35¢

BB

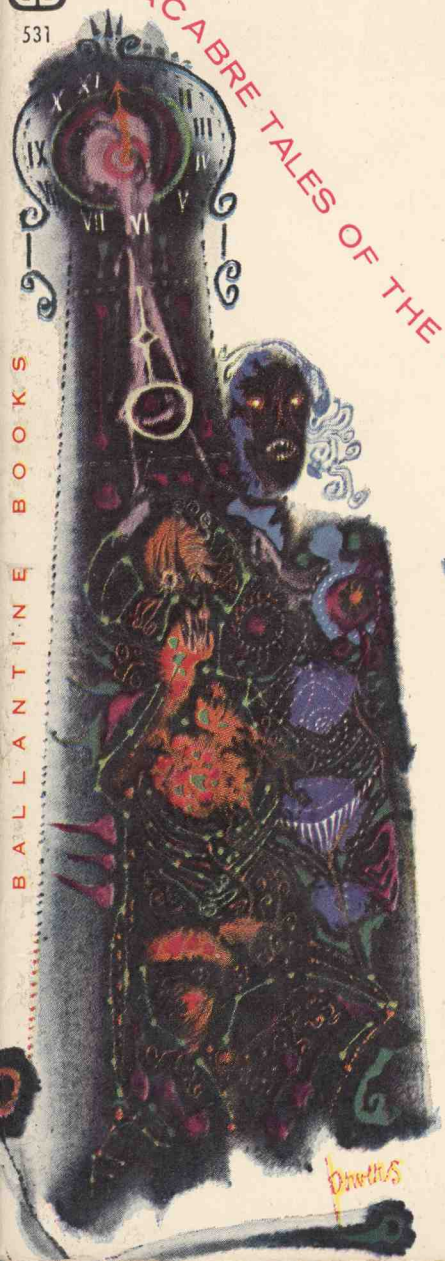
531

Stories from

THE CLOCK STRIKES 12

MACABRE TALES OF THE SUPERNATURAL

H. R. WAKEFIELD



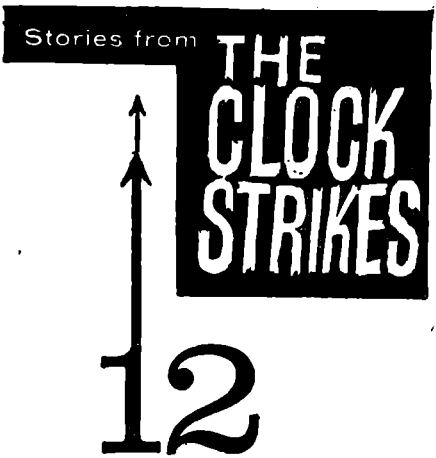
BALLANTINE BOOKS

H. Russell Wakefield

belongs to that growing number of intelligent people who have come to believe that there are many phenomena loosely called "psychic" which do occur, however unable mankind is to explain them rationally.

Writing in the tradition of M. R. James and J. Sheridan LeFanu, Mr. Wakefield has no contemporary peer in tales of that unknown country beyond reality whose shadowy borders, dimly sensed, have excited fearful curiosity in man since his beginning.

His stories, appropriately enough, cover the whole fascinating spectrum of the supernatural, all the way from dark and ancient rites *(The First Sheaf)* to the uncommonly gruesome probabilities of the modern day *(Used Car)*.



H. R. WAKEFIELD

BALLANTINE BOOKS
NEW YORK

By H. RUSSELL WAKEFIELD

Novels

GALLIMAUFRY
HEARKEN TO THE EVIDENCE
BELT OF SUSPICION
HOSTESS TO DEATH

Short Stories

THEY RETURN AT EVENING
OLD MAN'S BEARD
IMAGINE A MAN IN A BOX
GHOST STORIES
A GHOSTLY COMPANY
THE CLOCK STRIKES TWELVE

Criminology

LANDRU
THE GREEN BICYCLE CASE

Ballantine Books edition published 1961

BALLANTINE BOOKS, INC.
101 Fifth Avenue, New York 3, N. Y.

CONTENTS

Why I Write Ghost Stories

DR. MONTAGUE RHODES JAMES, who wrote the best ghost stories in the English language—but not the very best one, which is *The Upper Berth*—said that such tales were meant to please and amuse. If he meant to imply by this dictum that they are just arbitrary exercises in ingenuity, the baseless phantoms of a rather perverse imagination, I heartily disagree. Unless I believed there *are* inexplicable phenomena in the world, marshalled under the generic term "psychic," I should never have bothered to write a single ghost story.

Actually I am convinced there are perfectly authenticated cases of most versatile psychic phenomena, for the very good reason that I have experienced them myself. Quite recently I was living in a "disturbed" area. Believe it or not, two days before I left, a spoon hopped from the kitchen shelf and fell to the floor—the last of many such oddities! I defy anyone to find an orthodox explanation of this. A story I wrote, called *The Red Lodge,* was most displeasingly founded on fact.

I once had the honour of seeing through the press Professor Richet's classic work, *Thirty Years of Psychical Research.* Richet had the finest type of scientific mind, and he devoted much of his working life to the book. In it he chronicles hundreds of what he considered undeniably authentic psychic phenomena. He did not doubt that the persons who had experienced and recorded such happenings were telling to the best of their ability the truth and nothing but the truth. His explanation of all such things? He had none, and neither have I. He did not for a moment accept that they are necessarily spiritual or other-wordly in origin, and neither do I. I am a sceptic of sceptics, but not, I hope, a wooden one. That there are many things in Heaven and on Earth for which we have no explanation, and for which,

in all probability, we shall *never* have an explanation is certainly part of my philosophy; and I have never written a tale in which are recorded happenings that I do not believe could occur. I admit I have stretched the Long Bow hard at times, but never, as it were, to breaking point.

There are many things we experience every day that are quite inexplicable. If Einstein is to be believed, the dissemination of light defies all the laws of dissemination known to us. Gravitation is completely unexplained; it is the supreme enigma of the universe. What is electricity? A hundred years ago the belief that by turning a knob in a little box we could hear the actual voice of a diver deep under the sea six thousand miles away would have been deemed absolutely incredible by the finest scientific minds of that time. In the last analysis, it is a mystery to this day.

There are mysteries we have learned to accept and to some extent control. There are others—telepathy, for example—which we are in process of generally accepting, I fancy. It is established to many people's satisfaction. It is probably purely physical in its nature; that is to say, it will be studied and developed in accordance with physical laws. I may be quite wrong, and we may never understand it, but I am inclined to think the man of 2100 will. Its study is comparatively recent.

Psychical phenomena are another matter. They have been observed and brooded upon for, literally, thousands of years. In more recent times the most exhaustive attempts have been made to treat them scientifically by many first-class brains. Yet not the slightest progress has ever been made in elucidating them—*not the slightest.* In the end, Richet realised that they were not susceptible to scientific treatment; and if you cannot treat a subject scientifically, you can never learn of its nature. Of that which science can tell you nothing, you must remain forever ignorant. The mystic, of course, would accept that statement, but his lucubrations are singularly unrewarding. I think psychic phenomena will forever remain recalcitrant before scientific analysis, for they lack certain characteristics without which our present-day science is impotent in application; a *priori* we know nothing certain of them, we cannot experiment

with them (*pace* the spiritualists), we cannot classify or codify them. Pious guess-work is a poor substitute.

We have to remember and face the fact that we have not, and cannot have, any acquaintance with, let us say, more than a millionth part of what is loosely called "reality," or the final truth about the universe, which may be, indeed, from our point of view, fundamentally irrational. Remember that we can see only one octave of all the myriad wave-lengths. We are almost totally blind. It is said that bees can see ultra-violet rays. If so, they are a little less blind than we are, and they see an entirely different world from ours. We can see only what we are capable of seeing, and our minds have nothing more than their sensory data to work with. Therefore we can understand so much and no more, for our apparatus of cognition is utterly inadequate to grasp the whole. We see perhaps only one octave of the rays of reality, and ghosts, it may be, lie outside that octave, or rather just in and just out of it; they are Dwellers on the Threshold. The realm in which they have their being lies just outside our area of comprehension, but not absolutely and at all times, though there is evidence that some persons are quite blind to all suggestive psychic phenomena. Animals, apparently, are more susceptible than we are, which is odd.

Everything known about these happenings tends to support the view that they are *frontier* things. Fully to understand them we should have to possess a very different mental equipment. Yet some people at some times are conscious of vague intuitions about, and tiny tantalising intimations from that unknown country. It is quite possible that to the inhabitants of another planet, the map of that country would lie open before them, and the forces at work might be plain to see, but for us there are only those faintest of glimpses and softest of whispers. Sometimes I fancy I see something flicker and hear something stir. And that is why I sometimes write a ghost story. There is, I believe, something there, but I shall never know what; and, rest assured, neither will you. As a character in one of these stories says, "I have no explanation whatsoever to account for it. It merely serves to reinforce my conviction that the mind of man must forever remain baffled, fooled and frustrated because the key to the Final Riddle—if there is

one—why should there be?—is necessarily and eternally denied to it." To know not and know that you can never know is one of the finest panaceas for human doubts and fears, and an excellent recipe for humility.

Many people say, I accept the fact that such things can be, but can they be malignant? Most of the best ghost stories are based on the supposition that they can be, but how is that possible? I cannot answer, but since Hiroshima even the least scientifically-minded person has been compelled to recognize that strange forces can work unseen, that the contents of a hollowed-out baseball could annihilate most of the inhabitants of the island of Manhattan. But if you could look into that baseball at the moment of "fissioning" you would see absolutely nothing at work. If we had been a little "blinder," the realm of atomic physics might have remained till the crack of doom entirely unexplored by us.

Yes, say the objectors, I grant you that there may be vast unknown forces, but can they be *purposeful?* Well, there is excellent evidence of a sort that such things have been. The "curses" attaching to Egyptian tomb relics, mummies, certain jewels and so on. There are such tales in the folklore of every land under the sun, and there are persons alive today who believe they have only too good reason to take such things seriously. Once accept that these forces are unknown, one can accept the rest if one chooses. *Qua* ghosts, we're in an awkward position, but we must just make the best of it.

I know one man who did. I once worked with a person of high intelligence and great curiosity about the world. We worked in one of the oldest and quietest buildings in London, since pulled down. He used to labour late when all the rest of the staff had gone. Quite frequently he heard footsteps going up and down the stairs. I know they did, because I heard them once, too—footsteps made by no visible human agency. I asked if they worried him. "No," he replied, "why should they? They appear to be harmless *so far,* and in any case, what can *I* do about it?"

Well, fortified by his example, have a glance inside this book at your leisure, and then defy my hardest efforts to bring upon you the odd, insinuating little sensation that a number of small creatures are simultan-

eously camping on your scalp and sprinkling ice-water down your back-bone.

Envoi!

—H. RUSSELL WAKEFIELD

London
May, 1946

Into Outer Darkness

ALL right," said Richard Lytton, "I've promised to come. I've told you I consider the whole thing futile and pointless, but I'm not backing out."

"I know how you feel," said Alec Propert. "It's just that I'll feel more satisfied after you've been there—tested it, as it were." He sipped his port delicately, clipped a cigar and lit it.

"You must realise," said Lytton, "it can't prove anything useful from your point of view. Remember some people can't hear a bat scream, others can. In some such way there are those who are susceptible to psychic things and those who aren't."

"I dare say," replied Propert impatiently, his bland, precise, subaltern's face clouding. "And if my father hadn't guessed wrong over that damned mine and I could afford to live there, I shouldn't care two hoots. But it's rented at three thousand and I can't let it because of—well, because of what? That's just what I don't know, and that's where you may help me."

"It's damned bad luck, I know, but what help *can* I be?"

"You can 'vet' the place, as it were."

Lytton burst out laughing. "What, just by putting my head in the door and peering round?"

"An ordinary person couldn't, I know, but you're a sort of specialist. You've got that kind of instinct. If there's anything phony about a place you detect it."

"You greatly overrate that. I may be a little more receptive to such things than most people—unfortunately; that is all."

"Is it 'unfortunately'?"

"I think so."

"But it's never dangerous, is it? How absurd that sounds! What's 'It'? What are all these 'Its'?"

"Occurrences whose causes we are ignorant of," said

Lytton. "Not very illuminating that! Well, imagine the proverbial Visitor from Mars arriving on this earth after the last man has disappeared from it. Imagine him coming on derelict transmitters and wireless sets, and conceiving, by a flash of intuitive genius, a casual connection between them. Suppose then he devoted himself to tracing it.

"One line of enquiry might lead him to the discovery of some of the physical laws governing this planet; another, maybe, to death at a dynamo. Substitute 'Psychical' for 'Physical' and question-mark for dynamo——"

"Then such things *can* be dangerous?" said Propert.

"Not to one's body, perhaps—I'm not sure about that —but to one's mind. They're outside one's proper range of perception; so that they can be profoundly disruptive.

"One's mind is not constructed to cope with them. Like ultraviolet shades, they exist but are not for us. Now tell me more of the circumstances. I suppose your family has always known the Manor was haunted—a vague word, but it'll have to do."

"Yes, I realise that now, and, I suppose, always subconsciously knew it."

"Then it didn't trouble you?"

"We never talked about it; that was a sort of unwritten law. Some people make a joke of their ghosts, others shut up about them; we were like that."

"Have you ever seen anything?"

"Never. I haven't the vaguest idea what there is to see—if any. I tell you the subject was so taboo that if my mother had seen something the night before she wouldn't have batted an eyebrow at breakfast."

"I forgot how many 'lets' you've had?"

"Four."

"And they've all cleared out before their time was up?"

"Yes. Though they were all short terms."

"Surely they gave you some reason?"

"They each said much the same dumb thing, that circumstances had arisen which forced them to alter their plans. But I've heard gossip from the village. The Sussex peasant is as ghost-ridden as ever he was. You'd think with charabancs and radio—well, it has made precious little difference. Catch one of the Whitlingites going up our drive after dark of his own free will!

"And that's how I've always explained it. That these people brought their own servants, and as soon as they

arrived the locals got jawing to them, and it got back to the people in the house and they began seeing things. Anyway, they all left in a hurry, and apparently, were glad to go."

"Nothing more definite than that?"

"Well, there was one rather queer thing. The last people who took it were an American millionaire and his family. And, though they only took it for six months, I'm certain he meant to stay on if it suited him.

"His eldest son was an artist; and after they'd been there a week he disappeared, and so far as I know, was never seen again.

"Possibly it wasn't so funny at that. He was known to be rather weird, and you know what artists are. Well, you know what I mean; you're not an artist, just a penpusher."

"How d'you mean, 'disappeared'?"

"Just like that. They left him reading in the library when they went to bed; and though they did everything, searched, dragged the lake, put the cops on and whatever, they never found a trace of him."

"And he left no message?"

"Never even took his hat and coat. Just seemed to pop right off the earth."

"When was this?"

"Nineteen twenty-nine."

"I believe I remember reading about it."

"I expect you did. I suppose the Yanks talked, for a lot of reporters came down and there were bits in the papers about it."

"What kind of bits?"

"Oh, something about a bloke having been walled up in the Manor during the Civil Wars."

"A common enough example of the myth-maker's art," said Lytton, smiling. "But walling-up was certainly an old English custom. But d'you mean to tell me there was no such tradition in your family?"

"I told you we never talked about it," replied Propert uncertainly. "But I should be a liar if I said I'd never heard anything of the sort; but only the half-remembered echo of a whisper, if you know what I mean. I don't know when or how I heard it, but somehow it sounded familiar when I read it, unmistakably familiar.

"I can tell you this; if there is anything queer about

the Manor, it's connected with the library. I must sound like a fool, because I can't tell *how* I know *that.*

"I've never seen anything and I can't remember being told. It may be I heard it in the nursery. I simply don't know.

"There was just this, too. At one end of the library there's a door leading to some stairs, one flight leads up to the gallery, the other down to the cellars.

"At the bottom of the stairs there's a very heavy old oak door which was always kept locked. We never asked why—you know how children accept such things; in fact, I don't ever remember anyone going down those stairs. I know how vague all this sounds."

"I realise what you mean," said Lytton, "but you must get it into your head that even if I get any sort of reaction to the place—which is exceedingly improbable—I can't do anything about it. I've no formula for exorcisement, I've no 'Rough-on-Ghosts' to sprinkle in the library."

"I recognise all that. But if you tell me the house is a wrong 'un—I mean by that, if you don't think it's odds-on that anyone who took it would probably get the breeze up—then I shall sell it to another American millionaire, numbered brick by numbered brick, and he can number the ghosts and take them west with the other doings.

"Let's have another drink and then I'll get the car. There's no light in the place, by the way—we made our own juice—so we'll have to rely on my lamp."

They had one more drink and Propert went out to get the car ready.

Well, he'd have to go now, thought Lytton, lighting a cigarette. Alec had been badgering him for months to bring this about, this perfectly vain excursion. Certainly, to drop three thousand a year, and especially from such a dim, intangible cause, was exceedingly infuriating, even though Alec wasn't exactly starving.

Though Alec might have a bland, subaltern appearance, he had a shrewd money-spinner's knack. And with a seven-room flat in Park Lane and this much-coveted cottage, to say nothing of a fat car and a light plane, he was at least above the bread-line.

But the crowding thoughts of all he could be doing with that three thousand gave the poor fish no peace. Three thousand almost literally spirited away.

Odd yarn that about the millionaire's son. The Château Vignon over again? Sounded very like it.

Anyway, after persistent beseechings he'd agreed to this folly. It was a pity Alec had ever discovered his small repute as a clairvoyant, but that article he'd had printed had given the show away. No doubt most people would think he was making much ado about nothing, but most people were fools, and he intensely disliked any kind of ghost-hunt.

If those who took part in them knew even as much as he had cause to know of the latent might of those blind powers they joked about, they'd try to call no spirits from the vasty deep, not even one silent shadow moving through the dusk, but build up great Maginot Lines of resistance to keep those tense, straining potentials within their proper frontiers.

These flippant, carefree triflings could be dangerous, and he was about to partake in one, one from which he'd always flinched, obscurely but starkly.

Then there was that odd feeling he'd known recently, as if he had no *future,* as if he'd never see his name on the title-page of a book again; as if, very literally, his tale was told; as if he might suddenly look in a mirror and see nothing there. He shook himself and lit a cigarette.

"Come along," said Propert, putting his head in the doorway. "It's half-past ten."

Lytton got up heavily and followed him to the hall. It was a sparkling night, very still and with a half-moon whose glow outlined the rim of the downs ten miles to the south.

Propert headed the car towards them.

"Dick," said Propert after a while, "you're sure this couldn't be dangerous?"

"You've asked me that once and I've answered you."

"I want to ask you again. I'm thinking of that dynamo. If you say it could be, I'll gladly turn back. You see I'm out of my depth. Rather than let you run any risk I'd——"

Lytton laughed. "My dear Alec, d'you think I might go west too with a number on my back? Step on it"

"Here we are," said Propert half an hour later. He got out, opened the high iron gates, and climbed back into the car.

The drive seemed to lead right into the bowels of the

downs. It climbed quietly for half a mile, swung to the left through a high dense coppice, and ended abruptly at Whitling Manor.

"That's the dear old hovel," said Propert. "You ought to see it by daylight. Experts say it's about the best Early Tudor in Sussex."

The old house loomed above them, the moonlight shining faintly on the rows of diamond panes. Facing them was a polished oak door set back in the arch. Propert took a key from his pocket and by the light of his torch thrust it into the keyhole.

"Come on," he said. As he crossed the threshold Lytton hesitated for a moment, then moved forward. He knew again that strange, passive, receptive sensation, half-expectant, half-resigned, which he had known many times before, that cue that he was about to be used. He knew too well by now that it was useless to resist it.

"This is the Great Hall," said Propert, waving his torch about. "The library's through to the left."

They picked their way past chairs and tables shrouded in dark covers. They passed through an arched doorway into a short passage. Propert opened another door at the end of it.

"Here we are," he said.

By the light of the lamp the room looked huge. Bookcases, their contents shrouded by hanging curtains, stretched from floor to ceiling.

"It runs the whole length of this wing," said Propert in a loud whisper. "Used to be three rooms, but my great-great took down the walls."

They paced the length of the high, quiet, watching room, the small beam breaking its way through the darkness. At the far end was another door.

"This is the one I told you about," said Propert. He opened it, and there were the stone stairs. "Like to go down?"

"No," said Lytton.

Propert closed the door again and turned the beam down the room. It looked cavernous, unending.

"Isn't it a glorious room?" said Propert. "Well, you can imagine it."

They went back to the other end. Propert unclipped the covers over two armchairs.

"Now, I suppose," he said, "the procedure is that we await its pleasure. Will you be cold?"

"No," said Lytton. "Await whose pleasure?"

"Well, really yours," replied Propert with a short laugh. "Shall we talk?"

"No," said Lytton.

"Then let me know when you're ready to go."

He switched off the lamp and lit a cigarette.

Lytton watched the eager, sparkling top of the cigarette descend, and then diminish very slowly to a pin-point. He became rigid and inert.

Slowly the pin-point grew larger, splintered; and the splinters danced, settled, heightened—and he was staring down at a double row of candles, the thin smoke from their flames fluttering away and becoming straight again. Their flames made small disturbed pools of light on the rough surface of the table, and etched light and shade on the figures round it, so that their hands were white and clear, and their faces shadow-flecked and dappled.

The figure at the end of the table raised his right hand above his head so that its huge shadow stained the wall. The other figures raised their right hands.

The torch poured its smoke against the crouching ceiling. The smoke went searching along the ceiling and recoiling. The smoke poured up straight—and it was dark.

He passed his hands over the stone, edging at the cracks where the wall turned in on him. He breathed hard, for it was hard to breathe.

He clenched his fists and struck at the stone. He knelt down and ran his nails against the cracks where the walls met the floor. He breathed harder, for it was harder to breathe.

He hurled himself against the walls, struck against the ceiling, fell to his knees and drove his nails into the cracks where the walls met the floor. He opened his mouth—and flung his hands to his ears as the roar broke on them. He hurled himself against the walls, struck at the ceiling, beat against the stone.

He flung himself down and clawed at the cracks. He opened wide his mouth, searching for breath for his bursting heart, but he could breathe no longer.

Far away he could see a tiny beam of light, eager and sparkling. It grew larger, and was gone. . . .

"Well, Dick," said Propert, yawning. "Had enough? It's half-past one. Shall we beat it?"

He spoke louder. "Dick, are you asleep? Wake up!"

He got up and switched on the lamp. He gazed down at the gasping, fading shadow in the chair. And he screamed out, "Dick!" as the torch slipped from his trembling hand.

The Alley

"WELL?" asked Mr. Joseph Cummings; "what d'you think of it?"

There was, of course, only one mode of reply to that.

"Quite charming, my dear Joe," said Arthur Velling. "Extremely adequate," was William Camoys's contribution.

"It'll do," replied Whitney Palliser a shade tersely, "but all this rubber-necking has given me a thirst. Let's have a spot."

The occasion was the house-warming of Joe's "cottage," "Lonings," a few miles west of Chesham, all details of which he had kept a profound, but at moments of exuberance, a slightly leaky secret from his friends; childish, but rather charming.

The three who had driven down with him that Saturday evening were the best of those friends, and each was persuaded that this was an event of great moment, and that raillery should be tactfully muted.

Until a few months before, Joe, highly successful speculative broker and tenth best bridge-player in England, had regarded the "country"—he instinctively quoted it—merely as an area where tee-boxes grew, and the mown parts had coloured beacons stuck in tins, and where it always seemed to be raining at week-ends. And then his doctor had diagnosed incipient blood-pressure and advised "more fresh air and exercise" and other conventional prophylactics against a premature, if eventually inevitable, explosion.

From disgruntled protests and resigned acceptance he had progressed to the state of sublime complacency he was then displaying as, with his hands on his ribs and a bland smile on his face, he surveyed his five acres

and assumed a rustic pose. He was five feet seven, a shade paunchy, very firmly set on his legs, and his countenance vaguely resembled that of a shrewd but kindly carp.

Camoys agreed he had something to buck himself about, for he had chosen the best part of the right county, and "Lonings" seemed in every way well designed for living in. The dove-tailing of the original part of the old stone farmhouse and the new, a two-storied wing thrown out to the east, had been deftly done, the garden had fine turf, trees and flowers, and the view over to higher levels of the Chiltern downs that evening in late September had a spacious, melancholy beauty. Of course Old Joe had done little more than nod his head to the experts and sign the cheques, but he deserved some credit for the consummation.

"Glad you like it," said that person, gazing raptly about him in the manner of a mother regarding her first-born. "It's getting chilly. Let's have that drink before we dress."

Certainly the evening breeze, which was flicking the flies off Bacha, the Afghan's, tail, brusquely intimated that summer's lease was almost up.

"I got it ridiculously cheap," exclaimed Joe exultantly, as he poured out the sherry. "Rather an odd story, which I'll tell you during dinner."

"Well," mused Camoys, "the old dear's food and drink are justly celebrated, but I hope there'll be just a few words on some other topic."

"I thought we'd play at Berkhamstead to-morrow," continued Joe. "The glass is rising and the forecast's good. Now I'll show you your rooms."

Camoys's was in the old part on the first floor. He went up with Joe to see Palliser installed on the floor above. There were two flights to climb, and at the top of the first, on a tiny landing, was a pitted and discoloured door of antique and massive appearance, heavily bolted top and bottom. Camoys vaguely wondered where it led.

"I'll tell you about that later," said Joe, noticing his glance. "Velling and I are sleeping in the new wing." He bustled off.

"I do hope the old pet will put an occasional term to his Estate Agent rhapsodies," said Palliser, looking round the room and frowning slightly. "If I have to

continue croaking out 'yes-man' superlatives, I shall go all hot and cold and take refuge in one of the usual offices—especially as I don't much like the place."

"Don't you," said Camoys, surprised, "why, what's the matter with it?"

"For no precise reason. One doesn't like all dogs, cats or human beings—especially actors. One doesn't like all houses. Are you sensitive to the atmosphere, the spirit of places?"

"Not that I know of."

"Well, I am. Particularly when I'm tired out and overworked. I've been trying to finish the blasted play, but Lois fills the house with people, mostly bores—we've had three cursed cocktail parties this week and dined out every night! My nerves are sweating me."

"A quiet week-end will buck you up."

"I'm not so sure. The moment I came into this place I knew it was a wrong 'un somehow. Well, we must dress."

Camoys went down to his room. He had known Palliser for most of his life and had been greatly relieved by his success, for he had not a penny of his own and play-writing was a fluky and unreliable career. But he had "made it"; and though rather too fond of using his success as the text for a sermon of universal application, he had undoubtedly written two of the wittiest comedies since the war, witty and yet subtly sinister; and he completely lacked pomposity. He was of a very effervescent and moody temperament and was sometimes extremely "difficult," but Camoys was so used to him that if he had suddenly ejected his small frailties, he would have seemed an unwelcome stranger to him.

Camoys had very little use for his Canadian wife, that beautiful frigid snob, who believed in setting a lion to catch a lion, and having married one, was in a position to put this pestilential aphorism into practice. By thirty-five she had learnt every trick of her horrid trade, and made Pally's life a considerable burden. But her physical perfection always brought him to heel.

Camoys had noticed his jumpy, over-volatile mood coming down in the car. He himself was a very senior Civil Servant, forty-nine years of age—a year older than Palliser, of a nondescript, but reassuring appearance with that controlled tendency to misogyny often characteristic of those who have the capacity and inclination

to continue to read Greek and Latin authors after passing their last exam.

The electric stove was full on in his room, making it too warm for his liking, so he switched it off and opened the window. He found he could see straight down the sixty yards of drive, lined with willows, to the gate on the lane. The wind was stiffening and the clouds hurrying in from the west at different speeds and levels. It was late dusk, but still enough light remained for his wandering survey to settle on the gate, for there appeared to be someone standing beside it, presumably gazing at the house.

This figure was quite motionless, and Camoys idly wondered at the pointless peering of the fellow. As he undressed, he occasionally glanced down the drive, and as it grew darker, began to doubt whether he had been right in imagining the appearance to be animated; for it was obstinately still.

When he got back from his bath it was night. Another two glasses of Joe's pet sherry induced a mellow conviviality and after they had toasted the continuous felicity of their host and his flawless domain, Joe, his large face beaming, thanked them heartily and said:

"Now, I told you I got this place dirt-cheap. I don't want to bore you, but there's a little story connected with my making of the bargain. A fellow-member of the House, Trincing, owns most of the property round this hamlet, Glenna-Parva, as it's called. I was lunching with him one day and happened to mention that I was on the lookpout for a place near Town. He looked down his nose for a moment and then said: 'I've got a rather odd little house which might suit you. It has been empty for years, and beyond keeping it in repair, I haven't bothered about it. It'll want money spending on it, and you'll almost certainly have to build on. You could have it for a purely nominal rent and as long a lease as you like; buy it, if you prefer. My place is only a couple of miles away and I'll be glad to have you for a neighbour.'

"I said at once that I'd like to look it over.

" 'So you can at any time,' he replied, 'but it's up to me to tell you that it's got some sort of curious reputation in the locality. I don't say it's supposed to be haunted, whatever that means exactly, but there's some kind of prejudice against it. It's probably all bunk, and

I'm very vague about it. Anyway, I thought it only fair to warn you. You very likely agree with me that it's all tripe, but you might have servant-trouble.'

"I told him I'd slept in three 'haunted' houses and never had better nights; that I agreed it was tripe, and could answer for my servants.

"Well, I came down and had a look; was delighted with the situation, and engaged Clement and Giles to plan and carry out the renovation and additions. And I can tell you, though it was structurally sound—Trincing had seen to that—it looked sufficiently forbidding to have earned its repute. But I saw its possibilities—you needn't wink, Arthur, I saw you."

"I meant you to."

"That repute," continued Joe, "like that of nearly all places which share such is, I'm prepared to bet, merely due to a complex of inconveniences and disabilities." He seemed pleased with this polysyllabic rotundity.

"Firstly it was too small—it clamoured to have money spent on it."

"You mean the ghosts have simple tastes, or can they be bought off?" said Palliser.

"You know what I mean. The garden was a jungle; the draining system prehistoric. It was absurdly hemmed in by trees which made it seem gloomy and stymied the view. By chopping down a dozen of them I've given the place a chance to breathe and the people who stay here a chance to stretch their eyes. Again, it had no tennis court or garage, and a car's essential."

"Well, that's one formula for exorcisement," said Velling, "but it's another instance of class inequality. Poor men, apparently, will still have to put up with uninvited guests in their hovels. What's the date of it?"

"Fifteen-eighty-five," said Joe. "It's inscribed on the base of one of the chimneys."

Arthur Velling was the senior of the party, a wiry, compact little person of fifty-six; very precise in dress, diction and demeanour. To the outward seeming he was a bit forbidding, which was partly a humorous, partly a defensive pose; for he liked his joke and was in no sense a "good-mixer." But those whom he admitted to his intimacy, knew him for a most lively and modest fellow. He had large private means, much of which, with many hours of his time, he devoted to the cause of promoting kindness to animals, a better phrase he

thought, than the prevention of cruelty. He was full of recondite, versatile and commercially valueless lore which he revealed very seldom and never for its own sake. By temperament, he was a constructive sceptic. How fat, philistine Joe could be his best friend was one of the myriad mysteries of affinity.

"And I'm prepared to bet, too," Joe went on, "that with the tree-stumps, the dirt and the rubble, the workmen carted away the remains of the ghosts. There's another thing: Trincing tells me that Bucks is the most superstitious county in England; that there must be something in the atmosphere which explained it. He said that if you went by the locals you would believe every second house is haunted."

"Possibly these locals are right," said Velling. "But what phenomena are credited to 'Lonings'? Any consistent apparition? It's as well to be prepared."

"I'm coming to that. I asked Trincing. He said he'd never bothered to find out, but that there was an old chap in the village who probably could tell me if he chose. He is the father of the bloke who keeps the pub, sort of 'wise-man' of the hamlet.

"So one evening I went along to the Setting Sun, a fine old panelled house. I had a couple of drinks with the landlord, explained who I was, and hinted at what I wanted to know. He said the old man was in a good mood and I'd better try my luck. He took me into the parlour behind the bar, where the old boy was sitting reading the *New Statesman,* of all things."

"No doubt," said Velling, "being instructed as to the reactions of the rural proletariat towards the ideology of machine-minders."

"Very likely. He looks pretty antique, but he's got a fine head and eyes like a hawk. He greeted me with the utmost self-possession. He has an educated voice and the manners of a lord."

"We are not impressed!" said Palliser loudly. "My house is always stiff with the peerage, and most of them have the manners of storm-troopers and the culture of columnists."

This rather tasteless and over-personal malediction caused Camoys to glance at the speaker. It was uncharacteristically crude, and Camoys had noticed that his champagne-glass kept the parlour-maid busy.

"Well," continued Joe, "he took off his specs, had a

sip of the toddy his son had brought in, and said he could, perhaps, guess my errand.

"I told him it was chiefly to make his acquaintance, but that I *was* a little curious about certain rumours I'd heard concerning the house. He asked me if I worried about such things; if I believed in them. 'I don't mean so much with your brain, but with your "guts," as they are called nowadays.'

"I said I neither worried nor believed.

" 'Then,' he said. 'why not leave well alone? It is a very wise saying.'

"I replied that there was no doubt a lot in that, but that I wanted to know, just the same. As he still hesitated, I suggested that possibly he'd rather not tell me anything, and that no doubt I'd hear all about it from someone in the village.

" 'I doubt if you will,' he said with a smile. 'I dare say you don't quite understand the countryman's mentality; and we're still countrymen here, in spite of charabancs and wireless. I'll tell you. I shouldn't have done if I'd judged you to be a susceptible, nervous man. You've taken the house for better or worse. I spoke of our mentality down here. Well, the children won't go down your lane after dark. They don't know why. It's a village tradition, "Aural tradition," as it's called. I dare say their parents and grandparents don't know any more. But it's a fixed idea that there is something best left alone in that part of the village after sun-down. The kids have got a bit of doggerel:

> "Never look again, never look again,
> At the one who throws no shadow in Fire Lane."

They don't know what it means, but they keep away, and so do their elders, as a matter of fact. Of course there are vague tales about the lane; almost every village round here fosters some such tiny legend, at once its pride and its shiver.'

"I fancied he was deliberately getting away from the subject, so I brought him back to the house. Was there some legend about *that?* He smiled and said there was; that, like everyone else in the village, he'd heard it from his father; just a piece of folklore. How, long ago, the man who lived here tortured his wife and children

till they died insane; and was burnt alive by the villagers. I pressed him, and he said there was some belief that those who lived here, provided they were given that way, were liable to get a bit hot and bothered."

"As an oracle, he was in the correctly nebulous tradition," said Camoys.

"He got more precise: He asked me if I'd noticed a circular brown patch in the meadow near the pond. I had, and told him so. 'Well,' he said, 'that's supposed to be where the stake was set up, and no grass will grow there, so 'tis said.'

"He asked me if there was a small loft half-way up some stairs. I said 'Yes.' 'It's known as the Alley in the village,' he went on; 'that's where the farmer's family were tortured. I'm just telling you my father's version. If I were you, sir, I shouldn't worry. It is possibly all nonsense, like so many tales of its kind.'

"I told him I didn't somehow feel *he* thought it all nonsense; at which he didn't seem too pleased. 'Sir,' he said, 'I'm a countryman myself. You're not. Anyway, that fire was lighted long ago; maybe it has ceased to smoulder now.'

"But had it? That was what I wanted to know. What about the people who'd lived here since? Anyway, who were the last people who'd lived here? He'd forgotten their names, but it was just after the war. And what had happened to them, if anything?

"But at this he got a bit shirty, and I saw he'd had enough questioning, so I thanked him and came away. And there you are!—A place gets a bad name for some absurd reason or other, so the yokels invent a yarn to justify the prejudice. People fight shy of it, it gets dilapidated and begins to look the part. This neighbourhood is stiff with such derelict absurdities. I'm certain that in fifty years' time not a breath of superstition will attach to 'Lonings.' "

Stirred by this peroration, he drained his glass.

"You seem to me," said Velling, "slightly to beg the question when you use the phrase 'for some absurd reason or other.' It seems to me there must always be some very *good* reason for such a prejudice; otherwise it's inexplicable. If some particularly foul deed was done here, that *would* explain the prejudice, the idea, that that deed had unending repercussions. And for all I know that is a sound theory for which there is an im-

mense body of evidence, and for which there may be regulating laws as strict as those which govern the—to me—far more remarkable phenomenon that by turning a knob in a wooden box I can hear, within a minute, a diver talking under the sea, a bird fluttering its wings in Queensland, and the last scream of a lynched negro in Georgia. And that a thousand years hence those precise sounds may be reproduced again. I believe those laws exist, but I am not so sure man will ever learn them or is competent to do so. Philosophically, of course, we are on very delicate ground there, for are there laws-in-themselves? Edington and the neo-Idealists say there are not; that such codification is essentially subjective. I happen not to believe them. I believe that we four are all neo-Materialists, but scepticism carried too far is merely inverted superstition. I'm convinced of the existence of psychic happenings, but why, how and when they occur I haven't the faintest conception."

"It seems to me," said Camoys jokingly, "that the old boy was letting you down lightly. Courtesy compelled him to tell you something, but he told you as little as possible."

"I particularly impressed on him that I wanted to hear everything, and that I didn't care a damn what it was."

"And he very naturally didn't take you at your word, or rather was dubious of the capacity of that tolerance. I'd be guided by him, for he sounds a wise old card. You don't want to get ideas in your head."

"And don't despise the rustic intelligence," exclaimed Palliser. "It's apparent sluggishness is often a sly pose. Those who divide the peasant often get a rude awakening, for there is a virture and a mystery in his fields and streams unknown to the Nathans of Throgmorton Street. Frankly, the country often puts the wind up me, the Townee's uneasy sense of intrusion. There is always something highly charged and formidable about the primitive. As we drove down today, we passed a wide meadow running up to the margin of a wood. There was a scarecrow in the middle of it—I never quite like scarecrows. If some mocking fellow who knew his runes and dressed one and whispered in his ear as he set him up, he might scare more than birds. I wondered if that *drôle* in the field there was such a one. If so," he went on excitedly, "I'm not sure I'd like to walk

out to him on a not quite dark night, fancying, perhaps, he had beckoned, so that you felt you had to pay him a visit. And when you reached him, gingerly tilting up his battered billycock, and—well, what might you find underneath, and how would you address such a one?"

"I should tell him I was too old a bird to be scared of him," said Joe. "But Arthur, you don't really mean to tell me you believe in this haunting business!"

"I certainly believe that an influence can secrete itself, as it were, in certain places, like the germ in the throat of a 'Carrier'; and that it can remain latent, but potent, if it finds a victim ripe for its attentions."

"But how?" exclaimed Joe; "what's the sense of it?"

"I've told you I don't know *one* of the rules. I can't explain telepathy, but it's an established fact. Apparently this susceptibility this sixth sense, is liable to be atrophied by civilisation; for savages and, of course, animals retain it far more than we do, though I believe there are many more exceptions to this degeneration of the sense than is usually supposed."

"And I'm one of them!" said Palliser loudly. "I knew this house was a 'Carrier,' as you call it, as soon as I entered it."

Camoys noticed Joe was not too pleased with this remark, and he managed to switch the talk to other topics till their host initiated a move to the lounge. It was decided to give bridge a miss, so Palliser and Joe played piquet and Camoys took on Velling at chess. Port and brandy had brought Palliser to a condition of rather strident verbosity which distracted Camoys and dissipated his powers of concentration. He resigned on the twentieth move.

"When I'm weary," he said, "my pieces seem to take charge and control their own destinies, and on this occasion they developed suicidal tendencies; probably because I interfered with them."

"Les échecs fantasques," laughed Palliser, handing some silver over to Joe. "It's a cynical madman's allegory with its doddering monarch, vampire queen, gangster knights, double-faced bishops and inane pawns, whose supreme ambition it is to change their sex and share the dodderer's bed."

"I take it," said Velling, "that such a misalliance would not be contemplated till his own prelates were off the board."

"Well," said Joe, "it's getting late. Shall I show you the Alley before we go to bed?"

The others agreeing, he led the way past Camoys's room and up the flight of stairs to the door on the landing. He had some trouble easing back its bolts, but presently it swung out upon him, and he stepped forward, bending his head.

It certainly was a freakish place, thought Camoys. About twelve feet long by six broad, the roof crowding down on it and a small unopenable window facing the door. A narrow, wooden bench ran the length of it.

"Well, what d'you make of that?" asked Joe.

"What the deuce was it intended for?" asked Velling.

"I dunno. I asked the architect's man, and he said he had no idea. Merely remarked that he'd found similar puzzles before in old houses. He advised me to have it filled it, but didn't seem to have any valid argument for doing so. He looked at me as if he was going to say something and thought better of it. He may have heard talk in the village."

"What's underneath it?" asked Palliser, who seemed to have quieted down.

"Bill's room. It runs across the head of his bed."

"And that's where they sat and were tortured unto madness," said Velling. "I'm not sure I wouldn't take that architect's advice!"

They filed out again. Joe bolted the door and they separated for the night.

Before getting into bed, Camoys went to the window and looked out. As he did so, a full, glowing moon swung out from rainbow clouds, stared down for a moment, and faded luminously away in the following flurry. As he watched the darkness close that bland, flat eye, he was reminded of an article he had read recently in a scientific periodical on the influence of the moon on unstable mental subjects; a venerable idea, but the cases discussed had been dealt with in very precise and convincing detail.

He got a book from his suitcase, switched on the light over his bed, and settled himself down. He had chosen a work on physics, partly because it would encourage sleep, and partly because he found a rather absurd and baffled fascination in attempting to grapple with problems which he knew were just outside his range of complete comprehension.

If in spiritual spheres [he found himself reading], whose laws possess even more the character of probability, no single event can be exactly determined if the casual source is not made clear, the problem of causality is much less likely to be eliminated from natural science.

He realised from the blurring of the meaning of this simple statement that he was too sleepy to read. He dropped the book on the floor and turned out the light. It was very quiet. Even the stirring of the trees was more a part of the stillness than an interruption of it. He was well over the borderline of sleep when he was jerked back to full consciousness and something stronger than irritation. Those stealthy bulges of sound above his head must mean that fool, Pally, was prowling in that obscene little loft. He might have guessed it! He was just tight enough to make an ass of himself. That was why he'd asked what was underneath.

One, two, three, four! Now he'd be up at the end by the window. He waited to hear those steps retraced, but there was no sound. What a fool! Why didn't he go to bed? He must have tip-toed back.

After a few minutes of rather perplexed listening, he pulled the clothes over his head. The next thing he knew—unless a rather slippery and oppressive dream can be called knowledge—was a maidservant tapping on his door.

It was a splendid day.

"An admirable example," said Palliser, coming down late to breakfast, "of the increasing subservience of Nature to Science. A few years ago, weather-forecasters merely prophesied—usually falsely. Now they dictate." He seemed in rather exaggeratedly high spirits, and Camoys did not give him the satisfaction of referring to his puerile prowlings.

By ten they were *en route* to Berkhamsted. They played a four-ball in the morning; Camoys paired with Velling, enjoying the rub of the heather, and winning by a narrow margin. As they walked in, a famous amateur international was driving off the first tee. They stopped to watch the great man, who gratified them by slapping it hard on the top.

"We could have done as well as that," said Joe, who often revealed great natural talent for the obvious. Camoys happened to glance at Palliser. He was standing

rigidly still, his hands to his ears. Then he turned abruptly and stalked to the club-house.

He was very silent during the beginning of lunch, though he sent a second large whisky chasing the first.

Suddenly he said, in an excited, staccato way:

"That foozle reminded me of something. Some years ago I went down to the R.A.C. course of Epsom to watch an exhibition match: Bobby Jones, Tolley, Wethered and a bloke called Kirkwood."

"The trick-shot merchant?" suggested Joe.

"That's the fellow. Well, before the second round he did his stuff. He played left-handed with a right-handed club, hit a dozen pills in a row plumb down the middle —so fast they rained down on the heads of the forecarries, and did a lot of other remarkable stunts demanding the most perfect muscular and mental co-ordination and control. The point is, every one went dead straight. Then the match sarted again, and he hit an absurd, quick hook into a bunker. There was a moment's silence, and then the watching horde burst out into the most bestial, cacophonous, simultaneous jeer, one of the foulest sounds I ever heard."

"Rubbish!" said Velling, glancing up at him in surprise, "that was a purely subjective impression. It was a perfect laughter-provoker. When the man made things as hard as possible for himself, he succeeded When he made them as easy, he failed. Profoundly amusing."

"You're wrong!" exclaimed Palliser. "It wasn't just good-humoured laughter. It was a brutal, sadistic ya-boo, that loathsome lust of man to disparage greatness and degrade it to his level."

"Well, I'll be sugared!" said Joe. "What a preposterous exaggeration. I should have laughed, and so would anyone. I bet you did!"

"I didn't. It made me want to vomit. I can still hear the men bellowing and the women cackling their devilish derision." He put his hands to his ears again.

"That sort of thing's natural to you," said Camoys soothingly. "As a dramatist, it's your business to raise an impression to boiling-point and then cool it to a usable temperature. I agree with you that there was probably a ya-boo element in that laughter, but I'm certain most of that mob felt a certain sympathy, too; though I don't suppose he wanted it."

"What ludicrous stuff," he thought; "but Pally's nerves have taken charge."

"Well, it *hasn't* cooled; it's back again!" Palliser exclaimed. "I can still hear that filthy din; see the whole thing, too." As he raised his glass, his hand was shaking.

Camoys played a single with him in the afternoon and didn't enjoy it. He seemed distraught. He couldn't keep count of his score, missed the ball three times, and on one green stood motionless staring into the distance and forgetting to putt. His caddie regarded him with ill-concealed uneasiness and approached him with reluctance. Camoys won every hole, and at the end of the round Palliser apologised.

"I'm sorry, Bill, but that noise is like a barrage in my head. As a matter of fact it has worried me before when I've been overworking."

During the drive home, Camoys sat with him in the back seat. Palliser almost at once went to sleep. But not, apparently, thought Camoys, the proper quiet repose of a healthily weary man. For a strained, urgent expression came over his face and his lips often moved. How displeasing it might be, thought Camoys, if the shutter separating the dreams of sleeping and those of waking began to function too uncertainly; that would be almost a definition of insanity. When Palliser's head went down between his hands and his fingers were pressed to his ears, he felt an inclination to wake him. However, he resisted it, looked away over to the delicately robust Chiltern range, and presently closed his eyes.

He dozed till the car drew up at the drive gates. Palliser awoke abruptly at the same moment, and for a moment seemed to be at a loss and unable to get his bearings.

On entering the house, he went at once to the lounge, flung himself down in an armchair and went off again into deep but troubled sleep.

"Been overdoing it badly, I imagine," said Velling, looking down at him.

"I've seen him like this before," said Camoys. "He's just finishing a play. I know the symptoms, but he's curiously jittery."

They idled about till it was time to change for supper. Palliser took some waking. He poured himself out

a whisky and soda, drained it at a gulp, and went to his room without a word.

Supper was a slightly cheerless meal, Palliser's demeanor had an oppressive effect which the others were too weary to overcome. It seemed as though his mind was busy in a world of its own. He ate practically nothing and drank unexpectedly little. Camoys found himself becoming depressed and vaguely apprehensive. For the first time he felt himself almost being persuaded that perhaps "Lonings" did emit disturbing echoes from its past.

Eventually Velling broke a heavy silence by asking Palliser when he expected to finish his play.

"I should have finished it next week," he replied absently, and retired to his mental fastness again.

After supper the other three had a languid game of snooker and Palliser sat with a paper on his knee staring across the room. At the end of the game Joe began yawning uncontrollably, and his example was catching.

"Well," he said, "I don't know about you, boys, but I think I shall turn in. Two rounds at Berkhamsted always take it out of me. We'll decide on our programme in the morning."

Velling and Camoys agreed, and Palliser got up when they did.

"Let's have a look at the night first," said Joe. He opened the door into the garden and stepped out. It was strange and lovely, for the wind had increased to a gale, and yet the great moon swung through the stars from a cloudless sky. The earth seemed vehemently alive, and on such a night, thought Camoys, it was easy to realise that one was whirling through the infinite heavens on a lonely ball.

Ten minutes later he was in his room, Palliser, after wishing an oddly stilted, unsmiling good night to the others, having preceded him. Camoys frankly confessed to himself that "Lonings" might be a depressing abode. And oddly enough he found that Pally's ludicrous fantasia on a hooked tee-shot echoed both visually and aurally in his brain. He could see that horseshoe of gesticulating midgets and hear their muted babble. Any impression, he thought, however trivial, can be vividly communicated if sufficiently intensely felt. He read for half an hour and then switched off the light. Just as he was falling asleep, he heard Bacha, from his kennel

outside the garage, utter two sustained, wailing warnings to the shadows.

He awoke abruptly and was seized with a cold fury, for there he was stamping about again! There he went up and down, up and down! What was he doing now? He was *running* to and fro.

Suddenly there came a thump so heavy that it shook the ceiling, and a burst of laughter.

Good God! What was he doing!

As Camoys shuffled on his dressing-gown and slippers, he had to rally his spirit, for he had no wish to climb those stairs. As he set foot on them, he shouted:

"Is that you, Pally?"

For answer came another burst of crazy laughter.

The light from Palliser's room was reflected down through the open door of the Alley. Palliser was in there, crouched on his haunches, his face oddly distorted.

"What's the matter, Pally?" asked Camoys. He was coatless, his shirt gaping, his trousers sagging.

Palliser stared up at him with a dreamy, uncertain grin like that of a very drunk man. Then he lurched to his feet.

Camoys put his arm round his shoulders and led him back to his bed on which he fell back, breathing stertorously. Camoys wondered if the racket had disturbed any of the household, but there was no sound, and he decided not to rouse them.

Leaving the light on, he sat down in an armchair to wait for morning. He watched Palliser for a while, but soon looked away, for his face was working displeasingly; and like many men whose nervous system was otherwise sound, anything suggestive of insanity gave him a feeling of almost panicky ghostly horror; the only thing that made man tolerable was his reasoning-power and mental stability.

He had half dozed off when he started up and gripped the arms of the chair. What was that crash? Just the Alley door blown to by the gale. How exactly that could have happened he refused to consider.

At seven o'clock he dressed hurriedly and found his way to Joe's room. Joe fetched Velling and they briefly discussed the untoward occurrence.

"I half expected something like this," said Velling,

"he seemed to be deteriorating, as it were, ever since he came here."

"Well, he'll have to stay here today," said Joe. "Bill, you're dressed, you'd better fetch the doctor. I'll tell Sylvester to get the car round at once. You'll have to find out where he lives. You'd better sit with him, Arthur. I'll see about household matters."

Five minutes later Camoys was driven away. The nearest doctor, named Burgess, was located about four miles off on the other side of the hamlet. He was having his breakfast when Camoys arrived, but his annoyance at being deprived of his marmalade was obviously compensated for by the fact that he had established himself as physician-in-ordinary to the reputed health-seeking millionaire of "Lonings."

He was in the middle sixties, hairy, cumbrous and palpably bored with his endless round of impoverished, rheumaticky and procreant peasants.

As Camoys described Palliser's condition, he rhythmically scraped his whiskers.

"I'll mix him a sedative," he said, rolling off to his dispensary for some bromide.

"Queer thing," he said when they were seated in the car, "but last time I went to 'Lonings' it was on some such a case. Inquest was on the day war was declared, so I'm not likely to forget the date. Young fellow named Cummock—artist. Sudden attack of—well, call it what you like—brain-storm—never saw him alive."

"Suicide?" asked Camoys.

"Yes. Alone in the house. Gardener heard him yelling. Jumped from a window."

"Has anyone lived there since?"

"Yes. Couple named Brandon. Cleared out after a fortnight, nineteen twenty-one. Empty since."

Joe met them at the door and took the doctor to Palliser's room. He was still muttering to himself, sometimes chuckling, sometimes appearing to be in fear-stirred distress of mind.

The doctor remained alone with him for some minutes. When he came out, Camoys judged from his expression that he was trying to bluff-off the fact that he was out of his depth.

"Complete nervous breakdown," he said solemnly. "I managed to get some medicine down his throat which

should quiten him. Better keep him here today, but it must be a nursing-home tomorrow."

"Is he in any danger?" asked Joe.

"Physically he's strong enough, but he'll require very great care over a considerable period if he's to make a complete recovery—otherwise . . ."

"Better order an ambulance for tomorrow morning, then," said Joe, thinking things out, "I'll get on to his wife and she must make arrangements with his doctor about the nursing-home."

"That should be the best course," said Doctor Burgess.

"And what about today? I mean about feeding him, and so on?"

It was settled that the doctor would more or less forcibly feed him with some essences then and there, and again at seven o'clock, when he would return.

"What about sitting with him?" asked Joe, regarding the restless figure with an expression of mingled sympathy and aversion.

"Somebody had better stay with him; one's never quite sure what subconscious impulses may occur in such cases. Probably he'll remain semi-conscious for many hours."

"All right, then," said Joe, "my chauffeur will fetch you at a quarter to seven."

Mrs. Palliser's first reaction to the news was an outburst of surly expostulation. Apparently they had been going to dine with some persons who were acquainted with an equerry of one of the Royal Princes. Old Joe, however, could be peremptory and forcible enough when he chose, and he abruptly silenced this clotted irrelevance, with the result, that, within an hour, all was arranged for Palliser's transport to his doctor's pet nursing-home at nine the next morning, after which they took it in turns to sit with the sick man, who was now sleeping almost peacefully. At lunch-time Sylvester went on watch.

"Damned unfortunate business," said Joe, "just when he's finishing his play and all. And what a Champion-of-the-Show-Bitch his wife is!"

"He must have been working up for it for some time," said Velling. "I suppose, in a sense, it may be a good thing for him to get it out of his system."

"Much better to take it in time," said Camoys. "Such lesions are sometimes enduring."

"Spoiled our week-end completely," grumbled Joe. "It's upset me. I hate starting badly in a place. Now, so long as I'm here I suppose I'll always be reminded of this business."

"Rubbish!" said Velling; "you'll have hundreds of pleasant times to efface this one mischance."

"Hope so," sighed Joe, "but I've got a feeling I'd like to clear out of here now at this moment and never come back."

"Perfectly natural and absolutely ephemeral," said Camoys. "Come and have a round of clock-golf."

They idled away an hour or so at this inanity, and with this and tea and periodical visits to the patient, the afternoon dragged away.

For an hour before the doctor came Palliser grew increasingly restless. It was Camoys's watch and he didn't enjoy it. After a burst of giggling, Palliser's expression changed and he sat up in bed and attempted to get out of it. Camoys had some difficulty in restraining him.

"They're coming up the lane," he whispered in an urgent tone. "They're coming up the lane!"

The doctor brought a hypodermic with him this time and gave Palliser a shot in the forearm before feeding him.

"Has he had a shock of any kind recently?" he asked. "Been in any peril of his life?"

"Not that I know of," replied Camoys.

"His mind seems obsessed with some danger—fire, it would seem."

"He was very restless just before you came. What's the best thing to do when he gets that way?"

"Give him a tablespoon of the sedative. I'll be round first thing in the morning to give him another injection before he leaves for London. I fear the poor fellow is in for a bad time, but he'll be better when he gets away from here—I mean," he added hastily, "expert nursing is essential in these cases."

"Damned old fool!" exclaimed Joe irritably, when he had gone. "I don't believe he has the foggiest idea what's the matter with him."

It occurred to Camoys that a more inspired diagnostician might have been taken out of his book by the figure on the bed. "If in spiritual spheres no single event can be exactly determined if the casual source is not

made clear." Even more so, he thought, when that source was shadowed by the *Golden Bough.*

"Let's have some dinner," said Joe; "Sylvester will sit with him. He's just got back."

The meal was ironically lavish. Smoked salmon from a lordly fish; almost the best consommé Camoys had ever tasted; three just right young partridges, and the subtlest passion-fruit ice. Wines pluperfect. But Camoys couldn't get it down. "Ninety per cent of the populace," he thought, "have to sustain their troubles on bread, cheese and beer!"

"Let's take a stroll in the garden," said Joe, "then I'll relieve Sylvester."

They went out through the lounge and for a few moments contemplated the racing flood-cloud pouring over the Chiltern levee. Then they moved on in slow repletion.

Suddenly Bacha yelped and took to his heels, and there came a crash from the left.

Camoys was first round the corner, his feet gritting on glass splinters. Palliser had his head and arms through the tiny Alley window, both were bleeding. A confused babble was pouring from his foaming lips.

"In the bunker on the left; all three of them!" He burst into a high scream of laughter, and then, with the blood pouring over those wide lips, he cried in horror: "They're coming up the lane! The fire! The fire!"

Dimly Camoys saw another head come up behind Palliser's; then both disappeared. He ran for the front door, and dashed up the stairs, past his room. As he did so, two bodies, clasped together, came hurtling down to the little landing outside the Alley. As they struck the door, they seemed prised apart, and their heads were flung back and up.

For a moment he stared down into the still twitching faces of the dead men.

↑ *Jay Walkers* ↑

THOSE who possess an eye for oddities and enigmas may recall an item of news which was recorded at varying

lengths—from half a column upwards—in several of the London "dailies" about the middle of September three years ago. The "story," as I believe it is termed in press circles, was headed "A Haunted Road"—or words to that effect—and it stated that another fatal accident, this time to a travelling salesman, had occurred on a stretch of road in Herefordshire. The victim had been discovered underneath his overturned car about 9 p.m. and he had been dead about half an hour. This, it was said, was the sixth motor fatality within ten years at this precise spot—or very near it—on this same date, and very much at this same time. Apparently the representative of the agency who sent in this story had made some rather cursory enquiries in the neighbourhood, particularly in the village of M——, which is situated about two miles from the scene of these accidents, and gathered from the local people that this piece of road was "haunted," by what or whom he did not state. And that, if you please, was the beginning and end of the information these journals deigned to grant their readers; the "story" was not "followed up" even to the extent of a paragraph, but left in its pregnant strangeness, disparate and bare. And this is typical of many press tales. I suppose it is due to "pressure on our space," but the fact is there are only two topics which a popular newspaper ever seems consistently to explore and exploit: its own merits and those of British Womanhood. Perhaps it is because my father, a much-travelled man, considered British women the dullest in the world, that I have never been able to see eye to eye with the press that these assumptions are unchangeable, but this is a digression. Now for many years I have interested myself in Metapsychics, the science—if it can so be termed—of super-normal and occult phenomena, and I flatter myself I have investigated the history and credentials of more specimens of this genre than any other living Englishman. It is my hobby, my craving if you like, and fortunately I possess the means and the lesiure to devote myself to it thoroughly and conscientiously. Therefore, when I read that "intriguing" (I dislike the word but there is no other that precisely does its work) item of news and realised I should be vouchsafed no more information from the same source, I made up my mind to clear the matter up. Quite possibly, I knew, it was just one of the many tales of its

type, consisting far more of embroidery than stuff: but somehow it had an air about it which persuaded me it was worth investigation. So I took train to Ledbury, which was distant some eight miles from the village of M——. (I have resolved to maintain a certain reticence regarding place and personal names for a reason which I shall later explain.) I may say also that I have some reputation for pedantry amongst my friends; probably my enemies—if I have any—for I possess too neutral a temperament to have many, describe me as a bore; but I prefer pedantry to inaccuracy; I would sooner be a bore than a bluffer.

At Ledbury I installed myself at a hotel, and set out the next morning to consult the files of the local paper which bottles and dispenses the usual small beer of the regions round about. At the end of eight hours' laborious search I had verified the following facts: there *had* been six fatal automobile accidents on the Ledbury-M—— Road within the last decade, always roughly at the same spot on the same date, September 10th, and each of these fatalities had occurred between 8 and 9 p.m.—the exact time was not known in three instances as the crash had not been discovered till an uncertain period after its occurrence.

In 1926 a Ledbury doctor was found dead in his car which had left the road and telescoped against a telegraph pole.

In 1929 a local publican was driving his wife and daughter back from Malvern, when he apparently lost control, and his car ran into a ditch. All three were killed instantly, but the crash was heard and the time of its occurrence verified as 8.35.

In 1931 a local parson, driving alone, was killed when his car overturned. His body was discovered at 8.50.

In 1933 a Birmingham business man, touring the locality with his wife and two young sons, drove his saloon obliquely off the road into a field where it fell on its side and burst into flames. All four were burnt to death. This accident took place about 8.30.

In 1935 a Hereford building contractor, driving back from Ledbury, was found dying in the middle of the road having ben hurled through the windscreen of his car, which had crashed into the hedge. Just before he

died in hospital, he said, "Did I hit them?" The accident happened about 8.30.

Finally in 1936 this salesman had met his fate as stated. He was found at 8.45 by a passing car, and a doctor testified at the inquest he had been dead for a very short time.

Now it will occur to the reader to ask why, if there was some casual link between these accidents, was there no record of any such previous to 1926. Naturally I turned my attention to this problem and got this much enlightenment. Before the War the road was notoriously bad and practically unused by motor traffic. In 1923 the local authorities found the pressure on the nieghbouring highways becoming heavy and it was decided to improve this secondary road by relaying it, trimming hedges, and so on. It was not re-opened till December, 1925. Furthermore, I found a small paragraph recording the inquest on a local labourer's daughter who was found dead beside her cycle on this same stretch on September 10th, 1921. The theory was she had been thrown off on to her head when her cycle struck a stone. She was discovered about nine and had been dead a short time.

My next step was, of course, to visit the scene of these happenings to see if there was anything in this piece of road to encourage disaster, though I had gathered from the various inquests that such was not the case, and that the weather had been fine and the surface dry on every occasion. I hired a car and went there the next day. My driver was a stolid, unresponsive fellow who took no interest in my errand; but he knew the place by repute. "Here we are," he announced, after half an hour's drive. I found myself at the bottom of a shallow valley which pierced the road at this point, and from which it ran up pretty steeply due north and south. Consequently I judged the speed of cars at this point would tend to be high as they were "opened-out" to take the rise, otherwise there was nothing whatsoever to justify its malign record. My stolid chauffeur agreed with me in this, declaring he had driven it countless times in all weathers and found no perils or snares appertaining to it. His adequate imagination, however, seemed to find the axiom that ninety per cent of motorists were congenital idiots, quite adequate explanation of

the spate of blood on this, as on every other, stretch of road in the United Kingdom.

But I was not so easily satisfied: in fact, I found it impossible to write off this strange sequence as one of the vagaries of coincidence, many and fantastic though these can be. In fact, I knew again that sense of leashed elation which comes to me when I am, as I believe sportsmen put it, "on a good thing."

My next move was clearly indicated, to delve into this alleged "haunting." After dinner that night I invited Mine Host to share a pint of port with me in the smoking-room. After an exchange of rather flaccid civilities I brought the conversation round to what I was after, using the newspaper story as an introduction to the topic. This landlord was somewhat narrow-eyed and mundane-minded, and I received no very sympathetic response. He seemed to share the view of my chauffeur that most motorists abrogated their senses when they slipped in their clutches. "They've got to crash somewhere," he laughed, "besides, half-past eight is just the time when they're hurrying home after stoking-up at pubs, and then take the hill too hard. I don't say the parson was tight, but parsons and old women are the worst drivers on the roads. Anyway they've got to put something in the papers."

"Then you've heard nothing of any story or legend in connection with that piece of road?" I asked.

"No, sir, and I'll bet my boots there's no such; but," he said, "there's a gentleman who comes in here most nights who can tell you if there's any such yarn. He's an authority on these parts, he writes on 'em. He's a rich gentleman who lives at Metling Manor, two miles out of the town."

He looked at the clock. "It's near his usual time; I'll let you know if he comes in."

Presently he returned in company with an elderly man of robust, genial and intelligent appearance. He introduced us and departed.

"Well, sir," said my new acquaintance, accepting a glass of port. "I did not gather from Curtis very clearly what you wished to ask me about, but I am at your service."

Whereupon I gave him a précis of my reasons for being in the vicinity, and I could see he was somewhat impressed.

"Very interesting occupation, yours," he said, "as unusual as interesting. My hobby is peering at the heavens through a small telescope; so we are both of us preoccupied with an enigma. I may say I am no great expert; in fact, I could do with a course at the Academy of Professor William Hay, no doubt." (I think this is what he remarked, but the allusion quite escapes me.)

"As for your 'ghosts,' I am quite open-minded. Understanding, as we do, nothing of the purpose, and precious little of the content of creation, one more mystery makes little difference. And I'll give you this; it *is* a very suggestive sequence, a great straining of one's belief in coincidence. And, appropriately enough, that mile of road has a history, if one can so describe it."

"It has!" I said eagerly.

"Yes; though the fact must be known to very few, but I dare say there's some vague oral tradition in the neighborhood, but I don't advise you to go in search of it. Those you might interrogate would merely put you down as another reporter, though, if I may say so, you in no way resemble one, and they mistrust the breed. Probably you would be palmed off with a catalogue of lies by the local Pint-Scrounger, and that would be the beginning and end of your gleanings there." He spoke with great vivacity and gusto, and was palpably a man of superior character and parts. I thanked him for this timely advice and waited for his further pleasure.

"I'm not sure," he continued, "I can tell you anything very illuminating. Did you ever hear of a Victorian Q.C. called W—— M——?" (I am again observing a necessary reticence.)

"Remotely so, I think," I replied.

"He was a lamentably dull dog," continued my companion, "but he had a very large criminal practice during the last quarter of the century. In an ill-omened moment he decided to write his reminiscences, which in their soporific potency are about equivalent to a lethal dose of chloral. However, he devotes what seems a disproprotionate amount of this drowsy stuff to a case which was connected with that very mile of road, though he had merely a watching brief in a coroner's court. I have a copy of the book which I will gladly lend you."

I thanked him sincerely for his courtesy.

"The person whose interests he was watching," he continued, "was a certain H—— B——, a man of

thirty who lived with his mother in a house just at the top of the hill on the Ledbury side of the valley. He had some money of his own and led the life of a small country gentleman. This house has since been pulled down, and I believe, for your satisfaction, had the reputation of being haunted. In 1888 this H—— B—— was engaged to be married to a Miss L——, a young woman of great beauty, but beneath him in station, according to the world's values, being the daughter of a Birmingham tanner in a very small way of business. This maiden he had seduced, or been seduced by —it is of no consequence—and he had promised to marry her, a promise which his mother, a woman of strong character and principles, insisted he should keep. The wedding was fixed for some time in October. One evening in September—it may have been your tenth, I do not recall—when the girl was staying with the mother, she and this H—— B—— went for a walk and arrived back later in the evening. The girl was taken ill that night and died the next day. That is all I remember about the case, save that H—— B——, who was absolved of all suspicion, married soon after an American millionairess and went to live in the States. I know nothing of his subsequent history. The details of the affair you will find in W—— M——'s book."

I thanked him again but added, "I am not proposing to go against your advice, but that account in the papers suggested that there *was* some local tradition the road was suspect in some way—in the vaguest of terms, I grant you, but . . ."

"Excuse me interrupting," he said, "but I quite get your point. If that scribe wasn't merely adorning his tale with an appropriate fiction, he must have heard something. Leave that to me: I know the countrymen round here like the back of my hand, and I'll do a little ferreting around and let you know. Don't thank me, I'm highly interested. I'm supposed to be somewhat of an authority on Herefordshire history and customs, and this is quite within my province. When are you leaving here?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"Then I will send the book to your home address if you will give it me, and I will make these enquiries at once and write you of any information I can glean."

I told him how delighted I was to have found such

an accomplished and courteous helper. Whereupon we finished the bottle, and Mr. Thomas Tusker, as he was named, drove off home.

He was as good as his word, and thirty-six hours later the book was delivered at my home in Belgrave Square. I opened it eagerly as no doubt many others had done; but unlike them, at least so I fancy, I was not disappointed. It was a well-produced crown 8vo, published in 1898, with a lengthy and ponderous dedication to some unnamed female; and this, I found, was a characteristic and ominous introduction. Certainly he was a master of tepid verbosity, but this was all to the good from my point of view. It did not take me long to reach the year 1888 and the chapter dealing with the events antecedent and subsequent to the death of Miss L——. (I may say the author exercised the same discretionary powers as myself, and refers to the characters concerned by their initials only. It is quite conceivable H—— B—— is still alive.)

It appears—to use his own jargon—that on September 20th, 1888, he received an urgent request from a firm of Hereford solicitors and the offer of a substantial fee for representing this H—— B—— at an adjourned inquest in Ledbury. On calling upon the firm he was informed of the following circumstances: the doctor who attended Miss L—— had refused to give a death certificate and a post-mortem had been ordered. The experts who performed this gave it as their opinion that Miss L—— had died as the result of poisoning by some vegetable alkaloid, probably atropine or aconitine. Apparently—I may say I know little of such matters—the tests for the presence of such poisons in the human body were, in those days, indirect and rudimentary, but experiments had been made on some small rodents which reinforced this hypothesis; and that her symptoms were consistent with it. The author had "mugged-up" some information about these vegetable alkaloids in connection with a murder case in which he had acted for the defence, and which was the chief cause of his being briefed for Mr. H—— B——. The solicitors informed him that local feeling was running high against his client, more on general principles than from definite grounds of suspicion; he being haughty, high-minded, and boorish. It is clear, too, that his counsel took a strong dislike to him, though he never suggests he

doubted his innocence. When the inquest was resumed, Mr. H—— B—— was to all intents and purposes in the dock. However, our author, according to his own complacent account, had little difficulty in relieving his anxiety. Firstly, there appeared to be no motive. The marriage was arranged, and the parties to it on terms of great affection—Mr. H—— B—— fully repenting of his amorous indiscretion and anxious to make reparation. Again no evidence whatsoever of his purchase, or otherwise procuring, of any poison, could be produced, though it is clear the fullest investigation had been covertly made. Our author—who has no small opinion of himself—is not backward in pointing out how he belaboured and pulverised the medical experts, thus leaving the jury in a great state of uncertainty as to whether death had been due to poison and not natural causes—heart trouble, "idiopathic convulsions"—whatever they may be—or possibly a surfeit of bliss. If there were any traces of an alkaloid in the body, argued our author, it was probably a cadaveric alkaloid—whatever *that* may be. So the verdict was Death from Natural Causes, and our author pocketed his fee and went back to London.

But although, as I have stated, he professed to believe in his client's innocence, his chapter leaves the impression that Mr. H—— B—— was in serious jeopardy, and it required the talents of Mr. W—— M—— to get him safely out of it. And since he never knew that his client subsequently married an American heiress—well, in any case that could never have concerned him. He writes in conclusion:

I have devoted considerable space to what may seem a case of little interest and minor importance, but there were elements of strangeness and, from my point of view, difficulty about it. The girl was in robust health at eight o'clock one morning and dead by eight o'clock the next. Until I pressed them hard, the medical witnesses were very positive that the symptoms: high temperature, double vision, delirium, and the changes immediately preceding death, were consistent and consistent only, with poisoning by a vegetable alkaloid; and though I shook them, I think they remained of the same opinion still. Could any convincing degree of mo-

tive have been urged, far more if any procuring of poison been traced to my client, it must have gone hard with him. It is not one of the defences—for it amounted to that—on which I look back with least satisfaction. I may add the finding of the jury was received with murmurs of anger and disapproval.

Speaking purely for myself, I should say that the impression left on the untutored is that the one thing Miss L—— did *not* die from was a natural cause, but that may have been due to humanity's passionate preference for believing the worst if it is inhumanly possible.

A week later I received the following letter.

"DEAR SIR ANSTRUTHER,

"Well, I have 'snooped around' and you were certainly right. There is a very strong and adhesive local tradition that one is liable to encounter unexpected pedestrians on that piece of road on the evening of September 10th. In fact, those living in the vicinity give the area a wide berth on that anniversary. They attribute these crashes unhesitatingly to such encounters. There is another queer little belief. My informant, an astonishingly well-preserved nonagenarian, told me that the girl is supposed to have been singing as she walked through M—— with her lover. 'A song about doing her hair,' declared my Ancient. I wondered if it conceivably might be Haydn's 'My Mother bids me Bind my Hair'—one of the supreme delicacies of all time—and hummed the first ten bars. 'Yes, that was the tune, and you might hear her singing it still,' he declared after his third pint, 'if you were near to Pix Hill around eight-thirty on September tenth.' While the spell was on me I felt somehow as though I had strayed for a moment over the frontier of fairyland. This haunting business is a slippery half-concept. If one spot is haunted, why not all? If at one hour, why not always? Should not every battlefield be awake with the grapplings and loud with the cries of those who fought there? But they are not. Anyway it's your line of country, not mine, and I hope this is some use to you. And don't forget to advise me if your further researches lead you anywhere. This is a nice fragment of peasant legend; so compara-

tively recent in origin. It has moved me somewhat. Keep me informed.

"Yours sincerely,

"THOMAS TUSKER"

The hand-writing was very characteristic, lithe, "extempore," vigorous, and careless.

Well, this was satisfactory verification, so far as it went, though there was no palpable connection between Pix Hill and the events which had occurred here. However, there was nothing to be done but wait the best part of eleven months, till September 10th came round again. Meanwhile I devoted my time chiefly to putting into shape another 50,000 words of my opuscula on Modern Metapsychics, which I hope to have published —no doubt at my own expense—about the year 1948. I also bought a bicycle, and had some exercise I had not enjoyed—or suffered—for more than twenty years.

On September 9th, I took my cycle down to Ledbury and put up at the same hotel. I had previously informed Mr. Tusker of my coming and he dined with me that night. We discussed the case for a time, but nothing of our talk is worth repeating here.

At six o'clock the following evening I set out on my cycle and an hour and a half later reached Pix Hill. I decided to take up my position at the bottom of the switchback where the valley crossed the road, and sat down there in the hedge as though merely resting for a while. And, indeed, I felt the need of it. No doubt you, my readers, are smiling at the picture of me squatting in a dusty hedge and waiting for some occult manifestation. Maybe you think I was feeling an old fool! It was not so. I have had sufficient successes to fortify me against failure, and impatience is not one of my vices—or virtues.

It was an exquisite evening with hardly a hint of autumn to be descerned. Beninlgy warm, the sun climbing down through delicate ribbons of cloud and a gentle breeze blowing from the south. Rooks cawed, small birds rolled in the dust and I could just see through the hedge a company of rabbits feeding and playing in the field opposite. In these placid circumstances I began to feel drowsy, but the occasional passing of a car kept me awake. Apart from these, there were no signs of the presence of man.

Then suddenly it came. Now I have little descriptive power. I can catalogue and marshal facts as well as another, but I lack the range of vocabulary or flexibility of phrase to convey in any vivid manner how the world changed for me at that moment. It was not a new sensation—I have had it several times, but it never loses its strangeness and its shock. First there came, as always, that curious anticipatory sign. You know, the sharp twitch or flicker shown by an electric bulb that is about to break. Imagine that vastly intensified, painfully, distressingly so, a vicious flash that seems to generate in the brain and escape through the eyes. Some such sensation is the invariable prelude to these transmissions, if I may so term them. Then, to employ a bathetic comparison, it is rather as though one were suddenly encased in a gas helmet and peering out through its cloudy eyeslots. There is the same sense of oppression and slight suffocation, and the appearance of everything is changed, toned down, losing its quality, as it were. Again it is as if one were projected into another psychic dimension, a region where complete soundlessness reigns, and so far as the *setting* for these manifestations is concerned, stillness. Every seen thing is fixed and rigid, like soldiers at attention; every tree stands as stark and idle as a painted cypress in a painted graveyard. (And these were not the trees I had seen bending to the breeze a moment before.) There is a dread sense of suspense as though the stage was set, and some dim thing about to be performed. One feels isolated, enclosed, almost imprisoned. One waits for one knows not what. My eyes focussed themselves to this lost landscape, and then I saw them, slipping on to the screen of my consciousness. They had their backs to me. He was garbed in light, tight trousers, tight short coat and straw hat. She was wearing a frock of muslin, or some such stuff, tight backed, tiny waisted with a long full skirt; and fallen back from her head and swinging by a ribbon was a large bonnet or hat. (I can revisualise them as I write with the most precise definition.) They were pacing slowly up the hill, he on a grass verge (no longer existing), she beside him on the road. Every now and again he turned into the hedge and plucked at the bushes, and then, placing his right hand round the girl's waist, fed her, as it were, with his left. As she turned her head to take the berries, as

I suppose they were, in her mouth, I could see her face was smiling and radiant with happiness. He had done this perhaps six times when he glanced furtively around and behind him. I can see that evil face, its expression one of great agitation combined with hard resolve. He dropped back a pace or two, and unobserved by her, pulled a branch or twig towards him and broke it off. Then, with his hands concealed behind him, he picked stealthily at the branch. A moment later he regained her side, and taking her waist as before, he brought his left hand across her face and held it there. I saw her draw back her head as though taken by surprise and glance across at him as though puzzled and perplexed. And then they walked on side by side. At that moment there came a jangling roar and something hurtled by me, so close I leaped aside. Twenty yards ahead of me the car swerved violently over to its right side and I could see the driver struggling to regain control. It was too late; the long bonnet struck a telegraph pole, splintered it in halves and drove on into the hedge. I could see a figure hurled straight up from it like a man tossed in a blanket. For a second it sprawled suspended against a breeze-blown tree. . . .

I stayed on for the inquest, this time the Press seemed genuinely stirred, and I went about with eager reporters in my train like the Belle of the Ball. In answer to their almost menacing entreaties I told them that if I had anything to impart to the world on the affair, apart from my evidence at the inquest which was purely perfunctory, it would be available in my *Modern Metapsychics,* the probable publication date of which was 1948. This pronouncement did not seem to appease them.

I dined with Tusker on the night before the inquest and gave him the "story" these disgruntled pests had sought. "Well," he said, "it is a strange and somehow disturbing business, but I cannot see it explains anything at all."

"No," I replied doubtfully, "and, of course, there is no reason why it should. These apparitions often have no apparent *raison d'être,* no teleological purpose; and yet for some reason I feel I have missed the significance of something that I saw."

What that something might be suddenly occurred to

me in the train going home. On arrival I at once sat down and wrote to Tusker. Four days later I received the following reply—

"DEAR SIR ANSTRUTHER,

"I think I see what you're getting at. Curiously enough Atropa Belladonna used to flourish abnormally in this part of Herefordshire, but about fifteen years ago a number of brats were poisoned by the berries and an edict went forth that it was to be laid low as much as possible. Furthermore I paid a vist to Pix Hill on Monday and had a chat with an old hedger I found at work. He told me there was plenty of the muck there at one time, and on searching together we found a small plant not so far from where you had your adventure, which we yanked up.

"As a result of all this I have come to regard you with considerable awe, as one who, if you will forgive the expression, is true to the sinister traditions of British Baronets. In spite of which I am enormously looking forward to visiting you in November.

"Yours very sincerely,
"THOMAS TUSKER."

Ingredient X

As the door opened Philip Camley said, "I believe you have a bed-sitting room to let," and the echoing overtones from his three previous utterances of this remark that day giggled through his brain.

"Yes," said the person who opened it, "we have. Will you step in?"

As he entered, Camley slyly but fairly comprehensively examined him. That it was a "him" at all was a surprise, for the other three had been beady-eyed "hers" of that vague age between fifty and senility so hard to judge precisely in the case of landladies and other drab females.

This person suggested dilapidated, anæmic gentility, a thing of aged sports coat and grey bags, and thin, battered face, grotesquely hairy with its whiskers and drooping moustache. "Graham Browne played you perfectly," thought Camley, "but I can't remember the piece." He was about sixty and his voice was anæmically genteel too. A small grimy mongrel had come to the door with him.

"Will you come this way," said this dim carpet-slippered ghost of a gent, and led the way up two flights of stairs to the first floor and opened a door on the right.

Camley got another shock, and a far greater one, when he saw the room. A brief experience had taught him you got no bridal suite for twelve-and-six per week, but the unexpired portion of some moribund, down-at-heel sticks, torn lace curtains, a bed by courtesy of title, and a good portion of the dust of ages. But this apartment was almost lavish, almost grandiose, with its heavily timbered glossy furniture, spacious brass bed, thick carpet and china parrots on the mantelpiece. It looked like twenty-five shillings at least, but some dissembling was indicated.

He went to a window and looked out over a small oblong garden, a patch of mattled, scrubby lawn, a staggering pergola, four mangled plane trees, two stained, chipped stone urns, ending in a small jungle of bushes, tins, bottles, and bird-lime. Two cats were slowly swearing at each other on a wall.

"All right," said Camley, "I'll take it for a fortnight and we'll see how we get on. Twelve-and-six, I understand?"

"Yes," replied the old man, "I hope you'll be comfortable. I'm sorry my wife couldn't show you round, but she's somewhat of an invalid and this is one of her bad days."

"Not one of *your* best," thought Camley, for the paddling old thing looked strained and jittery, and his mottled eyes looked everywhere but into Camley's.

"Have you any other guests?" he asked.

"Two at present, but both happen to be away on business at the moment. This is the bathroom." Camley, after a cursory examination, decided the bath wanted a wash a good deal more than he did, and the geyser was clearly qualified to be a museum piece.

"Well," he said, "I'll get along and fetch my things. I'll be back in about an hour." The old man gave him a key and saw him out.

On leaving the house Camley glanced up at it. It was situated on a short street between Northcote Road and Clapham Common, and was constructed of that peculiarly horrid dirty white, slightly glazed brick prevalent in that neighbourhood. It had a look of hang-dog stability and permanence. "Better," thought Camley, "the jerry-built pimples of modernity, the 'Justa Places' and 'Newholmes,' which had the decency to be almost as unstable as sandcastles to be levelled by a few year waves, than these rows of little bastilles."

He took a train to Victoria, fetched his bags from the hotel and taxied back to 10 South Side Road.

As, with the assistance of the taxi-driver, he was humping his trunk up the stairs, Camley breathed deeply of that lodging-house *essence* which haunts the memory far more pungently than the scent of woodsmoke on an autumn evening. He tried to analyse it. Imagine, he thought, a very large and shaggy sheepdog and rifled the contents of a fried-fish shop and then trotted home through pouring rain and lain down in the hall to dry, exhaling vigorously, that would account for two of its ingredients. If a good stock of mice and a large head of cockroaches were at large on the premises, that would give you a third, and then there was the suggestion that a gentle breeze was blowing from over an ancient trunk full of decaying raiment and a moth-riddled stuffed heron. He found this *bouquet*, diluted but still pervasive, in his room.

He had intended to unpack immediately, but to his mild surprise he found his will placed a rigid veto on this proposal. "No, you don't!" it seemed to proclaim, almost with the coda. "Wait and see!" Oh well! he was tired, and weariness imposed odd prohibitions. Besides, he was not yet properly broken-in to the corollaries of penury. He got out enough for the night, put a bob in the metre, after oathful gropings in a dark cupboard, sat down before the gas-fire, yawned, and ruminated again, and for the hundredth time, on his past, present and future. He was aged twenty-eight, and three months before had occupied an eight-room flat, mildly renowned for its interior decorations, in Mayfair, and spent rather more than his £3,000 a year on his person-

al delectation in a robustly decorative way, and practised the art of painting for a dilettante twelve hours a week. However, the solicitor who had charge of his trust funds had decided to employ them in something younger and gayer than Trustee Securities and lost the lot in the Metal Market. So *he* had retired to Wandsworth and Camley to Clapham. He had been lucky to get a job with a firm of commercial artists and was starting work the next day; and just as the sour soldier found to his indignation that on reaching the front he had not only to fight for king and country but also for his bleeding life, so now Camley found he had to paint and draw for his. Well, he could make it; make one pound do far, far more than its share of what ten had done before. But there were many mental adjustments, coarse and subtle, necessary before he could acquire the poor man's angle of vision and scale himself to the P.M.'s design for living. He'd got to accustom himself to this one room, for example. He glanced around it in the gathering gloom and was suddenly assailed by a gust of intense depression. It *was* pretty grim, so hideous, utterly *wrong*, as aloof and inhuman as a prison cell, somehow sinister, echoing many sad thoughts and desperate anxieties. He shivered, then shook himself, he mustn't let it get him down; half an hour in prison cell would teach him the difference. Really he was very lucky. Why didn't they charge more for it? He turned on the light, dozed over a book for a while and presently decided he was hungry. Sleepily he looked round for a bell—then smiled wryly; there was to be no more of that! He got up and stretched himself. How quiet it was —almost sepulchrally so. Nothing was so quiet as a London backwater in its own melancholy way. He turned out the gas, lit a cigarette, put on his hat and coat, switched off the light and opened the door. As he went out he could see a faint reflection of himself, made by the glow of his cigarette, or the faint light from the landing, in the wardrobe mirror opposite. As he went down the stairs he frowned as though vaguely puzzled, for it seemed to him there had been something a tiny bit odd about that reflection he had faintly glimpsed; but he could not put, as it were, the finger of his mind's eye upon it. He walked to the Junction and dined bravely off some shepherd's pie and cheese which inclined him to take a less picturesque view of the pas-

toral life; but the bill was one shilling, and he had all the convert's zeal for economy. It had then been his intention to go straight "home" but he felt a very strong distaste for the prospect and, instead, took a walk round the dread wastes of Wandsworth Common. Then, to his shame, he felt abominably hungry again. He found an all-night café and ate one of those pies which, screened by beans, from a good part of the staple diet of a certain percentage of the populace, and the contents of which their makers are sworn by huge oaths and mighty convenants never to betray.

"Bill, please, wait-ah!" exclaimed a facetious and slightly casked hobbledehoy further along the counter. Camley realized this shaft of wit was aimed at him and meditated removing a block, a feat he was quite capable of accomplishing and would have enjoyed. "But no," he thought, "I'll take it as a compliment, obviously I don't look the part of Lazarus yet, and damn it, I never will!"

Fortified by this resolution he strode resolutely to Number 10. It was pit-dark inside and he hadn't the vaguest idea where the light switch was. He struck a match and by its initial flare saw a large dog slink away down the passage. It turned its head for a moment and Camley could see the twin gleams from its tawny eyes. "That probably accounts for ingredient one," he thought. "I wonder how many more unhoovered hounds the old devil keeps!"

Just before he reached the landing his match went out. He lit another and looked up. "Sorry, sir!" he exclaimed, and then swore at himself.

Apologising to one's shadow! How occidental—oriental! How Barrie-the-Pooish! But somehow the silence and the fetid gloom, the baleful glare of the beast, and that little futility had withered his momentary self-confidence. His room breathed chill, yet airless, and he received an impression that someone had been there shortly before, one of those odd little ripples, so irrational, so powerfully persuasive from, perhaps, some central secret. He turned on the gas and looked for evidences of this person's presence. He saw none. He then went to the bathroom for some hot water and found it locked. "An infernally punny piece of stinginess!" he thought angrily. So he dug a kettle out of the cupboard and heated some water on the bracket, an-

other dreary little corollary of twelve-and-six a week. He undressed, and ten minutes later set his alarum clock for 7.30 and got into bed. The fact that he had accomplished something, and that tomorrow would see him earning his living and, marvellously lucky, at a congenial job, saved him from lying awake, as had been his custom for many weeks, and brooding almost agonisingly over his troubles. He was asleep within five minutes, but some time later found himself awake again under the uncertain impression that some sound had disturbed him. Ah! There it was, a short staccato rattle of his door and a faint "swish," as if something had been drawn across it, and then a sharp convulsive rattle again. That blasted dog! he thought. "Go away! Beat it!" he exclaimed. He half dozed off and woke again. He then had an experience which he had known often before, especially in strange rooms. It was that he had become, as it were, disorientated; that he was lying in the wrong direction of the room, as though his bed had been slewed round. Of course he knew that once you sat up in bed the illusion vanished, but ever since he had been a small boy it had amused him to "play-up" to such illusions for a time. He did so now. It seemed to him he was lying along the top wall instead of a side one. He found no difficulty in "holding" it. "That is enough," he thought, after a few moments and sat up—and rubbed his eyes. For he still found himself lying along the top wall; and then something else caught his attention, his clock had stopped its throaty ponderous ticking. "Blast it!" he exclaimed. He had put a box of matches under his bed. He reached down for them and lit one—and there he was lying along the side wall, his clock was hammering placidly away and the time was 2:45. Camley closed his left eye and tapped his nose, a habit of his when puzzled. "It must be those two pies," he decided, "the shepherd's and his dog's. But my tummy must take the vows of poverty and learn to like it as well as I. I must get some sleep—only about four hours till the maroon goes." He sniffed. "That stench is pretty fruity, there's the Wet Dog, the Fried Fish and the rest of it, but now there's something added—what is it?" It was pungent and sickly, but he couldn't place it. He'd call it "Ingredient X" for the time being. He yawned, lay back and the next moment, it seemed, he was roused by the most bestial of small sounds. Half an

hour later he was in the hall. The old man was there before him, the small tyke at his heels.

"Did you have a good night?" he asked in such a comically urgent way that Camley wanted to laugh.

"Fairish, thanks," he replied. "You're very fond of dogs aren't you?" he added pointedly.

"Well, I've had this little fellow ten years," said the old man. "I should feel lost without him."

"What about that big swine?" thought Camley. "By the way," he said, "do you always lock the bathroom door at night?"

A curious expression came over the old man's face. Camley attributed it at the moment to discomfiture at being detected in such petty parsimony.

"I never do," he muttered, his eyes on the floor.

"It was locked last night."

"It can't have been, but it sometimes sticks."

"I see," said Camley. "Well, I must be off."

He spent an anxious but reassuring day. He was given a short story to illustrate, and the "roughs" he submitted were well approved. The atmosphere of the studio was amicable, and when he left at six he knew that sense of tempered relief experienced by a batsman, who, at a moment of crisis, sees double figures go up beside his number on the score-board.

He dined with a friend in Soho and put his key in the lock of Number 10 as the clock was striking a quarter to one. Hell! He'd forgotten to locate that light-switch! He fumbled through his pockets and discovered he'd no matches. Oh well he knew the way. The complete lack of cheer about such abodes in the early hours of the morning was impressive, he decided. To become entangled at this moment with the feet of a body hanging from the bannisters would merely be matter for a shrug of the shoulders. He stumbled and swore; that demnition dog again! He paused for a moment; how could a brute that size lie on one of those stairs? But his foot had certainly touched something soft. It must have been coming down or going up and he'd clipped its muzzle or rump. Why didn't that old fool shut it in at night! He moved on up the stairs. As he reached the spot where he had apologized to his shadow he stumbled again. "What's the matter with this bloody place?" he muttered. He switched on the light in his room and then went to the bathroom. It was open. He

went back to his room and, though he had meant to go to bed at once, sat down for a time considering that short story and, of course, at once had a far, far better idea for the "full-page." He took a pencil and paper and roughed it out. He glanced up at the clock—almost two. He *must* get to bed. Besides, he was damned cold; never again would he be without matches. There might be a box in the bathroom. He went to see. Locked! or stuck. He put his shoulder to it. Hullo, there was someone in there; that was a footstep, Mr. or Mrs. presumably. Odd time for a bath, but there seemed to be a general tendency to reject the normal in this abode. "Abode," second time he'd used the word. He undressed quickly, got into bed—and presently woke abruptly to full consciousness. Now that, he thought, had been an interesting example of the Jumbled-Re-Hash dream, and not a pleasant one; for it had started by his getting the sack from his job, well, not *his* job, but some job. "Get out and stay out!" that tough-looking bird had shouted. And he'd slunk back to Number 10 and later on had gone to the bathroom for some reason. Ugh! There had been an atmosphere of profound, pitiless melancholy brooding over it all. The door rattled sharply. My God, that dog again! He'd let it have it! He jumped out of bed, made for the door and banged into the table. How was that! Where was the door? Rather flustered, he groped round the room. The fireplace must be *here*, therefore the door was *there*. No. That was the bed. Blast and Hell! Therefore, the door *must* be in this direction—and he caught his ribs against the table again. He ran his hands along the walls and suddenly touched the light-switch. As he flicked it down, the room seemed to spin round as though it were on a revolving stage, and he realized the clock was ticking again. He stormed out of the door, furious and confused, though through this emotional fabric a tiny thread of fear was woven. Now he was on the landing and there was nothing. He listened intently for a moment, no sound from the dog; but from the bathroom came a rather revolting little noise, a sort of hawking, choking cough—senile catarrh, he decided, as he went back to his room. He glanced at the clock the clock—2:45. Did the old devil *sleep* in the bathroom! "I'm not sure I shall be here very long," he said to himself as he got back into bed. . . .

Though he woke with the alarum, he dozed off again and this made him late, so he had no time to communicate his views on the large dog to his landlord. He spent another hard but satisfactory day; and did not leave the office till after seven. Not feeling very like Clapham at the moment, he dined at his club—he had paid the sub before his downfall—drowsed through a movie, and was back at Number 10 before eleven. The light was still on in the hall, the bathroom door was unlocked, the large, foul dog was not about, and Camley felt more kindly disposed toward his domicile. He had brought back some proofs of a novel for which he had to a "packet" and he read these till one; then folded them and put them on he table.

For rather obvious reasons Camley seldom referred in after life to his experiences in Number 10. For one thing, he knew if he did, he would usually encounter the bland grin of unbelief; for another, recounting them evoked displeasing memories, which, which, once evoked, took time to fade. But to one to whom he related them he confided that from the moment he put down those proofs till seven the same morning—six hours—his memory is, in a sense, unreliable. Once at Oxford he got extremely tight and his memories of that night are similarly hazy. Certain incidents stand out translucently from the haze like atolls in the ocean, but their time-order and sequence are uncertain, and he finds a difficulty in categorically deciding between appearance and reality. It was so also on this later occasion. He finds it difficult to dogmatize and say, "This was dream, this actual event." Sometimes he thinks he dreamed it all—he hopes he did. Sometimes he has an unhallowed suspicion that he was the subject —the victim—of a new—to him—mode of apprehension. He dislikes this possibility intensely, for if he was a selected victim once, why not again! In any case, this is what he recalls. He had a certain dim recollection of undressing, but as he puts it, "the spell was already working then" and the details of that undressing are blurred and unarticulated. The next thing he *thinks* he remembers is sitting up in bed and hearing the door rattle violently again and again. He leaped out of bed and, as before, lost his bearings and dashed round and round the room in a sharply growing panic. At last he

found the door and flung it open. His right foot slipped as he did so. There was a strange, dim light on the landing and by it he could just see the body of the dog writhing, twisting and rolling from side to side; his foot, he saw, had slipped in a pool of blood. This discovery, he said, completely unnerved him. He rushed to the bathroom door and found it locked. He thumped on the panel, shouting: "Come out, whoever you are!" He flung his shoulder at the door and shouted again. And then he heard footsteps and the door slowly opened. Out through it tottered a tall figure, naked above the waist. Its head was tilted back, its eyes pupilless, white blanks, its arms were stretched out before it as though groping for its way, and blood was pouring from its throat, which was gashed from ear to ear. Camley shrank back from it as it passed him and entered his room. Then he heard it crash down beside his bed.

He woke in that bed sweating, trembling and heart racing. "Thank heavens!" he cried to himself, "it was only a dream." And then he smelt overpoweringly that terrible stench "Ingredient X" and heard a movement beside his bed. "That accursed dog!" he thought, and stretched down his hand for the matches. His hand touched something before it should have done. It was hard and pointed. His fingers pulsed down and felt below to where something warm pulsed out, swilling up over his wrist. . . .

Camley has no doubt about the bona fides of his next experience; that of waking up abruptly at seven o'clock and seeing a wintry light breaking through the dark blinds. In a flash he remembered. In twenty minutes he was dressed and packed, for he *had* to get out of that room. As he passed the bathroom door he saw it was shut. As he reached the hall the landlord was awaiting him. He was in his dressing-gown and Camley saw he was shivering violently.

"Look here," said Camley. "I'm leaving you. I'll fetch my things this evening."

"Very well," said the old man.

"You don't seem very surprised," remarked Camley dryly.

"No, sir."

"When did it happen?"

"Three years ago."

"And the dog?"

"Yes."

"You haven't any other guests, have you?"

"No sir. I shouldn't have let the room to you, but I hoped . . ."

"I understand. I suppose your wife is frightened?"

"Yes, sir."

"I wonder you can stick it."

"It's all right during the day, sir; and, unfortunately, I own the house and cannot sell or rent it; it has a bad name."

"You've got enough to live on?" asked Camley sympathetically.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I hope my successor will have stronger nerves or be a sounder sleeper."

"I shall not try again, sir."

"Well, I must be going," said Camley. "By the way, you've moved the bed since then?"

"Yes, sir," replied the old man, shaking from chin to knees.

As Camley was having breakfast in a café near the Junction he thought miserably, "Now I shall have to begin den-hunting all over again. And I know I shall never get anything like as good for twelve-and-six." He smiled to himself. " 'Anything like as good.' Well, that's one way of putting it!"

He found a tolerable habitation the next day, but for some nights he hated turning out his light and his sleep was disturbed. But the memories of the young are flexible and resilient, and within a month his had erected a barrier against those three days in Number 10; and his will being reasonably strong, he "crowded out" the recollection of them with determined efficiency. But always in the back of his mind was a wish to solve the little puzzle; what had been wrong with that reflection he had seen in the wardrobe mirror? One evening, some years later, when he was sitting alone in his five-guinea-a-week flat in St. John's Wood, he felt an impelling desire to settle this petty problem. He turned out the reading lamp by his side, cleared his head and concentrated on revisualising the scene. In about five minutes he was seeing every detail of that room and then, as it were, he introduced himself into it, and set himself in motion. As before he yawned, switched off the gas-stove, picked up

his hat and coat and walked over to the door. Now for it! He switched off the light and glanced back in a fury of concentration, his eyes tightly closed. For a while nothing appeared, and then the ghostly outline of the wardrobe re-created itself. For a moment that was all. He drew his eyes in, remained absolutely still, his heart thumping with the strain, and then, just as a film comes to life in the developer, the most tenuous image shone from the mirror, hardened, sharpened and was there. He stared at it for ten seconds in passionate absorption; all the time as an accompaniment to this scrutiny was the thought, "How true it is we see what we expect to see!" Then he could hold it no longer, and the image faded as it had come. Seen again there were several little discrepancies, several little reasons, why it was a suspect reflection of Mr. Philip Camley, and there was one which could rightly be considered decisive, for Camley had certainly been wearing a white collar round his neck on that occasion and not what appeared to be a broad band of ribbon which his colour sense told him was almost certainly red. The spectral memory of a certain sickly, pungent reek came faintly, remotely back to him. He switched on the light.

↑ *"I Recognized the Voice"* ↑

GORAN first set eyes on Lefanu when he was washing his hands at the Palmerston Club, to which he had been recently elected. Lefanu was using the next basin and they looked across at each other. For a moment Goran held his breath, and the soap slid from his hands. Then he recovered himself, and the soap. The cause of his lapse was partly the odd look the other gave him, partly the sense of mental disturbance this look produced in him. The expression on Lefanu's face might have been considered impertinent or familiar, if he had not so obviously been a person incapable of such vulgarity. It might have been described as a friendly, quizzical, understanding look. Goran was so affected by the encounter that he forgot all about his lunch and

went out and walked the streets for a full two hours, spiritually ill at ease and much moved in his mind, seeing always before his inner vision that lean, oval, slightly sallow face with its searching brown eyes. Goran had the very queer sensation that they had long been acquainted, as if they had met in some previous incarnation. An absurd idea, but how otherwise to explain this feeling for one with whom he had never exchanged a word, never seen before to his knowledge?

He took to frequenting the club regularly. For a time he never came into close contact with Lefanu, but he often caught sight of him across the hall or in one of the club-rooms and, if their eyes met, Lefanu's face took on very much that same expression—always.

Goran was acquainted with several of the members, and one of them told him some facts about Lefanu. He was reputed to be a man of considerable wealth who travelled extensively, particularly in the Far East, and was a connoisseur of Oriental art; his collection of jade and priest-robes being considered one of the finest in Europe. Though he "knew everybody" he was temperamentally rather a recluse. All rather vague and exotically commonplace, thought Goran. But one day he discovered another side to his character, for he overheard him talking with a circle of distinguished persons in the smoking-room; a well-known novelist, a couple of K.C.'s and others. Lefanu appeared to be the centre of this circle, for he was doing most of the talking and the rest were listening with close attention. He was discussing a recent inquest on an elderly female in whose body traces of poison had been found. Several of her relatives, who were in a position to ensure it, had had an interest in her death. But though there was suspicion enough, the truth was dark and uncertain, and the verdict had been "open." Lefanu, with extreme virtuosity—almost, thought Goran, amounting to inspiration or second-sight—was analysing the case. He advanced two clues of which, he maintained, the police had entirely missed the significance; he showed precisely how, in his opinion, the crime had been committed, the trail obscured, and how it should have led straight to the culprits. "As if," thought Goran, "he had actually been there, standing unseen beside those two as they laid those so careful plans, foreseeing so much better than the ordinary murderer; perfectly pre-

pared for and against suspicion; perfectly safe against proof; isolated from the world by their dreadful secret."

Goran recognized the analysis to be the work of an imaginative intelligence of a high order. This was also, apparently the opinion of one of the K.C.'s, for he said: "That is complete and unanswerable; you'd have made a fortune at the Bar, my dear Lawrence, as you'd made one at many other things, if you had been born without one."

"It's just a knack," replied Lefanu, laughing.

"Oh, it's a good deal more than that," said the K.C. "Your critiques always leave me with a very odd suggestion of inside knowledge which I don't in the least understand; they have a flabbergasting air of authenticity. Nevertheless, I have certain objections I should like to raise. Let us discuss the case at the next meeting of the Q.T."

This conversation still further increased Goran's interest in Lefanu, for he was also much fascinated by criminological problems, particularly those of homicidal incidence. Making further enquiries, he found that the "Q.T." was a very select little club, the members of which dined together at irregular intervals and discussed cases of unsolved crime. This discovery made him all the more anxious to make Lefanu's acquaintance. In fact, by now "anxious" was hardly the word; "compelled" more accurately described his emotion; and this compulsion became so urgent that it eventually so overcame his natural reserve that he went up to Lefanu one afternoon when he found him reading in the library. As he approached, Lefanu looked up at him with that expression he knew so well. He began to speak hurriedly and nervously."

"My name is Goran," he said.

"I know that," replied Lefanu, smiling.

"I hope you'll pardon me," continued Goran, "but I happened to overhear your analysis of the Gort case the other day. It seemed to me to be brilliant. I, myself, am in a very small way a student of such matters, and I was once concerned in what I believe to be—well, something that might interest you, something about which I should greatly value your views. If I didn't think that you would find it worthy of the exercise of your exceptional ability, I should not have intruded myself upon you." He mopped his forehead.

"Of course, I'm very glad you have," said Lefanu courteously. "I should be delighted to hear about it."

"Then," said Goran, "I wonder if you would dine with me one night and allow me to put the facts before you. I should suggest to-night if I thought there was a chance of your being disengaged. My wife—who has had trouble with her nerves—is in the south of France, but I think I can promise you a decent dinner."

"To-night will suit me perfectly," replied Lefanu.

"Well, then, could you be at forty-six Rexham Gardens, somewhere around eight o'clock?"

"Forty-six. I shall be there."

Goran shivered slightly as he left the club, and, searching for an explanation, found he had been sweating profusely. He hurried home and drank two stiff whiskies in four gulps. His nerves then ceased temporarily to trouble him—or almost so.

It was not until near the end of dinner that the conversation came round to the subject of crime. Lefanu rather deliberately kept it to other topics, and Goran got the uneasy impression he was being studied. When the subject was eventually broached, Lefanu suggested he had no great respect for the sanctity of human life.

"It is a superficial concept," he said, "which ceases to operate very easily. On the battlefield, for example. If there were a fundamental moral veto on killing, it would not lose its force when translated from Soho to Flanders. Again, to kill another painlessly is often to do him a great service."

"It is entirely a question of motive?" suggested Goran.

"Again, let us take the case," said Lefanu, "of two men and one woman, she married to one of the men but loving the other, and being loved by him in return. Let us suppose for some reason, religion, perhaps, divorce is impossible. The only possible way by which the lovers can become united is by the removal of the husband. Well, logically, the happiness of two being twice as important as the happiness of one, the destruction of the husband is logically justified."

Goran stared fixedly at him. "You really believe that?" he asked.

Lefanu smiled. "I merely said that logically there was no flaw in the argument. But I can't tell you how I should react to an actual case that was put before me. But what is the justification always given for the whole-

sale murder of war? That it is for the greatest good of the greatest number that one nation should murder as many as possible of its enemies. That equally applies to the hypothetical case I put forward just now. In each case the individual murderer feels he is helping to ensure the widest distribution of felicity. In war, of course, the individual murderer feels he has the approval of the herd behind him when he sticks his bayonet into the belly of his foe; he knows he has the sentiment of the herd against him when he sticks a dagger into the belly of his rival. Morally, there is not the slightest distinction between the two cases; only the grossest special pleading can establish one. But I am no more logical than any other man. I am emotional, cowardly, conventional. I might disapprove of the wielder of the dagger. It would entirely depend on the circumstances of the case."

Goran regarded him searchingly while he was uttering these specious and perverse observations. He believed he had a definite purpose in making them.

"Let us go to my study," he said, "and I will tell you about that case to which I referred."

"As I have said," he continued when they were seated before the fire, "I overheard your dissection of the Gort case. It seemed to me a most brilliant performance. Not merely the analysis itself, but as Godwin observed, the suggestion of inside information it left on one's mind."

"In a sense that is what I have got," replied the other, "though I seldom refer to the fact. I am at times clairvoyant—a convenient word for describing a not-quite-understood mode of apprehension. For example, when I first saw you, I felt absolutely convinced we should become better acquainted."

It was on the tip of Goran's tongue to say that was just how he had felt himself, but for some reason he decided against it.

"Then again," Lefanu went on, "I often have the truth about such cases on the Gort vividly revealed to me. I have a sense of absolute certainty. It was after spending six months in a Tibetan monastery that this faculty became entirely reliable. So-called 'Eastern Mysticism' is often sheer bunk, but by no means always so. I learnt some odd things in Tibet, the air breathes

magically there. But let me hear about this puzzle with which you were concerned."

Goran lit a cigar, and after that it seemed as if he found it a little difficult to frame his opening sentences. Presently, however, he began:

"Some years ago I went down to stay at the house of a man I had known slightly for a very long time. I will not mention names or places. He was a man of great wealth married to a woman thirty years younger than himself. There were several other people staying in the house. There was his nephew, who would inherit a good deal of his money."

"Did he know he would?"

"Yes. Then there was his brother-in-law, who more or less openly resented his sister's treatment by her husband. And there was a man who, I happen to know, owed his host a very large sum. We four made up the shooting-party. Our host had always been the picture of rude health, very strong, tireless, vital. On this occasion, however, he told me that he had recently suffered several very severe attacks of indigestion which had included some alarming symptoms. On each occasion he had been struck down with agonising pains. As a result the doctor told him his heart was slightly affected."

"How did the doctor diagnose the case?"

Goran paused before replying, but presently said: "He gave it some long, technical name and said it was a case of severe functional disturbance."

"Did he get another opinion?"

"I believe not. He put my friend on a strict diet and, I gather, took other measures he considered suitable. But although the acute symptoms passed away, my friend remained debilitated, nervous and apprehensive about himself. He seemed, however, reasonably well till one night during the second week of our stay. He went to bed apparently quite well, but began to ring his bell violently at two in the morning. He was found in the throes of a violent attack and died before the doctor arrived." He paused.

"I suppose there was an inquest?" said Lefanu.

"No. The doctor gave a certificate that death was due to heart-failure."

"And is that all?" asked Lefanu.

"Yes."

"You suspected something?"

"I want to know what you think about it; to test that faculty of yours," replied Goran, twisting in his chair.

"Well, you've certainly given it little enough to work on," laughed Lefanu. "Apparently there are three persons in the house each with some degree of motive for killing your friend."

"I suppose so."

"Well, let's hear more about them. The young heir, for example."

"Completely commonplace, selfish, improvident."

"A potential murderer?"

Goran seemed uneasy with his question. "Is there such a person?" he said.

"Well, d'you think he had the guts and initiative to plan and execute his uncle's murder?"

"No," replied Goran.

"What about the brother-in-law?"

"A sponger; otherwise he wouldn't have been there." Goran said with emphasis.

"Would you judge he had sufficient temperament to kill a man for ill-treating his sister? I take it from what you said he *did* ill-treat her?"

"Not physically, of course. But I consider he submitted her to extreme mental torture. She was absolutely dependent on him, and he brutally took advantage of the fact."

"I rather wonder he was a friend of yours," said Lefanu, smiling.

This remark seemed rather to touch Goran on the raw. "He was really only an acquaintance," he said. "When I accepted his invitation I didn't realize the state of affairs, that he possessed this strong sadistic taint."

"And the man who owed him money?"

"A rather curious type, but just a type. Plausible, good company, good shot, with big, bad business ideas; bad because they were too big for him. It's no use your asking if he was a potential murderer, because I don't know one when I see one."

"And the wife?" asked Lefanu.

Again Goran hesitated, for this question also seemed rather difficult to answer. "A very beautiful, charming and intelligent woman," he remarked after some moments.

"You're sure that is a comprehensive diagnosis?"

"Quite sure."

Lefanu lit another cigarette. "You've certainly given me a teaser. However, we'll see."

He leaned back in his chair and put his hands over his eyes. He remained absolutely motionless for what seemed to Goran a very long time. Suddenly he sat up and said: "Tell me about the doctor."

"The doctor?" replied Goran. "Oh, just an ordinary G.P."

"Surely not quite ordinary, I hope. Here is a patient clearly suffering from what he must have realized was a dangerous disease, almost certainly one with which he was inadequately equipped to deal. Yet he doesn't call in a specialist, but complacently accepts his patient's peril; and when that patient dies, merely remarks that he expected him to do so. Furthermore, in what seems an obscure and dubious case, he gives a death certificate without a qualm. What age was he?"

"About forty-five."

"Was he an old friend of the family?"

"I believe so."

"An old friend of your host's wife?"

"What do you imply by that?" asked Goran after a pause.

"Well, I have found a possible justification for your suspicions," replied Lefanu lightly. "It seems to me incredible that either of your fellow-guests could have poisoned this man. For this reason. Your ordinary G.P. would have had to have been an extraordinary negligent or half-witted G.P. not to have spotted the fact that his patient was being poisoned. I studied medicine when I was younger, and I can assure you that this doctor could not have failed to share your suspicion, though far more strongly."

"There have been cases where the doctor was deceived," said Goran rather perfunctorily.

"I grant you that, but only where the doctor was extraordinarily negligent or half-witted. Did this man seem to be either?' '

"No."

"Then I say emphatically that his conduct was so unprofessional that it requires more explanation than I can find for it, save on one assumption, that he killed, or arranged for the killing of, your friend. Let us indulge in a little harmless theorising. The doctor is thrown into

the company of a beautiful, charming and unhappily married woman. Was *he* married, by the way?"

"No."

"Well, then. Susceptible, probably meeting few other attractive women, your G.P. becomes madly infatuated with her. She reciprocates, for unhappily married women are by that very fact ready to fall in love. Divorce is out of the question; he cannot afford to ruin his career and beggar himself by running away with the lady. He gets to loathe the husband for his brutality to the woman he loves. Remember there are certain temperaments, always persons of fine character, in whom cruelty towards helpless human beings or animals rouses uncontrollable fury; they go berserk. If this doctor was such a one, and the cruelty was to one he adored, the result would be almost inevitable. Well, the emotional situation grows more and more strained. The strain becomes intolerable. Suddenly he—or, I think, more probably she, —sees there is a way out, a perfectly safe way out, for he was his own dispenser, no doubt. Presently our friend has an attack of "indigestion'; how easy for the wife to arrange that—under expert direction. From then on he is in the doctor's power. He prescribes for him, patches him up and inspires his confidence. Well, we needn't prolong the, or his, agony. Before long the doctor is sending a wreath with his name on it and provisionally fixing the happy day."

After Lefanu ceased speaking, Goran stared into the fire for a while.

"I agree," he said after a time, "that is a plausible theory—"

"No," said Lefanu, "it is fact."

Goran stared up at him. "Your faculty assures you of it?"

"It gave me the vital hint. The rest was mere deduction from it."

"What hint?"

Lefanu paused before replying. "Somehow," he said, "I do not feel it was just to test this faculty that you told me that story. Was it, perhaps, that you wanted—it is rather hard to put it—that you wanted someone with whom to share your secret—secret suspicion; to ease your mind and get it off your chest?"

"Yes," replied Goran, grinding his cigar into an ashtray.

"It has troubled me greatly. That is why I felt I must confide in someone, confide in you."

"Then I'll tell you. After you had finished describing the circumstances, I emptied my mind, allowed it to become a complete blank, so permitting it to become receptive to this odd form of telepathy, if it chose to work. And after a while I suddenly heard a voice speaking in my inner ear, as it were."

"What did it say?" asked Goran, gazing down at the ashtray.

"It said—very stealthily, 'Change the bottles while we're still in the dining-room.' " He glanced at his wrist-watch. "Well, I must be getting home. Many thanks for a most interesting evening."

Goran led him downstairs to the hall and helped him on with his coat.

"Tell me," he said urgently, "how that hint helped you?"

"I have suggested," replied Lefanu, "that your doctor was probably a man of fine fibre. Such a one would experience terrible and lasting remorse. But I shouldn't worry any more about it if I were you. My favorite text is, 'Judge not that ye be not judged,' and I'm not at all sure what I'd done if I'd been in your G.P.'s shoes." He opened the front door.

"Tell me," said Goran, clutching his coat; "how did that hint help you? Tell me!"

Lefanu glanced away across the street. "I recognized the voice," he replied gently. "Good night, Goran." And hailing a passing taxi, he drove away.

Farewell Performance

JACK GRANGER swung open the stage-door of the Wolverham Empire in the manner of one to whom stage-doors had no sanctity. The theatrical agent was a big fellow in his middle forties, rather overdressed. His mien suggested abounding self-confidence, acquisitiveness and competence; and that the elasticity of his con-

science would meet any demands that might be made upon it.

"Mr. Nimbo?" he said to the stage-door man.

"First on the right, top of the stairs."

Granger took the flight in three strides and tapped on the designated door.

"Come in," said a voice.

"Hullo, Gustave," said Granger. "So sorry to hear the bad news."

Nimbo was lying back on a couch. On a table beside him was a bottle of whisky, a glass and water-pitcher. Bottle and glass were both half full.

The ventriloquist was ten years younger than his agent. In a way he was very good-looking. That is to say he appeared so in his photographs when something about his face was touched out; something that was not very easy to define, but something which caused persons of discernment instinctively to take a dislike to him. A look of furtive arrogance? Something like that. His father had been a Prussian and bad Prussians often wear that look. His mother had been English and he was completely anglicised. He was clad in a silk dressing-gown.

"I was in Brum on business when I heard about it. Very sudden, wasn't it?" said Granger.

"Not very;" answered Nimbo quickly. "Sit down. Have a drink?"

"Not for me."

"She'd been ailing for some time," said Nimbo rather mechanically.

"Bad shock for you all the same," said Granger. He had little more use for Nimbo than most people connected with the Profession, though they got on well enough; and he paid his rent and the upkeep of his car out of his percentage of Nimbo's earnings, for he topped most bills.

"Are you sure you're all right to go on?" asked Granger.

"I'm going to," replied Nimbo, emptying his glass. The peg was stiff enough to contort his face slightly.

"May help to take your mind off it."

"Off what?" asked Nimbo sharply.

Granger stared at him, puzzled.

"Your loss, of course."

"Yes," said Nimbo, pouring out another stiff drink.

"Ditto that stuff," said Granger, "but I shouldn't overdo it."

"I'm all right," said Nimbo irritably; he lay back and stared at the ceiling.

His doll, Nobby, was perched in a chair facing Granger. He was garbed as an infantry private and the condition of his kit reflected little credit on his corps. Nobby was famous and had cost a lot of money. He didn't look so funny, thought Granger, off stage and in repose. His set, sardonic grin, bulging red cheeks, round, staring eyes, were vaguely repulsive. He looked extraordinarily alive in a garish, bestial way. He was smirking knowingly at Granger, who looked away from him.

"You're sure you'll be okay?" he said. "If you don't feel up to it, you've got a perfect alibi."

"I'm going on," said Nimbo, taking another drink.

"Well, you know best. I'll be in the front row of the stalls to lend you my support. Keep your chin up!"

"I'm all right," said Nimbo. "Thanks for coming."

Granger went to the bar and sat down with a drink. He hadn't been reassured. Nimbo had a funny look about him; half-tight, of course, but something else, a sort of daft, strained, vague look; and ventriloquists had to have their wits about them. Oh well, artists nearly always pulled themselves together, drunk or sober, when they got out in front. He bought a programme. Mostly barturns except for the Midge Sisters and Nimbo, who came just before the interval, his invariable place, rather daringly and cleverly chosen.

Granger took his seat for the turn before Nimbo's:

"Ruggles Rowlock, the Ace of Chumps."

Ruggles was a new one to Granger and might be worth a decco. The usual piece of cheese, however. Jokes as old and dirty as a tramp's pants; singing, septic; dancing, dud.

But he got a huge hand from the Wolverhamites of all ages, who obviously liked their sex raw.

Then the orchestra clanged out some introductory chords, the audience opened their mouths in a fixed grin and prepored to be mightily amused. A moment later Nimbo in his famous check plus-fives and wearing a monocle, came on to the stage, Nobby under his right arm. Nimbo acknowledged the vociferous greeting, sat down in his special gold chair, with a table beside it,

arranged Nobby to his liking, adjusted his fingers to the loops and strings and lit a cigarette.

He didn't look too good, thought Granger; too full of whiskey, wrong dope for ventriloquists.

"Well, Nobby," said Nimbo, "and how are you?"

"I'm okay," squawked the doll, "and you, Guv'nor?"

"Very well, thanks."

"And the wife."

Granger frowned. "My God!" he exclaimed to himself, "I'd have thought he'd cut that out! Whiskey talking!" And indeed, a close observer might have noticed an odd look pass across the ventriloquist's face.

"She's well too," he muttered, pulling hard at his cigarette.

Nobby turned to the audience, pursed up his lips and winked his right eye in a highly impertinent and incredulous way.

"And how'd you like the army, Nobby?" asked Nimbo.

"I don't like it, Guv'nor. I *don't like* it!"

"Indeed. Why's that?"

"Always in trouble, Guv'nor. Always up to the gills in the 'ot connsommy."

"What kind of trouble?"

"Impert'nence to orficers."

"Impertinence to officers! A very serious offence. What have you done?"

"I ain't done nuffin. It's like this 'ere. T'other mornin' we're 'avin' our chow when the ord'ly orficer comes around. An' 'e ses, 'Any complaints?' an' I ses 'Yussir,' an' 'e ses, 'Wha's the matter?' an' I ses, 'It's the stew sir.' 'What abaht it?' ses 'e. 'I don't fancy it,' I ses. 'Why not?' he ses.

" 'It's the meat in it,' I ses, 'gives it a funny taste.' 'E ses, 'Ain't you the bloke what complains last week there ain't *enough* meat in it?' 'Yussir,' I ses. 'Well,' he ses, 'we don't want many of your sort in the Dudshires. 'Owsoever I'll taste it.' So 'e does and ses, 'Excellent stew, never tasted better,' and I ses, 'You really likes it, sir?'

" 'Yus,' he ses, 'I'll show yer,' and 'e scoops up another spoonful. 'Delishus,' 'e ses, 'an' don't let me 'ear no more complaints from you!'

" 'Okay,' I ses, 'but you see that there spud a floatin' aroun' in that corner?'

" 'What abaht it?' he ses.

" 'Well,' I ses, 'there's a dead mouse unner it!' Well you never did, Guv'nor! Anyone 'ud think I'd shoved some poison in it!"

Nimbo dropped his cigarette and again that odd, dazed expression came over his face.

"Shouldn't have attempted it," thought Granger; "he looks ghastly."

"Then, Guv'nor, I gets sevin days C.B.," said Nobby.

"You were confined to barracks?"

"Yus, Guv'nor, and sevin days E.F."

"What's that?"

"Extry fatigues, guv'nor, swabbin' out the cookhouse, an' sevin days B.F.U."

"What's that?"

"Bloody fed-up, Guv'nor."

"I've told you not to swear in front of me!" said Nimbo sternly. "Never swear in front of a gentleman."

"Are you a gentleman, Guv'nor?"

"Of course!"

"One of the Mayfair boys?"

"Certainly not!"

Nobby cocked his head round to the audience and seemed to mutter something.

"What did you say?" asked Nimbo in an urgent angry tone which made the audience roar.

"Nuffin', Guv'nor. An' then I gets anuffer packet. It's like this 'ere. When I joins hup, the serjunt bloke ses to hus: 'If you wants a quiet life, you'll do just what you're tole, no more, no less, an' no back answers. Never let me 'ear you say, "I thought," nor any tripe like that. You're not 'ere to do no thinkin'; and mos' of you ain't got the works to do it with.' "

"That certainly applies to you, Nobby," said Nimbo.

"Ho it does, does it! 'Ave you got brains, Guv'nor?"

"Most certainly I've got brains."

"Is that 'ow you thinks of——?" and the doll leaned over and whispered something in Nimbo's ear. Nimbo shot his head back and his monocle clattered on to the table. Nobby faced the audience again, leered and winked.

" 'E didn't know I knows that one," he squawked. "Well, Guv'nor," he continued, "the Colonel, the 'ead bloke, comes up to me on the square one mornin' and ses, 'Look 'ere, my man, d'you know where Corporal Twister is?' And I ses, 'No, I doesn't, sir,' an' 'e ses,

'Possibly 'e's in the henseeos' mess. Go and see.' So I goes there and finds this Corporal Twister a washin' 'is map; and I goes back an' tells the Colonel.

" 'Didn't yer say I wants to see 'im?' he ses. 'No, sir,' I ses. 'Well,' he ses, 'you're a most stupid and fat-'eaded soldier,' he ses, 'an' you'll never do for the Dud-shires. Go an' tell 'im I wants to see 'im and put a jerk in it!' So I goes back and tells this Twister the Colonel bloke wants to see 'im. 'Okey-dokey,' 'e ses, 'tell ole curried-guts I'll be there in 'arf a mo.' So I goes back to this Colonel bloke an' 'e ses, 'Well, what did 'e say?' ''E said,' I ses, 'Okey-dokey, tell ole curried-guts I'll be there in 'arf a mo.' Well, Guv'nor, you never see such a shine-up! Anyone 'ud think I'd done a murder!"

Nimbo seemed to start, so that the doll almost fell from his knee.

"'Ere, what's the gyme!" he squawked; "if you does that again, you'll be givin' me conwulsions!"

"Imagine saying that!" thought Granger. "He's not fit to be on. I'll tell him so when he goes off."

"So I don't think I'm goin' to like the army, Guv'-nor," continued Nobby. "Will yer buy me hout? Only thirty-five quid."

"Certainly not! It'll be the making of you."

"It'll be the death of me!" howled Nobby. "An' I don't want to die, Gustave!" he added in a screaming falsetto.

Granger felt ripples of horrified dismay running down his spine.

"Her voice, too! He's completely lost control of him-self. What had I better do?"

Nimbo stretched out a trembling hand and took and drained the glass of water on the table. The audience vaguely sensed this was wrong; the more perceptive be-came puzzled and uneasy. The giggling was fitful.

"D'you think we'll be sent abroad, Guv'nor?" asked Nobby.

"I expect so," replied Nimbo mechanically.

"Where shall we go, Guv'nor?"

"Possibly to Aden."

"Shove us in a den, Guv'nor!"

"And Lucknow."

"What hat, Guv'nor?" asked Nobby peering round the theatre.

"Or Hong-Kong, perhaps, the Suez Canal or Khartoum."

"Well, I'll be damned!" exclaimed Nobby. "Sorry Guv'nor, mustn't say that! I'll be 'anged! That better, Guv'nor? So'll you, unless you 'as yer luck with yer! Fust we're shoved in a den. Then we 'as a date with King Kong, then we're bunged in Susie's Canal, and we ends up in a toom! Oh, must I die, Gustave!" And that high, feminine wail of despair came again.

Granger gritted his teeth. "I can't stand much more of this," he thought.

"Or you might be sent to Bombay," said Nimbo monotonously.

"Bomb a what, Guv'nor?"

"Bombay is a city in India. I'm afraid you're terribly ignorant."

"Am I, Gov'nor?"

"Terribly. Let's see if you know *any* geography."

"Right, Guv'nor."

"Where's Adelaide?"

"Dunno, Guv'nor. But yer left Gladys in Glasgie," and the doll turned and faced the audience, grinning and winked. Nimbo half rose from his chair. The audience giggled no more. It seemed to their troubled minds that the rôles of Nimbo and Nobby had been reversed, as if the doll was dictating the dialogue.

"Can I 'ave a fag, Guv'nor?" said Nobby.

Nimbo rather clumsily pushed a cigarette into a tube in the doll's mouth, and lit it.

"Shall I sing, Guv'nor?"

"If you like," replied Nimbo vaguely.

The orchestra lightly suggested the accompaniment to "The Mountain of Mourne," and Nobby, puffing smoke and beating time with his right arm, burst into a raucous chant:

"In a very short time
I'll be bung up the Pole,
Right down on me huppers
And drawin' the dole,
For the 'angman'll soon be a cashin' 'is check,
For shovin' a ro-ope around Nimbo's neck."

Granger got up hurriedly and left the auditorium.

"Did yer like that, Guv-nor?" asked Nobby.

Nimbo did not answer and his face was contorted.

"We 'ad a bay'net practice this mornin', Gov'nor," said Nobby. "Narsty ole-fashioned way of killin' a bloke. Yer wouldn't do it that way, would yer, Guv'nor; you'd put a little white powder in 'er hoxo!"

Nimbo leapt to his feet. "I didn't, you bloody little devil!" he cried, and flung the doll to the back of the stage. Then he staggered into the wings.

After a moment the curtain descended and the manager, looking woried, came on to the stage.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "Mr. Nimbo wishes to express his profound regret. The fact is he lost his wife yesterday. He pluckily tried to carry on, but the effort was too much for him. I'm sure you will all join with me in expressing our deep regret at his bereavement."

By the time of the trial many myths and legends were current about that memorable half-hour. But there is a rather convincing body of testimony, supplied by those in the stalls, that just after the manager had spoken his last sentence, a derisive voice squawked from behind the curtain, "Hi shud shay sho!"

↑ *In Collaboration* ↑

A Preparatory Note by Instructor Sawbridge, Bart.

THOSE who have honoured me by reading my earlier studies in metaphysics (and so helped me to re-coup some of the expense of their publication) may recall the name of Dr. Landon, the distinguished alienist, formerly of the Porwich County Asylum. He has now his own "home" in North London where wealthy "patients" are housed. He maintains that 99.9 per cent of the population of the world are technically "insane" (a generalisation that is not peculiar to himself, and one that has obtained increasing support since August, 1914).

He insists that he himself is indisputably of dilapidated mind in regard to several of his mental areas. I attempted to refute this paradox by advancing another, that the consciousness of "insanity" implies "sanity," but

he declared that "paradox" is only another word for an ingeniously phrased lie; and that his generalisation was a plain statement of fact; and provided as evidence for it the following narrative.

Concerning the author of it, he informed me of these facts. He *did* write one highly successful book which, for an introspective novel, had a memorable sale; and a number of clever, but strained, short stories. Nothing more was heard of him till he was found lying on the floor of his sitting-room in his hotel suite in South Kensington, suffering from wounds self-inflicted with a knife. That was in August, 1928. "The Court," said Landon, "found him to be of unsound mind and he was put in my charge. He was a very odd one. He neither looked, nor for the most part behaved, in the least like a lunatic. Though extremely taciturn, his sparse conversation revealed intelligence and co-ordinating power of a high order, and he was scrupulously clean, neat and fastidious in his personal habits. But it was extremely difficult to get him to eat enough to keep himself alive, and I never remember finding him asleep. He spent nearly all his time writing, and tearing up what he had written. Eventually, however, he began to clip together the sheets he had covered; and one evening he sat back, read through what he had written, wrote the words 'The End,' and died. He was aged forty-three. The whole thing, of course, may be a maniacal phantasy, but I can assure you, so far as I could judge, he was one of the sanest men I ever knew. Now you are an authority on such phantasies. Read what he wrote, and if you admit it could be the work of a sound mind, then you must accept my thesis, for he lived seven years and died in my luxurious madhouse, while I, and millions like me, are labelled sane and allowed our liberty. And don't tell me I am attempting to establish a theory by a single instance. I've known hundreds of others who could be placed in almost the same category."

The manuscript itself had points of interest. It was inscribed on lined foolscap paper, but, with what might be called pedantic eccentricity, the author had written *between* the lines and not upon them. Again, though the script was neatness itself, every now and again it was defaced by a word scrawled hugely, thick with ink,

staring harshly. Some might suggest that the author was, as it were, materialising his malady as he ground his pen into these words. Others might deduce from them a hopeless longing to be understood. This is what he wrote:

I first met Jim Rowland when we were posted to the 3rd Battalion of a Midland Regiment in September, 1914. We arrived on the same day and, from then till the end of the war, our careers were oddly similar. We went to France in the same draft, we were both wounded at Loos, both of us were dispatched to Salonika on recovery, and we were invalided home for good in the autumn of 1917. Apart from this parallelism of destiny, I suppose we should have gravitated together, not, I feel, through any natural affinity, but we shared a taste, embryonic enough, for literature. The other subalterns were boisterous young Philistines, which resounded to the credit of their common sense, for they one and all were doomed.

When we were demobilised we considered we had suffered sufficiently for our country, but we found the ills that we were heir to had only just begun. The community handed us our gratuities, wished us well, and left us to starve when its bounty was expended.

Rowland was an orphan; my parents had been improvident enough to have a bad war. They made me an allowance of twenty-five pounds a year. We took a room together in Dean Street at ten-and-six a week, delivered it of roaches and bugs, and settled down to keep our patched bodies—insufficiently patched for pensions—and credulous souls together, selecting, of all unpropitious belly-fillers, free-lance journalism and exquisitely unsaleable short stories, a ludicrously commonplace sequence so far. Nevertheless we made just enough money, plus my dole, to pay the rent, keep the home gas burning for an hour or two a day at low pressure, and stock a small corner of the cupboard with dwarf sardines and potted enigmas.

Now I have said that Rowland and I were not psychologically *en rapport*. These was nothing displeasing about him. Physically he was a superb specimen, very good-looking and with an athlete's body; he had been a renowned ball-beater at Clifton. He was absolutely honest, kindly, with a good touch of the scholar in his well-tempered brain, which showed itself in his brow and

eyes. But he entirely lacked originality and was somewhat short of humour.

I am narrow, weedy, and "homely" is an euphemism for my face. I am, or was, opportunist, ingenious-minded, and a seeth of nerves. It was not that we had widely differing temperaments and equally divergent opinions; one can live happily with one whose views on many subjects sharply diverge from one's own, provided one respects those opinions. I am an atheist by nature and study, but I think I could live with a Catholic, for a Catholic's head is a magician's castle and arguing with him would be a perpetual challenge to one's sanity. To do him justice, Rowland belonged to no breed of supernaturalist, but he had unmistakably the Anglican cast of mind, especially in regard to two subjects, girls and games. Women to him were irresistible and "sacred," especially if they were reasonably attractive—and his standards were not high. He was a romantic voluptuary. For women, he might have been said to possess the "sensualist's vision and the ascetic's line." He was always falling an eighth "in love" with the "business girls" and models he picked up and entertained to sandwiches and bitter; bits of fluff and flotsam I found nauseatingly inadequate. I believe he left them as *intacta* as he found them, though whether they fully appreciated this chaste continence I often doubted. I think I might live ten lives and never find a woman I could love, but I should know her instantly if I saw her, or even, I believe, heard her voice. She would have to be five feet ten or over, massive, majestic, animal, dangerous, one who never made another's jest and never made a bad one, a vibrant, ruthless amoral tyrant. With such I could live on a desert island in absolute bliss for eternity. A masochist's day-dream? Of course; and perfectly appropriate to my physique.

Then again his puerile preoccupation with games disgusted me. To see him rustling the evening paper in search of Eozoic tidings of bats and bunkers; or to see if one team of husky helots had tripped and fouled more remuneratively than another infuriated me. Once I stormed at him for it. Whereupon he referred with oblique disparagement to my muscular nullity. "It is natural enough," he said, "to describe one's body as 'my poor brother, the donkey,' if it really is an ass."

One other crucial cause of friction, our divergent

senses of humour. He had, apparently, the capacity to find the conventional incongruities of existence infinitely amusing; in that respect he was terribly B.B.C. To me all creation appears innately ludicrous. I remember once being allowed a glimpse of the night-sky through a great telescope, an awe-inspiring privilege I was given to understand. But I didn't find it so. I burst out laughing at the ultimate inanity, the spacious, loathesome, blasphemous firmament. Rowland would have regarded it with a hushed, obsequious gaze.

I am not trying to establish a whining justification for my crime by emphasising the defects of the person I wronged. At least if I am, I am far more concerned with achieving the truth, and Rowland was a good and able man; and in no way decently to be disparaged by such as me. I am trying to be absolutely truthful, [word scrawled. A.S.] and it is true to say I did not betray one I loved or who loved me. It was not my own dog, as it were, I kicked to death.

We were both determined to write a novel.

The composition of British fiction is, of course, primarily designed to feed and clothe British typists, and an unfaked "2nd impression" is a minor literary event. But we didn't realise that, and, if we had, we were young. But neither of us could find a *plot*, or nucleus, to fire our minds. A conventional love-story was, of course, a hoot and a derision. Even Rowland's Anglican eroticism could not extend itself from fact to fiction. I actually tried my hand at a detective novel, for I heard there was a large boom in, and much boodle to be extracted from, such reeking romances.

I was given to understand that they were delivered in droves to Downing Street, that their perusal, if quite wholesome, was approved in the highest ecclesiastical circles; that the doffing of the episcopal gaiters was almost the invariable prelude to the donning of the episcopal glasses and a quiet hour over *The Clue of the Bloody Dumb-Waiter,* or *The Bumping of Tony the Hop,* that they were equally acceptable to mildly sadistic spinsters and unusually "bookish" bookmakers, and ranked only second to the thighs of chorus girls as recreation material for the leisure hours of round-bellied commercial buccaneers; and that Lazarus feasted eagerly off the gory scraps from Dives' library. For a time I spilt much ink and blood in this enterprise, but the

criminal circumstances I devised were so immensely complex and intractable, that in the end I could see no possibility whatsoever of providing a solution for them. The bloody business remained congealed, the *corpus delicti* began to stink in my nostrils, and my Aristide Citron was left mingling his defeatist "mon dieuxs" with the baffled "tut-tuts" of my Inspector Stench; the one dropping un-English tears, the other torn fragments of a Continental and clue-less Bradshaw over the unavengeable corruption.

One evening I came back from Fleet Street to find Rowland in a state of great elation.

"I've got it!" he exclaimed. "Just exactly the idea I wanted."

"How darling!" I replied disinterestedly, for I had heard that will-of-the-wisp stuff often enough before, and, in any case, what use was his idea to me! He began to give me the outline of it, and because he was glowing with it, he did it with precision and eloquence. Almost at once I was bitterly impressed by it; I felt the blood flooding to, and leaving, my face. I had to practice small subterfuges to prevent him noticing the expression on it. For he had found, purely by chance, the perfect theme for *me,* and I was immediately menaced by a frightful temptation. He *might* be able to write that book, I *knew* I could do it a thousand times better. Subtly and insinuatingly I saw the characters take shape and reveal themselves to me by act and word.

When Rowland finished and looked eagerly and interrogatively towards me, I had already begun to betray him. I approved it tepidly, but forced him to realise my small estimation of it. He was obviously disappointed and irritated.

"Not quite your book, I expect," he said shortly. The irony of that! Secretly I began to write it that night. For the time I completely forgot Rowland. That "plot" was mine. I had decided it. Only I could do it justice, and "justice" was the pregnant word. These characters had an indisputable right to be perfectly interpreted; and only to me would they confide their secrets.

By "plot" I do not mean a mere series of happenings, causally, or casually connected. I do not mean an arbitrarily selected "story," a slice out of related lives. I mean simply a central situation, emotional, spiritual,

a theme, a psychic "situation" which at once creates and is created by the characters necessary for its elucidation. At the outset, therefore, I am a fairly rigid determinist, but once I have breathed life into my people they dictate the action, they unshackle my control. So the two methods become fused when I am composing at white heat. When I flung myself down on my bed twenty hours later that complete fusion had been finally achieved.

I shall not detail this plot, it is in no way germane to this document. Suffice it to say it concerned the overmastering passion of a man of high principle position and intelligence for the illegitimate daughter of his wife. As tritely improbable no doubt as the main theme of *Hamlet,* but it possessed me with irresistible ecstasy.

The next day I pawned the few things of value I still possessed, got a quarterly advance from my father, crossed to France and hid myself away in a village on the Breton coast. I wrote and re-wrote that book within one month. It was not that I felt such haste was essential—Rowland I knew to be a slow, laborious writer of fiction, but I couldn't keep my pen from paper. As I re-wrote the last word I had the first of my hallucinations. I seemed to be looking into our Dean Street attic. Rowland was seated at the table writing. And he looked up—seemingly straight at me, with an expression of great happiness on his face, but what impressed me most poignantly was that he got up, knocked his pipe against the fire-place and began filling it again from his pouch [This word scrawled. A. S.] That seemed to make it altogether other than a mere revisualised mental picture. A shiver of foreboding ran through me and I fooled myself with flat pretenses of overwork; but I had never felt better.

The book was accepted at once by the publishers of my choice. They paid me an immediate advance on royalties which just saved me from starvation, for the cost of typing those 100,000 words had drained me dry. It came out two months later—I had used a *nom de guerre* needless to say—and was an enormous success from the start; and the publishers sent me a cheque for a thousand pounds a month after publication. Triumph —and the last moment of such frenetic happiness as I had enjoyed. The moment I realised I was "made," I realised also I was a traitor, a thief, cheat and obscene

rogue. Hadn't I know it before? Hardly at all, I believe. The creative artist—and for a few weeks I was that— is not as other men. That is not a frantic, far-fetched excuse, it is an absolute law of life. He is accused, and rightly, of utter selfishness, boundless and vaunting egoism and a swarming nebulae of minor antisocial tendencies, drink, dirt, promiscuity. The essential fact is he does not feel himself to be his own master. He feels under a profound compulsion to act as interpreter between reality and mankind; that only he can properly be that interpreter, and that it is a function of the supremest, untouchable importance that nothing, nobody, can be permitted to hinder or frustrate him. He feels destined, impelled, if you like "inspired"; in undisputed possession of an absolute right and duty to give his vision to the world. He is, therefore, a passionate individualist and, because he many times suffers the torments of elusive perfection, he is peculiarly liable to every kind of alleviative excess, and his mind is ploughed and warmed for every variant of nervous disorder. It is the very necessity of his revelation that the frontier between appearance and reality should be for ever shifting, and traced by an entranced and wavering hand. [Last word scrawled. A. S.] But any emotion which seizes him almost strangles him.

Once my book was a success, I completely lost interest in it. My work as interpreter had been done. My medium-mind, the seance over, drowsily awaited the next summons, but my heart, the old distinction is valid, was filled with the most agonising remorse. If I had merely swindled a plutocrat to get that book done, I should have recalled it was equanimity, even satisfaction; for the artist is inevitably convinced that happiness—especially his own—is man's birthright. But I had betrayed and cheated a man of my own kind. I had stolen his most precious possession, his chosen means of self-expression; utterly, obscenely unforgivable. And how had he fared in the seven months since I had left him? He might well have starved; for most of our meagre pittance had come from me, and he would have put other things aside while he concentrated on his book. So terrible was my anxiety, so frantic my longing to make reparation that I knew I must die if the chance was denied me. I went at once to London and to our digs

in Dean Street. The landlord shrugged a greasy shoulder.

"He go. Now, maybe five, six month. He cannot pay, so he go."

The shock of that made me tremble. I went back to my hotel and, for the first time in my life, drank myself into oblivion. The next morning my terror returned, for if Rowland had perished, I knew I was doomed. I went to a firm of private detectives and told them to find him. I went to the editors of every periodical he had written for, advertised in every London paper, I did everything I could to find him, and everything was unavailing. I could not rest, and took to roaming the streets day and night searching the faces of the passers-by. Vaguely I realised my book was an amazing success. I received £5,000 for my film rights. I put it in the bank for Rowland. In America and throughout the world its sales were huge. I was a very rich man. I lived as cheaply as I could and saved it all for Rowland. But I kept a suite at a hotel so that I could bring him there if I found him. And one day I saw him. I was walking down St. Martin's Lane just as the theatre crowds were pouring out. Suddenly he passed me, moving slowly through the throng. His clothes were shabby, his face drawn and haggard.

I shouted after him, but he seemed neither to see nor hear me and disappeared in the crowd. And yet I knew I had received my orders. [This word wildly scrawled. A. S.] I hurried back to my hotel filled with an inexorable compulsion to write; not knowing what. But as soon as I sat down with the paper before me, I wrote with extreme fluency. But what I wrote was dictated to me. No plot shaped itself in my mind, no characters forced themselves, jostling and gesticulating on to the stage of my consciousness, I sat there as though hypnotised and drove my pen forward. But I never knew what the next sentence was to be till it was whispered, as it were, into my inner ear. The phrasing was not mine, many of the words were those I never employed, but I recognised that phrasing and choice of words. I knew at once it was the story of Rowland since my betrayal of him. It told how he had slaved at his book for four months, just scraping together the money for food and rent by a few lucky placings. And then he delivered the typescript at my publishers; selected because I had once praised

them. The ultimate irony. My book had then been out for a month, though he hadn't read it. The publishers declined at once, delicately insinuating that he had perhaps been influenced in his choice of a theme by the success of my book. Rowland managed to borrow a copy, and then realised everything, and the vile treachery of which I had been guilty—it had completely broken his spirit. A week later that oily Dago rogue, the landlord, flung him out and let his room to a prostitute. As I wrote I could see it all with inexplicable clarity. The night before he was flung on the streets, he was sitting in one of the leprous armchairs, his head in his hands, staring into the gas-fire which was drooping and dying. And I could watch the flames shortening and dimming and climbing down the stove, and *hear* the splutter of the exhausted supply breaking into the faint hiss of the gas. So each picture as it was described to me flashed to life before my senses. Suddenly, after I reached that last despairing night in that grim room, the whisper ceased and I could write no more. I looked up and there was Rowland standing in the shadows beside the door, his eyes fixed on me, the expression on his face compounded of misery and implacable loathing.

For a moment he remained there, the next he had gone. This was not the end, I knew.

The bitter tale would be remorselessly dictated to me down to the last fatal word, and I longed to get it done with, achieve my expiation by knowing all my infamy had entailed. But the next day that whisper was silent, and the next and the next, till I became certain that I must go out and seek my collaborator; I must find Rowland again. So out into the streets I went once more, for ever searching, searching and dreading what I should find; yet longing to find it.

On the sixth morning, a bitter dawn of gale and sleet, I was passing St. Martin's-in-the-Fields, when out from the crypt came jostling a troop of shuffling, blinking castaways. I stepped aside to make way for them, when suddenly I saw Rowland. He was hatless, his hair tangling over his burning eyes, his hands plunged into the pockets of his buttonless coat. I shouted to him, a reflex and vain action, and the bedraggled band turned and stared at me. I suppose they took me for a belated drunk. I tried to break through their ranks to reach Rowland, but they resented it and lurched me from

side to side. When at last I freed myself, Rowland had disappeared, but I heard the faint beginnings of that whisper. I found a taxi, and, by the time I was back at my hotel, it was dictating steadily and urgently as before. And for ten hours it continued to do so. I was told how Rowland strove to get work, and by picking up a pound here and there, saved himself for a time from the ultimate degradation. But the slope ended only too soon at disguised beggary with match-boxes by day and the crypt at night. And he knew *hunger*. Not the hunger of war, which is communal, dimmed by excluding, mind-monopolising fear and hope, a *busy, exceptional* hunger, but the deadly, lonely, mind-absorbing hunger, which grows a little more insistent, more *italicised* every quarter of an hour, like a rising river, bringing with it, first, sheer vibrating terror and then, like all slow deaths, a great lethargy, from which the dying man makes sporadic, wild-eyed essays to free himself. The first time it became unbearable he got a ticket from the crypt which entitled him to claim two slices of bread and margarine at a café on the Embankment. As he ate them, he tried to pretend to himself that he was just doing it for an experience, that they represented one slice of life of which he could make literary use. But this was the last flicker of his self-respect, and never again did he fool himself that the margarine of semi-starvation was the butter of copy-gleaning. And Down-and-Outs, I had whispered to me, were for the most part existing in a soothing, numbing daze. The tramp, rustic and urban, must either be a *born* tramp, or caught and trained young by the priests of poverty. "A learned judge," I found myself writing, "was fond of stating that no one need starve in England. The appearance of this jurist did not suggest he had proved this theorem by personal experience, but it is probably at least a half-truth. So it may be culpable negligence to die of thirst in the desert, but it is easier for Bedouins, or those provided with maps of the wells, to find water, than for a Cook's tourist who has lost his way in the sand!" It had been by brooding on these matters that Rowland had passed the slow, lifeless hours in the crypt on the night before that brutal dawn. Then, as before, the whisper ceased abruptly, and I looked up to see him there, but somewhat nearer me, in his sodden, decaying clothes, unshaved, half-starved, his

mind hardening towards suicide. He stared at me through his already sunken eyes, and there was still hate in those eyes, but it was dimmed by misery. As before he left me as swiftly and silently as he had come. He left me exhausted, that last sentence running through my head, and, for the first time and very faintly, my mind protested. My punishment, I now knew, was to write his book for him, to trace down on paper the tale of the agonies my infamy had caused him. My protest was a strange, almost incredible one, that he should not have let me edit and polish it for him. I put this down to the fact that no one can experience any emotion, however strong, and remorse is the most grinding of them all, without knowing occasional temporary ebbing of its striding tide. That last sentence! How far more neatly and pointedly could I have phrased that great, if simple truth! I told myself rebelliously that he could never have written that book as I had written it; and almost found myself rehearsing my old pleas in justification. But the reaction was short-lived. Like the glimpse of blue in the hurricane's eye, the storm obscured it utterly in its wild renewal. For should I have composed with delicacy, polish and finesse if I had luke-warmed a coffin-pew each night, soaked and famished; and stumbled out into a slouching, barren day!

It was ten days later, days of peering search; searching for the scent like a Hound of Hell, that I saw Rowland again. He was coming out of a block of flats in Berkeley Square late one night. As he stood in the doorway, he pulled out the money in his pocket and counted it slowly three times—you can always tell a man who is, or recently has been poor, by the way he counts his change; he does not count it in a miserly, but in a measuring, apprehensive way. He was decently dressed, clean-shaved and spruce. My heart leaped up for a moment. Had things gone well for him? Was I saved as well as he? But then I knew I was looking on the dead; the whisper began again and I hurried home.

When I reached my room I found Rowland there, and he sat facing me across the table as I wrote. This filled me with a grim and ghostly terror, but though I trembled and sweated, my hand was firm.

One evening Rowland was accosted and picked up by a woman. He was vaguely and aloofly roaming the

streets, slightly resembling, no doubt, a masculine and resisting Edward Thompson; and, like that gaping, inspired mendicant, suffered himself to be led away. This woman was physically "flawless," that is to say her half-dozen palpable flaws cost her hundreds a year to palliate and disguise.

Rowland seems to have aroused in her a strange emotion, half sensual, half maternal. She gave him clothes, but she paid the bills herself and allowed him only enough pocket-money to satisfy his barest needs. She realised that he was the character-type on whom the sense of shame acts oddly; he might save up out of her money enough to enable him to break away from her; so she was not running any such risk. Whether he would have freed himself, I am not sure, what he dictated to me was confused and inconclusive. But he was saved from any necessity of decision by her keeper, a Tory racketeer with a wife and four children, who found him in her flat one morning, and drove him out with the suit he was wearing and three shillings in his pocket. A pathetic and indecorous figure? Rowland realised it only too well. He had despised her, but she had meant food, shelter and temporary security; and if he'd been a kind of scarecrow gigolo, derelicts cannot be touchy about their honour.

Acute poverty, and all the demoralising little shifts and humiliations it entails, can never be a stimulant to success, for it destroys the power to concentrate and wastes too much time on the sheer job of keeping alive at all. Rowland with good luck might have been a reasonably successful and prosperous second-rate writer. But the combined effects of the war, his crushing lack of money and, above all, my treachery, had made success for him a sheer impossibility. That is what he wrote through me and it rang true. You must have luck in one shape or another to do anything in this world—profound platitude, absolute axiom. If only I had not first deserted and then betrayed him, he would have won through. That was why his gentle spirit had developed this piercing and implacable hatred for me. And oh, my God, I knew it to be true!

When he'd done with me that night, he stared across at me for a long minute. The bitter glare of his sunken eyes drove through me and held me taut in terror, so that I had to gaze back at him and know the brooding,

perfect hate he bore for me. He had, I knew, already willed my agony and planned my doom.

He was gone, and I was left exhausted and trembling, with the baleful pages I had covered. A week later I saw him again. He was scrabbling in a refuse bin by the bridge in St. James's Park. It was nine at night and a biting mist was wreathing off the lake. He looked up just before I reached him. He glanced at me for a moment. He was utterly dishevelled, hatless, his hair streaming over his eyes, a mottled stubble on his chin, his rent coat clinging to his knees, his broken boots squelching over his naked feet. He was beaten. Such derelicts, if they are of exceptional physical resilience and equally abnormal spiritual costivity, may last a fairly long time, some even reach old age; tough, matted and verminous as goats. A month or less would see Rowland in his Common Grave. Having dredged out a handful of garbage, he shambled off and I followed him. I *had* to follow him. Every now and again he turned his head and fixed his hollow eyes on me. He led me over Vauxhall Bridge and into the tangle of mean streets off the South Lambeth Road, and at length disappeared down the area steps of a depraved hovel. I stared at the door for a time summoning up courage to knock at the door. At length I did so. It was opened by a slatternly hag, who regarded me inimicably and asked my business.

"Is there a man named Rowland living here?" I asked.

"Big, tall bloke with a gent's voice?"

"Yes."

" 'E was 'ere for a time and was picked up dead in the street. What abaht it? He owed me for two weeks."

"How long ago?"

" 'Bout three month."

I handed her some notes.

"What did he die of?"

The crone regarded me quizzingly.

"Of an hempty belly, which is sumpin' what never troubles the likes of you."

He was awaiting me in my room when I got back. As I wrote, he thrust his head across the table so that his face was very close to mine, and his cavernous eyes burnt into mine, when I dared to lift them, with an unmeasurable loathing.

The long closing scene was a study in slow, remorseless starvation [This word scrawled. A. S.], but the rhythm of its beat was uneven. Some day he would lose a few ounces of his fading flesh. Rowland was finally beaten down by the discovery that, even though he was prepared to take the meanest job, he could not earn enough to keep himself alive. The world simply didn't want him. He was as helpless as a strayed lap-dog at keeping himself alive. The flea-bitten mongrels of the gutter were immeasurably his superiors at the crude prime purpose of belly-filling. It was partly the enervating bewilderment of job-hunting, his sheer ignorance of how to set about the humiliating business. But it was even more innate and hopeless incapacity, which he knew he could never overcome. Nevertheless he earned a shilling or two on lucky days. But soon enough he was too weak for even the lightest work; and then one night he knew his time had come. So he stumbled out, a gaunt and gallant gentleman, and crumpled in a gutter near Stockwell Station.

And there my collaboration with Rowland ended.

I knew a wild surge of hope that this would satisfy him, that he would feel he had been revenged enough, and that he would leave me for ever. For a time I kept my head down and my eyes shut. Perhaps when I dared to open them again he would be gone. But no, he was still there, gazing implacably and yet aloofly at me.

And then for the first time I spoke to him. I beseeched him to forgive me and let me rest. I told him all I had suffered and the depth of my remorse. How I sought to find him. How I had been obsessed and crazed by the theme he had given me. In the end I screamed at him every wild appeal. But still his expression never changed, the glare in his smouldering eyes never softened. He held my gaze relentlessly, and as I stared into those dead eyes, I seemed to see in ghastly review all the scenes of his agony.

I knew he was pitiless and I was doomed. Suddenly he rose and towered above me. In his right hand was clenched a knife. He flung himself upon me and enveloped me. And a rending agony went through me as he drove home the blade in my breast!

THE END

[Here the script ended; the agitation of the writer

vividly revealed by the chaotic irregularity of his wildly scrawling pen. A.S.]

Lucky's Grove

"And Loki begat Hel, Goddess of the Grave, Fenris, the Great Wolf, and the Serpent, Nidnogg, who lives beneath The Tree."

MR. BRAXTON strolled with his land-agent, Curtis, into the Great Barn.

"There you are," said Curtis, in a satisfied tone, "the finest little fir I ever saw, and the kiddies will never set eyes on a lovelier Christmas tree."

Mr. Braxton examined it; it stood twenty feet from huge green pot to crisp, straight peak, and was exquisitely sturdy, fresh and symmetrical.

"Yes, it's a beauty," he agreed. "Where did you find it?"

"In that odd little spinney they call Lucky's Grove in the long meadow near the river boundary."

"Oh!" remarked Mr. Braxton uncertainly. To himself he was saying vaguely, "He shouldn't have got it from there, of course he wouldn't realize it, but he shouldn't have got it from there."

"Of course we'll replant it," said Curtis, noticing his employer's diminished enthusiasm. "It's a curious thing, but it isn't a young tree; it's apparently fullgrown. Must be a dwarf variety, but I don't know as much about trees as I should like."

Mr. Braxton was surprised to find there was one branch of country lore on which Curtis was not an expert; for he was about the best-known man at his job in the British Isles. Pigs, bees, chickens, cattle, crops, running a shoot, he had mastered them one and all. He paid him two thousand a year with house and car. He was worth treble.

"I expect it's all right," said Mr. Braxton; "it is just that Lucky's Grove is—is—well, 'sacred' is perhaps too

strong a word. Maybe I should have told you, but I expect it's all right."

"That accounts for it then," laughed Curtis. "I thought there seemed some reluctance on the part of the men while we were yanking it up and getting it on the lorry. They handled it a bit gingerly; on the part of the older men, I mean; the youngsters didn't worry."

"Yes, there would be," said Mr. Braxton. "But never mind, it'll be back in a few days and it's a superb little tree. I'll bring Mrs. Braxton along to see it after lunch," and he strolled back into Abingdale Hall.

Fifty-five years ago Mr. Braxton's father had been a labourer on this very estate, and in that year young Percy, aged eight, had got an errand boy's job in Oxford. Twenty years later he'd owned one small shop. Twenty-five years after that fifty big shops. Now, though he had finally retired, he owned two hundred and eighty vast shops and was a millionaire whichever way you added it up. How had this happened? No one can quite answer such questions. Certainly he'd worked like a brigade of Trojans, but midnight oil has to burn in Aladdin's Lamp before it can transform ninepence into one million pounds. It was just that he asked no quarter from the unforgiving minute, but squeezed from it the fruit of others many hours. Those like Mr. Braxton seem to have their own time-scale; they just say the word and up springs a fine castle of commerce, but the knowledge of that word cannot be imparted; it is as mysterious as the Logos. But all through his great labours he had been moved by one fixed resolve—to avenge his father—that fettered spirit—for he had been an able, intelligent man who had had no earthly chance of revealing the fact to the world. Always the categorical determination had blazed in his son's brain, "I will own Abingdale Hall, and, where my father sweated, I will rule and be lord." And of course it had happened. Fate accepts the dictates of such men as Mr. Braxton, shrugs its shoulders, and leaves its revenge to Death. The Hall had come on the market just when he was about to retire, and with an odd delight, an obscure sense of home-coming, the native returned, and his riding boots, shooting boots, golf shoes, and all the many glittering guineas' worth, stamped in and obliterated the prints of his father's hob-nails.

That was the picture he often re-visualized, the way

it amused him to "put it to himself," as he roamed his broad acres and surveyed the many glowing triumphs of his model husbandry.

Some credit was due to buxom, blithe and debonair Mrs. Braxton, kindly, competent and innately adaptable. She was awaiting him in the morning-room and they went in solitary state to luncheon. But it was the last peaceful lunch they would have for a spell—"the Families" were pouring in on the morrow.

As a footman was helping them to Sole Meunière Mr. Braxton said, "Curtis has found a very fine Christmas tree. It's in the barn. You must come and look at it after lunch."

"That *is* good," replied his wife. "Where did he get it from?"

Mr. Braxton hesitated for a moment.

"From Lucky's Grove."

Mrs. Braxton looked up sharply.

"From the grove!" she said, surprised.

"Yes, of course he didn't realize—anyway it'll be all right, it's all rather ridiculous, and it'll be replanted before the New Year."

"Oh, yes," agreed Mrs. Braxton. "After all it's only just a clump of trees."

"Quite. And it's just the right height for the ballroom. It'll be taken in there tomorrow morning and the electricians will work on it in the afternoon."

"I heard from Lady Pounser just now," said Mrs. Braxton. "She's bringing six over, that'll make seventy-four; only two refusals. The presents are arriving this afternoon."

They discussed the party discursively over the cutlets and Pêche Melba and soon after lunch walked across to the barn. Mr. Braxton waved to Curtis, who was examining a new tractor in the garage fifty yards away, and he came over.

Mrs. Braxton looked the tree over and was graciously delighted with it, but remarked that the pot could have done with another coat of paint. She pointed to several streaks, rust-colored, running through the green. "Of course it won't show when it's wrapped, but they didn't do a very good job."

Curtis leant down. "They certainly didn't," he answered irritably. "I'll see to it. I think it's spilled over from the soil; that copse is on a curious patch of red

sand—there are some at Frilford too. When we pulled it up I noticed the roots were stained a dark crimson." He put his hand down and scraped at the stains with his thumb. He seemed a shade puzzled.

"It shall have another coat at once," he said. "What did you think of Lampson and Colletts' scheme for the barn?"

"Quite good," replied Mrs. Braxton, "but the sketches for the chairs are too fancy."

"I agree," said Curtis, who usually did so in the case of unessentials; reserving his tactful vetoes for the others.

The Great Barn was by far the most aesthetically satisfying as it was the oldest feature of the Hall buildings, it was vast, exquisitely proportioned and mellow. That could hardly be said of the house itself, which the 4th Baron of Abingdale had rebuilt on the cinders of its predecessor in 1752.

This nobleman had travelled abroad extensively and returned with most enthusiastic, grandiose and indigestible ideas of architecture. The result was a gargantuan piece of rococo-jocoso which only an entirely humourless pedant could condemn. It contained forty-two bedrooms and eighteen reception rooms—so Mrs. Braxton had made it at the last recount. But Mr. Braxton had not repeated with the interior the errors of the 4th Baron. He'd briefed the greatest expert in Europe with the result that that interior was quite tasteful and sublimely comfortable.

"Ugh!" he exclaimed, as they stepped out into the air, "it *is* getting nippy!"

"Yes," said Curtis, "there's a nor'-easter blowing up —may be snow for Christmas."

On getting back to the house Mrs. Braxton went into a huddle with butler and housekeeper and Mr. Braxton retired to his study for a doze. But instead his mind settled on Lucky's Grove. When he'd first seen it again after buying the estate, it seemed as if fifty years had rolled away, and he realised that Abingdale was far more summed up to him in the little copse than in the gigantic barracks two miles away. At once he felt at home again. Yet, just as when he'd been a small boy, the emotion the Grove had aroused in him had been sharply tinged with awe, so it had been now, half a century later. He still had a sneaking dread of it. How

precisely he could see it, glowing darkly in the womb of the fire before him, standing starkly there in the centre of the big, fallow field, a perfect circle; and first, a ring of holm-oaks and, facing east, a breach therein to the firs and past them on the west a gap to the yews. It had always required a tug at his courage—not always forthcoming—to pass through them and face the mighty Scotch fir, rearing up its great bole from the grass mound. And when he stood before it, he'd always known an odd longing to fling himself down and—well, worship—it was the only word—the towering tree. His father had told him his forebears had done that very thing, but always when alone and at certain seasons of the year; and that no bird or beast was ever seen there. A lot of traditional nonsense, no doubt, but he himself had absorbed the spirit of the place and knew it would always be so.

One afternoon in late November, a few weeks after they had moved in, he'd gone off alone in the drowsing misty dark; and when he'd reached the holm-oak bastion and seen the great tree surrounded by its sentinels, he'd known again that quick turmoil of confused emotions. As he'd walked slowly towards it, it had seemed to quicken and be aware of his coming. As he passed the shallow grassy fosse and entered the oak ring he felt there was something he ought to say, some greeting, password or prayer. It was the most aloof, silent little place under the sun, and oh, so old. He'd tiptoed past the firs and faced the barrier of yews. He'd stood there for a long musing minute, tingling with the sensation that he was being watched and regarded. At length he stepped forward and stood before the God—that mighty word came abruptly and unforeseen—and he felt a wild desire to fling himself down on the mound and do obeisance. And then he'd hurried home. As he recalled all this most vividly and minutely, he was seized with a sudden gust of uncontrollable anger at the thought of the desecration of the grove. He knew now that if he'd had the slightest idea of Curtis's purpose he'd have resisted and opposed it. It was too late now. He realised he'd "worked himself up" rather absurdly. What could it matter! He was still a superstitious bumpkin at heart. Anyway it was no fault of Curtis. It was the finest Christmas tree anyone could hope for, and the whole thing was too nonsensical for words. The general tone of these

cadentic conclusions did not quite accurately represent his thoughts—a very rare failing with Mr. Braxton.

About dinner-time the blizzard set furiously in, and the snow was flying.

"Chains on the cars tomorrow," Mrs. Braxton told the head chauffeur.

"Boar's Hill'll be a beggar," thought that person.

Mr. and Mrs. Braxton dined early, casually examined the presents, and went to bed. Mr. Braxton was asleep at once as usual, but was awakened by the beating of a blind which had slipped its moorings. Reluctantly he got out of bed and went to fix it. As he was doing so he became conscious of the frenzied hysterical barking of a dog. The sound, muffled by the gale, came, he judged, from the barn. He believed the underkeeper kept his whippet there. Scared by the storm, he supposed, and returned to bed.

The morning was brilliantly fine and cold, but the snowfall had been heavy.

"I heard a dog howling in the night, Perkins," said Mr. Braxton to the butler at breakfast; "Drake's I imagine. What's the matter with it?"

"I will ascertain, sir," replied Perkins.

"It was Drake's dog," he announced a little later, "apparently something alarmed the animal, for when Drake went to let it out this morning, it appeared to be extremely frightened. When the barn door was opened, it took to its heels and, although Drake pursued it, it jumped into the river and Drake fears it was drowned."

"Um," said Mr. Braxton, "must have been the storm; whippets are nervous dogs."

"So I understand, sir."

"Drake was so fond of it," said Mrs. Braxton, "though it always looked so naked and shivering to me."

"Yes, madam," agreed Perkins, "it had that appearance."

Soon after Mr. Braxton sauntered out into the blinding glitter. Curtis came over from the garage. He was heavily muffled up.

"They've got the chains on all the cars," he said. "Very seasonable and all that, but farmers have another word for it." His voice was thick and hoarse.

"Yes," said Mr. Braxton. "You're not looking very fit."

"Not feeling it. Had to get up in the night. Thought

I heard someone trying to break into the house, thought I saw him, too."

"Indeed," said Mr. Braxton. "Did you see what he was like?"

"No," replied Curtis uncertainly. "It was snowing like the devil. Anyway, I got properly chilled to the marrow, skipping around in my nightie."

"You'd better get to bed," said Mr. Braxton solicitously. He had affection and a great respect for Curtis.

"I'll stick it out today and see how I feel tomorrow. We're going to get the tree across in a few minutes. Can I borrow the two footmen? I want another couple of pullers and haulers."

Mr. Braxton consented, and went off on his favourite little stroll across the sparkling meadows to the river and the pool where the big trout set their cunning noses to the stream.

Half an hour later Curtis had mobilised his scratch team of sleeve-rolled assistants and, with Perkins steering and himself breaking, they got to grips with the tree and bore it like a camouflaged battering-ram towards the ball-room, which occupied the left centre of the frenetic frontage of the ground floor. There was a good deal of bumping and boring and genial blasphemy before the tree was manoeuvred into the middle of the room and levered by rope and muscle into position. As it came up its pinnacle just cleared the ceiling. Sam, a cow-man, whose ginger mob had been buried in the foilage for some time, exclaimed tartly as he slapped the trunk, "There ye are, ye old sod! Thanks for the scratches on me mug, ye old—!"

The next moment he was lying on his back, a livid weal across his right cheek.

This caused general merriment, and even Perkins permitted himself a spectral smile. There was more astonishment than pain on the face of Sam. He stared at the tree in a humble way for a moment, like a chastised and guilty dog, and then slunk from the room. The merriment of the others died away.

"More spring in these branches than you'd think," said Curtis to Perkins.

"No doubt, sir, that is due to the abrupt release of the tension," replied Perkins scientifically.

The "Families" met at Paddington and traveled down together so at five o'clock three car-loads drew up at

the Hall. There were Jack and Mary with Paddy aged eight, Walter and Pamela with Jane and Peter, seven and five respectively, and George and Gloria with Gregory and Phyllis, ten and eight.

Jack and Walter were sons of the house. They were much of a muchness, burly, handsome and as dominating as their sire; a fine pair of commercial kings, entirely capable rulers, but just lacking that something which founds dynasties. Their wives conformed equally to the social type to which they belonged, good-lookers, smart dressers, excellent wives and mothers; but rather coolly colourless, spiritually. Their offspring were "charming children," flawless products of the English matrix, though Paddy showed signs of some obstreperous originality. "George" was the Honourable George, Calvin, Roderick, et cetera Penables, and Gloria was Mr. and Mrs. Braxton's only daughter. George has inherited half a million and had started off at twenty-four to be something big in the City. In a sense he achieved his ambition, for two years later he was generally reckoned the biggest "Something" in the City, from which he then withdrew, desperately clutching his last hundred thousand and vowing lachrymose repentance. He had kept his word and his wad, hunted and shot six days a week in the winter, and spent most of the summer wrestling with the two dozen devils in his golf bag. According to current jargon he was the complete extrovert, but what a relief are such, in spite of the pitying shrugs of those who for ever are peering into the septic recesses of their souls.

Gloria had inherited some of her father's force. She was rather overwhelmingly primed with energy and pep for her opportunities of releasing it. So she was always rather pent up and explosive, though maternity had kept the pressure down. She was dispassionately fond of George who had presented her with a nice little title and aristocratic background and two "charming children." Phyllis gave promise of such extreme beauty that, beyond being the cynosure of every press-camera's eye, and making a resounding match, no more was to be expected of her. Gregory, however, on the strength of some artistic precocity and a violent temper was already somewhat prematurely marked down as a genius to be.

Such were the "Families."

During the afternoon four engineers arrived from one of the Braxton factories to fix up the lighting of the

tree. The fairy lamps for this had been specially designed and executed for the occasion. Disney figures had been grafted upon them and made to revolve by an ingenious mechanism; the effect being to give the tree, when illuminated, as aspect of whirling life meant to be very cheerful and pleasing.

Mr. Braxton happened to see these electricians departing in their lorry and noticed one of them had a bandaged arm and a rather white face. He asked Perkins what had happened.

"A slight accident, sir. A bulb burst and burnt him in some manner. But the injury is, I understand, not of a very serious nature."

"He looked a bit white."

"Apparently, sir, he got a fright, a shock of some kind, when the bulb exploded."

After dinner the grown-ups went to the ball-room. Mr. Braxton switched on the mechanism and great enthusiasm was shown. "Won't the kiddies love it," said George, grinning at the kaleidoscope. "Look at the Big Bad Wolf. He looks so darn realistic I'm not sure I'd give him a 'U' certificate."

"It's almost frightening," said Pamela, "they look incredibly real. Daddie, you really are rather bright, darling."

It was arranged that the work of decoration should be tackled on the morrow and finished on Christmas Eve.

"All the presents have arrived," said Mrs. Braxton, "and are being unpacked. But I'll explain about them tomorrow."

They went back to the drawing-room. Presently Gloria puffed and remarked:

"Papa, aren't you keeping the house rather too hot?"

"I noticed the same thing," said Mrs. Braxton.

Mr. Braxton walked over to a thermometer on the wall. "You're right," he remarked, "seventy." He rang the bell.

"Perkins," he asked, "who's on the furnace?"

"Churchill, sir."

"Well, he's overdoing it. It's seventy. Tell him to get it back to fifty-seven."

Perkins departed and returned shortly after.

"Churchill informs me he has damped down and cannot account for the increasing warmth, sir."

"Tell him to get it back to fifty-seven at once," rapped Mr. Braxton.

"Very good, sir."—

"Open a window," said Mrs. Braxton.

"It is snowing again, madam."

"Never mind."

"My God!" exclaimed Mary, when she and Jack went up to bed. "That furnace-man is certainly stepping on it. Open all the windows."

A wild flurry of snow beat against the curtains.

Mr. Braxton did what he very seldom did, woke up in the early hours. He awoke sweating from a furtive and demoralising dream. It had seemed to him that he had been crouching down in the fosse round Lucky's Grove and peering beneath the holm-oaks, and that there had been activity of a sort vaguely to be discerned therein, some quick, shadowy business. He knew a very tight terror at the thought of being detected at this spying, but he could not wrench himself away. That was all and he awoke still trembling and troubled. No wonder he'd had such a nightmare, the room seemed like a stokehold. He went to the windows and flung another open, and as he did so he glanced out. His room looked over the rock garden and down the path to the maze. Something moving just outside it caught his eye. He thought he knew what it was, that big Alsatian which had been sheep-worrying in the neighbourhood. What an enormous brute. Or was it just because it was outlined against the snow? It vanished suddenly, apparently into the maze. He'd organize a hunt for it after Christmas; if the snow lay, it should be easy to track.

The first thing he did after breakfast was to send for Churchill, severely reprimand him and threaten his with dismissal from his ship. That person was almost tearfully insistent that he had obeyed orders and kept his jets low. "I can't make it out, sir. It's got no right to be as 'ot as what it is."

"That's nonsense!" said Mr. Braxton. "The system has been perfected and cannot take charge, as you suggest. See to it. You don't want me to get an engineer down, do you?"

"No, sir."

"That's enough. Get it to fifty-seven and keep it there."

Shortly after Mrs. Curtis rang up to say her husband

was quite ill with a temperature and that the Doctor was coming. Mr. Braxton asked her to ring him again after he'd been.

During the morning the children played in the snow. After a pitched battle in which the girls lost their tempers, Gregory organized the erection of a snowman. He designed, the others fetched the material. He knew he had a reputation for brilliance to maintain and produce something Epsteinish, huge and squat. The other children regarded it with little enthusiasm, but, being Gregory, they supposed it must be admired. When it was finished Gregory wandered off by himself while the others went in to dry. He came in a little late for lunch during which he was silent and preoccupied. Afterwards the grown-ups sallied forth.

"Let's see your snowman, Greg," said Gloria, in a mother-of-genius tone.

"It isn't all his, we helped," said Phyllis, voicing a point of view which was to have many echoes in the coming years.

"Why, he's changed it!" exclaimed a chorus two minutes later.

"What an ugly thing!" exclaimed Mary, rather pleased at being able to say so with conviction.

Gregory had certainly given his imagination its head, for now the squat, inert trunk was topped by a big wolf's head with open jaw and ears snarlingly laid back, surprisingly well modelled. Trailing behind it was a coiled, serpentine tail.

"Whatever gave you the idea for that?" asked Jack.

Usually Gregory was facile and eloquent in explaining his inspiration, but this time he refused to be drawn, bit his lip and turned away.

There was a moment's silence and then Gloria said with convincing emphasis, "I think it's wonderful, Greg!"

And then they strolled off to examine the pigs and the poultry and the Suffolk punches.

They had just got back for tea when the telephone bell rang in Mr. Braxton's study. It was Mrs. Curtis. The patient was no better and Doctor Knowles had seemed rather worried, and so on. So Mr. Braxton rang up the doctor.

"I haven't diagnosed his trouble yet," he said. "And I'm going to watch him carefully and take a blood-test if he's not better tomorrow. He has a temperature of a

hundred and two, but no other superficial symptoms, which is rather peculiar. By the way, one of your cowmen, Sam Colley, got a nasty wound on the face yesterday and shows signs of blood poisoning. I'm considering sending him to hospital. Some of your other men have been in to see me—quite a little outbreak of illness since Tuesday. However, I hope we'll have a clean bill again soon. I'll keep you informed about Curtis."

Mr. Braxton was one of those incredible people who never have a day's illness—till their first and last. Consequently his conception of disease was unimaginative and mechanical. If one of his more essential human machines was running unsatisfactorily, there was a machine-mender called a doctor whose business it was to ensure that all the plug leads were attached firmly and that the manifold drain-pipe was not blocked. But he found himself beginning to worry about Curtis, and this little epidemic amongst his henchmen affected him disagreeably—there was something disturbing to his spirit about it. But just what and why, he couldn't analyse and decide.

After dinner, with the children out of the way, the business of decorating the tree was begun. The general scheme had been sketched out and coloured by one of the Braxton display experts and the company consulted this as they worked, which they did rather silently; possibly Mr. Braxton's palpable anxiety somewhat affected them.

Pamela stayed behind after the others had left the ball-room to put some finishing touches to her section of the tree. When she rejoined the others she was looking rather white and tight-lipped. She said good night a shade abruptly and went to her room. Walter, a very, very good husband, quickly joined her.

"Anything the matter, old girl?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes," replied Pamela, "I'm frightened."

"Frightened! What d'you mean?"

"You'll think it's all rot, but I'll tell you. When you'd all left the ball-room, I suddenly felt very uneasy—you know the sort of feeling when one keeps on looking round and can't concentrate. However, I stuck at it. I was a little way up the steps when I heard a sharp hiss from above me in the tree. I jumped back to the floor and looked up, now, of course, you won't believe me, but the trunk of the tree was moving—it was like the

coils of a snake writhing upward, and there was something at the top of the tree, horrid-looking, peering at me. I know you won't believe me."

Walter didn't, but he also didn't know what to make of it. "I know what happened!" he improvised slightly. "You'd been staring in at that trunk for nearly two hours and you got dizzy—like staring at the sun on the sea; and that snow dazzle this afternoon helped it. You've heard of snow-blindness—something like that, it still echoes from the retina or whatever. . . ."

"You think it might have been that?"

"I'm sure of it."

"And that horrible head?"

"Well, as George put it rather brightly, I don't think some of those figures on the lamps should get a 'U' certificate. There's the wolf to which he referred, and the witch."

"Which witch?" laughed Pamela a little hysterically. "I didn't notice one."

"I did. I was working just near it, at least, I suppose it's meant to be a witch. A figure in black squinting round from behind a tree. As a matter of fact fairies never seemed all fun and frolic to me, there's often something diabolical about them—or rather casually cruel. Disney knows that."

"Yes, there is," agreed Pamela. "So you think that's all there was to it?"

"I'm certain. One's eyes can play tricks on one."

"Yes," said Pamela, "I know what you mean, as if they saw what one knew wasn't there or was different. Though who would 'one' be then?"

"Oh, don't ask me that sort of question!" laughed Walter. "Probably Master Gregory will be able to tell you in a year or two."

"He's a nice little boy, really," protested Pamela. "Gloria just spoils him and it's natural."

"I know he is, it's not his fault, but they will *force* him. Look at that snow-man—and staying behind to do it. A foul-looking thing!"

"Perhaps his eyes played funny tricks with him," said Pamela.

"What d'you mean by that?"

"I don't know why I said it," said Pamela frowning. "Sort of echo, I suppose. Let's go to bed."

Walter kissed her gently but fervently, as he loved

her. He was a one-lady's man and had felt a bit nervous about her for a moment or two.

Was the house a little cooler? wondered Mr. Braxton, as he was undressing, or was it that he was getting more used to it? He was now convinced there was something wrong with the installation; he'd get an expert down. Meanwhile they must stick it. He yawned, wondered how Curtis was, and switched off the light.

Soon all the occupants were at rest and the great house swinging silently against the stars. *Should* have been at rest, rather, for one and all recalled that night with reluctance and dread. Their dreams were harsh and unhallowed, yet oddly related, being concerned with dim, uncertain and yet somehow urgent happenings in and around the house, as though some thing or things were stirring while they slept and communicated their motions to their dreaming consciousness. They awoke tired with a sense of unaccountable malaise.

Mrs. Curtis rang up during breakfast and her voice revealed her distress. Timothy was delirious and much worse. The doctor was coming at 10.30.

Mr. and Mrs. Braxton decided to go over there, and sent for the car. Knowles was waiting just outside the house when they arrived.

"He's very bad," he said quietly. "I've sent for two nurses and Sir Arthur Galley; I want another opinion. Has he had some trouble with a tree?"

"Trouble with a tree!" said Mr. Braxton, his nerves giving a flick.

"Yes, it's probably just a haphazard, irrational idea of delirium, but he continually fusses about some tree."

"How bad is he?" asked Mrs. Braxton.

The doctor frowned. "I wish I knew. I'm fairly out of my depth. He's keeping up his strength fairly well, but he can't go on like this."

"As bad as that!" exclaimed Mr. Braxton.

"I'm very much afraid so. I'm anxiously awaiting Sir Arthur's verdict. By the way, that cow-man is very ill indeed; I'm sending him into hospital."

"What happened to him?" asked Mr. Braxton, absently, his mind on Curtis.

"Apparently a branch of your Christmas tree snapped back at him and struck his face. Blood-poisoning set in almost at once."

Mr. Braxton felt that tremor again, but merely nodded.

"I was just wondering if there might be some connection between the two, that Curtis is blaming himself for the accident. Seems an absurd idea, but judging from his ravings he appears to think he is lashed to some tree and that the great heat he feels comes from it."

They went into the house and did their best to comfort and reassure Mrs. Curtis, instructed Knowles to ring up as soon as Sir Arthur's verdict was known, and then drove home.

The children had just come in from playing in the snow.

"Grandpa, the snow-man's melted," said Paddy, "did it thaw in the night?"

"Must have done," replied Mr. Braxton, forcing a smile.

"Come and look, Grandpa," persisted Paddy, "there's nothing left of it."

"Grandpa doesn't want to be bothered," said Mary, noticing his troubled face.

"I'll come," said Mr. Braxton. When he reached the site of the snow-man his thoughts were still elsewhere, but his mind quickly re-focused itself, for he was faced with something a little strange. Not a vestige of the statue remained, though the snow was frozen crisp and crunched hard beneath their feet; and yet that snow-man was completely obliterated and where it had stood was a circle of bare, brown grass.

"It must have thawed in the night and then frozen again," he said uncertainly.

"Then why—" began Paddy.

"Don't bother Grandpa," said Mary sharply. "He's told you what happened."

They wandered off toward the heavy, hurrying river.

"Are those dog-paw marks?" asked Phyllis.

That reminded Mr. Braxton. He peered down. "Yes," he replied. "And I bet they're those of that brute of an Alsatian; it must be a colossal beast."

"And it must have paws like a young bear," laughed Mary. "They're funny dogs, sort of Jekyll and Hydes. I rather adore them."

"You wouldn't adore this devil. He's all Hyde." (I'm in the wrong mood for these festivities, he thought irritably.)

During the afternoon George and Walter took the kids to a cinema in Oxford; the others finished the decoration of the tree.

The presents, labelled with the names of their recipients, were arranged on tables round the room and the huge cracker, ten feet long and forty inches in circumference, was placed on its gaily-decorated trestle near the tree. Just as the job was finished, Mary did a three-quarters faint, but was quickly revived with brandy.

"It's the simply ghastly heat in the house!" exclaimed Gloria who was not looking too grand herself. "The installation must be completely diseased. Ours always works perfectly." Mary had her dinner in bed and Jack came up to her immediately he had finished his.

"How are you feeling, darling?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm all right."

"It *was* just the heat, of course?"

"Oh, yes," replied Mary with rather forced emphasis.

"Scared you a bit, going off like that?" suggested Jack, regarding her rather sharply.

"I'm quite all right, thank you," said Mary in the tone she always adopted when she'd had enough of a subject. "I'd like to rest. Switch off the light."

But when Jack had gone, she didn't close her eyes, but lay on her back staring up at the faint outline of the ceiling. She frowned and lightly chewed the little finger of her left hand, a habit of hers when unpleasantly puzzled. Mary, like most people of strong character and limited imagination, hated to be puzzled. Everything she considered ought to have a simple explanation if one tried hard enough to find it. But how could one explain this odd thing that had happened to her? Besides the grandiose gifts on the tables which bore a number, as well as the recipient's name, a small present for everyone was hung on the tree. This also bore a number, the same one as the lordly gift, so easing the Braxton's task of handing these out to the right people. Mary had just fixed Curtis's label to a cigarette lighter and tied it on the tree when it swung on its silk thread, so that the back of the card was visible; and on it was this inscription: "Died, December 25th, 1938." It spun away again and back and the inscription was no longer there.

Now Mary came of a family which rather prided itself on being unimaginative. Her father had confined his flights of fancy to the Annual Meeting of his Share-

holders, while, to her mother, imagination and mendacity were at least first cousins. So Mary could hardly credit the explanation that, being remotely worried about Mr. Curtis, she had subconsciously concocted that sinister sentence. On the other hand she knew poor Mr. Curtis was very ill and, therefore, perhaps, if her brain had played that malign little trick on her, it might have done so in "tombstone writing."

This was a considerable logical exercise for Mary, the effort tired her, the impression began to fade and she started wondering how much longer Jack was going to sit up. She dozed off and there, as if flashed on the screen "inside her head" was "Died, December 25th, 1938." This, oddly enough, completely reassured her, There was "nothing there" this time. There had been nothing that other time. She'd been very weak and imaginative even to think otherwise.

While she was deciding this, Dr. Knowles rang up. "Sir Arthur has just been," he said. "And I'm sorry to say he's pessimistic. He says Curtis is very weak."

"But what's the matter with him?" asked Mr. Braxton urgently.

"He doesn't know. He calls it P.U.O., which really means nothing."

"But what's it stand for?"

"Pyrexia unknown origin. There are some fevers which cannot be described more precisely."

"How ill is he really?"

"All I can say is, we must hope for the best."

"My God!" exclaimed Mr. Braxton. "When's Sir Arthur coming again?"

"At eleven tomorrow. I'll ring you up after he's been."

Mr. Braxton excused himself and went to his room. Like many men of his dominating, sometimes ruthless type, he was capable of an intensity of feeling, anger, resolution, desire for revenge, but also affection and sympathy, unknown to more superficially Christian and kindly souls. He was genuinely attached to Curtis and his wife and very harshly and poignantly moved by this news which, he realised, could hardly have been worse. He would have to exercise all his will power if he was to sleep.

If on the preceding night the rest of the sleepers had been broken by influences which had insinuated themselves into their dreams, that which caused the

night reached hurricane force, driving before it an almost demoniacal violence of the elements. The northeaster had been waxing steadily all the evening and by midnight reached hurricane force, driving before it an almost impenetrable wall of snow. Not only so, but continually all through the night the wall was enflamed, and the roar of the hurrican silenced, by fearful flashes of lightening and raffales of thunder. The combination was almost intolerably menacing. As the great house shook from the gale and trembled at the blasts and the windows blazed with strange polychromatic balls of flame, all were tense and troubled. The children fought or succumbed to their terror according to their natures; their parents soothed and reassured them.

Mr. Braxton was convinced the lightning conductors were struck three times within ten minutes, and he could imagine them recoiling from the mighty impacts and seething from the terrific charges. Not till a dilatory, chaotic dawn staggered up the sky did the storm temporarily lull. For a time the sky cleared and the frost came hard. It was a yawning and haggard company which assembled at breakfast. But determined efforts were made to engender a communal cheerfulness. Mr. Braxton did his best to contribute his quota of seasonal bonhomie, but his mind was plagued by thoughts of Curtis. Before the meal was finished the vicar rang up to say the church tower had been struck and almost demolished, so there could be no services. It rang again to say that Brent's farmhouse had been burnt to the ground.

While the others went off to inspect the Church Mr. Braxton remained in the study. Presently Knowles rang to say Sir Arthur had been and pronounced Curtis weaker, but his condition was not quite hopeless. One of the most ominous symptoms was the violence of the delirium. Curtis appeared to be in great terror and sedatives had no effect.

"How's that cow-man?" asked Mr. Braxton.

"He died in the night, I'm sorry to say."

Whereupon Mr. Braxton broke one of his strictest rules by drinking a very stiff whiskey with very little soda.

Christmas dinner was tolerably hilarious, and after it, the children, bulging and incipiently bilious, slept some of it off, while their elders put the final touches to the preparations for the party.

In spite of the weather, not a single "cry-off" was telephoned. There was a good reason for this, Mr. Braxton's entertainments were justly famous.

So from four-thirty onwards the "Cream of North Berkshire Society" came ploughing through the snow to the Hall; Lady Pounser and party bringing up the rear in her heirloom Rolls which was dribbling steam from its ancient and aristocratic beak. A tea of teas, not merely a high-tea, an Everest tea, towering, skyscraping, was then attacked by the already stuffed juveniles who, by the end of it, were almost livid with repletion, finding even the efforts of cracker-pulling almost beyond them.

They were then propelled into the library where rows of chairs had been provided for them. There was a screen at one end of the room, a projector at the other. Mr. Braxton had provided one of his famous surprises! The room was darkened and on the screen was flashed the sentence: *"The North Berks News Reel."*

During the last few weeks Mr. Braxton had had a sharp-witted and discreetly furtive camera-man at work shooting some of the guests while busy about their more or less lawful occasions.

For example, there was a sentence from a speech by Lord Gallen, the Socialist Peer: "It is a damnable and calculated lie for our opponents to suggest we aim at a proposterous and essentially *inequitable* equalisation of income——" And then there was His Lordship just entering his limousine, and an obsequious footman, rug in hand, holding the door open for him.

His Lordship's laughter was raucous and vehement, though he *would* have liked to have said a few words in rebuttal.

And there was Lady Pounser's Rolls, locally known as "the hippogriffe," stuck in a snow-drift and enveloped in steam, with the caption, "Oh, Mr. Mercury, *do* give me a start!" And other kindly, slightly sardonic japes at the expense of the North Berks Cream.

The last scene was meant as an appropriate prelude to the climax of the festivities. It showed Curtis and his crew digging up the tree from Lucky's Grove. Out they came from the holm-oaks straining under their load, but close observers noticed there was one who remained behind, standing menacing and motionless, a very tall, dark, brooding figure. There came a blinding

lightning flash which seemed to blaze sparking round the room and a fearsome metallic bang. The storm had returned with rasping and imperious salute.

The lights immediately came on and the children were marshalled into the ball-room. As they entered and saw the high tree shining there and the little people so lively upon its branches a prolonged "O—h!" of astonishment was exhorted from the blasé brats. But there was another wave of flame against the windows which rattled wildly at the ensuing roar, and the cries of delight were tinged with terror. And, indeed, the hard, blue glare flung a sinister glow on the tree and its whirling throng.

The grown-ups hastened to restore equanimity and, forming rings of children, circled round the tree.

Presently Mrs. Braxton exclaimed: "Now then, look for your names on the cards and see what Father Christmas has brought you."

Though hardly one of the disillusioned infants retained any belief in that superannuated Deliverer of Goods, the response was immediate. For they had sharp ears which had eagerly absorbed the tales of Braxton munificence. (At the same time it was noticeable that some approached the tree with diffidence, almost reluctance, and started back as a livid flare broke against the window-blinds and the dread peals shook the streaming snow from the eaves.)

Mary had just picked up little Angela Rayner so that she could reach her card, when the child screamed out and pulled away her hand.

"The worm!" she cried, and a thick, black-grey squirming maggot fell from her fingers to the floor and writhed away. George, who was near, put his shoe on it with a squish.

One on the Pounser tribe, whose card was just below the Big Bad Wolf, refused to approach it. No wonder, thought Walter, for it looked horribly hunting and alive. There were other mischances too. The witch behind the sombre tree seemed to pounce out at Clarissa Balder, so she tearfully complained, and Gloria had to pull off her card for her. Of course Gregory was temperamental, seeming to stare at a spot just below the taut peak of the tree, as if mazed and entranced. But the presents were wonderful and more than worth the small ordeal of finding one's card and pretending not to be

frightened when the whole room seemed full of fiery hands and the thunder cracked against one's ear-drums and shook one's teeth. Easy to be afraid!

At length the last present had been bestowed and it was time for the *pièce de résistance,* the pulling of the great cracker. Long, silken cords streamed from each end with room among them for fifty chubby fists, and a great surprise inside, for sure. The languid, uneasy troop were lined up at each end and took a grip on the silken cords.

At that moment a footman came in and told Mr. Braxton he was wanted on the telephone.

Filled with foreboding he went to his study. He heard the voice of Knowles—

"I'm afraid I have very bad news for you . . ."

* * * * *

The chubby fists gripped the silken cords.

"Now pull!" cried Mrs. Braxton.

The opposing teams took the strain.

A leaping flash and a blasting roar. The children were hurled, writhing and screaming over each other.

Up from the middle of the cracker leapt a rosy shaft of flame which, as it reached the ceiling, seemed to flatten its peak so that it resembled a great snake of fire which turned and hurled itself against the tree in a blinding embrace. There was a fierce sustained "Hiss," the tree flamed like a torch, and all the fairy globes upon it burst and splinered. And then the roaring torch cast itself down amongst the screaming chaos. For a moment the great pot, swathed in green, was a carmine cauldron and its paint streamed like blood upon the floor. Then the big room was a dream of fire and those within it driven wildly from its heat.

* * * * *

Phil Tangler, whose farmhouse, on the early slopes of Missen Rise, overlooked both Lucky's Grove and the Hall, solemnly declared that at 7.30 on Christmas Day, 1938, he was watching from a window and marvelling at the dense and boiling race of snow, the bitter gale, and the wicked flame and fury of the storm, when he saw a huge fist of fire form in a rift in the cloud-rack,

a fist with two huge blazing fingers, one of which speared down on the Hall, another touched and kindled the towering fir in Lucky's Grove, as through saluting it. Five minutes later he was racing through the hurricane to join in a vain night-long fight to save the Hall, already blazing from stem to stern.

Happy Ending?

JONATHAN TURTELL was absolutely, perhaps a shade stlf-consciously, scientifically minded. He was studying psychology under Gillivan at London University. Certain sceptics deny that psychology is, or can be, a science at all. Jonathan, however, had no such doubts; he was not a person who cherished many. His appearance suggested assurance of belief. High, domed brow, small, black, piercing eyes, slightly tilted fleshy nose, long, rather pouting mouth and a chin to match this uncompromising combination. Below it a strong, rather squat, body which brought his feet down with the resolute thumps of a man of mettle. He was only twenty-three and aloofly and scientifically approved of what the mirror showed him. The general opinion amongst his contemporaries was that he was destined to force the world to recognize his existence in no uncertain manner. Jonathan saw no reason to debate this opinion.

In a sense his choice of lodgings in London was scientifically dictated. In his view the law of supply and demand made it extremely improbable that there could be any very noticeable variation in comfort and cleanliness between "Digs" in the same neighbourhood at the same price. He wished to be within a few minutes' walk to Marylebone Station because his mother had a house near Rickmansworth and he wanted to visit her every Sunday. So he set out from the station and rang the bell of the first respectable looking house which had a "bed-sitting-room" card in the window. This happened to be 84 H——Street. The door was opened by a square middle-aged female. Jonathan at once summed her up scientifi-

cally as "rapacious, capable, rather sly, probably nonconformist."

He stated his business and was conducted to the top floor. The room was quite satisfactory, spacious, high ceiling, light, airy and very clean. A guinea a week was satisfactory, too, and he took it for a month.

"I'll bring my things along in half an hour," he said, and handed over a guinea. The whole affair had been conducted in a decisive, practical, scientific way. Exactly half an hour later he was unpacking his trunk. He then wrote to his mother, and afterwards settled down with work on Behaviourism which, Gillivan maintained, was unique in the fact that it contained specimens of all the elementary fallacies in each of its sixteen chapters. It should be said Gillivan's opinion and Jonathan's invariably coincided.

As for the other denizens of Number 84, Jonathan had no concern with them; but he vaguely hoped the person next door didn't snore, for he could hear him moving about and the wall seemed rather thin.

Jonathan's régime was regular and austere. He had a light breakfast at an A.B.C. shop, worked from nine to one. Had a light lunch at an A.B.C. shop, worked from two to six. Hd dinner at a Corner House. Usually went to a movie afterwards, for the reactions of the multitude were of huge psychological value. Walked back to 84 and went to bed.

He had been doing this for a week when he had the first of his odd dreams. It must have been one of the shortest on record for it merely consisted of hearing a voice mutter, "My God! My God!" He awoke at once, its displeasing echo in his ears; displeasing because he had never heard anything uttered with such desperate melancholy. Why on earth did dreams play such tricks on one! It took him half an hour to get to sleep again. But he had forgotten all about it by the time he went to bed the following night. However, he seemed hardly to have laid his head on the pillow when it happened again. "My God! My God!" and then, after some uncertain interval, an odd, sharp sound which, as it were, woke him. He got up, switched on his light and examined the room. Everything was in order. What had caused that sharp sound? It might have been, in fact he was almost certain it had been, due to the abrupt knocking over of a light chair on to an uncarpeted sur-

face. He glanced swiftly at his own small chair by the table. It was standing firmly on its four slightly rickety legs. No, he had *dreamed* that sound; he knew it.

He didn't mind realising *that;* but the other, that voice, and for the second time! It might be a queer dream-echo of something he'd heard recently in a film. That was probably the explanation. He sincerely hoped it wouldn't happen again, he thought, as he settled himself down to sleep.

It was his experience on the next night which started seriously to worry Jonathan's mind. Once again sleep seemed to come instantaneously—and first the voice and then that enigmatic little crash. His dreaming consciousness became prey to a deep unease. Something unhallowed and fearful was happening in the room beyond the wall. Suddenly there came to the dreamer's ears a rapid dual drumming on the door of that next room, a devilish din, and a horrid gasping and choking—and he awoke; and so vivid and intense had been the nightmare that still for a moment after he was awake that vile hawking echoed in his ears.

Now that was very odd, he thought, as he sat up in bed. Three nights running he had dreamed of sounds which, he now realised, had come from the next room. As a rule he was markedly a "non-dreamer"; that is to say, though he knew he dreamed, as everyone did, his dreams left no impression on his waking mind—he couldn't recall them having done so half a dozen times in his life. At any rate he had never known anything remotely comparable with this. And the subject-matter of these visitations was odd too. He had studied dream phenomena—was studying it at the moment as an integral department of psychological research—but he had never read of a case of disconnected dreamed *sounds;* that is to say sounds entirely dissociated from visions.

And what sounds! He was wide awake and calm now, and his habitually scientific cast of mind persuaded him —a shade reluctantly—to see if he could "make sense" of this sound-sequence. To do so he made one only half-justified assumption, that sounded number two was that of an overturned chair. First there was a voice, and the tone of that voice and the remark it uttered suggested its owner was in some urgent trouble. Well, then there was the assumed knocking over of a chair. Next that extraordinary drumming on the door, and lastly that

peculiarly displeasing hawking and choking. Well, could one derive a coherent series out of that? It *did* seem to Jonathan that one could do something along those lines. He frowned as though the conception was unwelcomed. Some dreams, he knew, not all, but perhaps the majority, were distorted rehashes, regurgitations of some recent waking experience, physical or mental. Had anything occurred to him of late which might have given rise to, been distorted into, this sequence? He could recall nothing; yet such distortion was often so violent that no such tracing could be made, or rather was too unconvincingly easy to ingenious savants. Then, of course there were those other classes of dreams, but he did not propose to consider them at two in the morning. He must get some sleep, and he profoundly hoped it would be dreamless. It was so.

The next morning as he was dressing he casually glanced at his door. His overcoat was hanging from a stout iron hook. He paused for a second in the act of pulling on a shoe. He cast an equally casual glance at the door of the room opposite, which was set at right angles to his own, as he set out to get his breakfast, and aloofly calculated it was just about level with the head of his bed.

It may be interpolated here that Jonathan's views on the so-called "supernatural" were at once agnostic and dogmatic. (So, it may be remarked, were those of Professor Gillivan.) He considered it the height of intellectual arrogance and egotism to deny flatly that such phenomena occurred. More than one great and sceptical scientist had devoted much of his working life to research regarding them, and had been convinced of their occurrence; though they equally firmly asserted that they had made not the slightest progress towards discovering the causes giving rise to and controlling them, and suggested that no such progress might ever be made. Equally possible some such genius as Einstein—one of absolute originality of mind—would, in a flash in inspiration, elucidate them. But there was, of course, always the possibility that the Universe was fundamentally irrational and that such phenomena were merely modes of its unreason; that Nature sometimes acted in such a way that man could not frame laws to interpret that action. This possibility was highly unpalatable to Turtell-Gillivan, but that composite personality ruefully recognized that

the absolute lack of progress in discovering the laws governing psychic phenomena was ominous.

Jonathan had actually experienced—at second-hand—one such strange thing, when his mother had rushed into his room three years before and said she had just seen his father standing before her, his face covered with blood. And, indeed, he had been accidentally killed out shooting fifty miles away at just that very moment.

This digression is given to explain that Jonathan experienced a preoccupied day. His nightmare remained vividly in his memory, and he had a feeling that something was afoot, what might be called a "ghostly" sense that there might be more to come. His "scientific curiosity" was aroused; that is to say something had happened to him for which he could find no explanation, possibly something for which no explanation could ever be found. Even if it were all over now, he knew he would remember it all his life; one of those queer little incidents which "stick" when many greater ones are forgotten.

He got back to Number 84 at eleven and went straight to bed. "My God! My God!" that murmur of profound despair. He listened with agonised attention. Suddenly he heard the chair go crashing down and then that sustained and dreadful drumming and that vile strangling choking. And it seemed to him that he dragged himself trembling from his bed, opened his door and crossed the passage to that other door, which was quivering and rattling violently. He had to *thrust* it open for it was heavy to his hand. On the other side of it something was swaying and jerking, something which broke loose from the door and fell enveloping him. And then he awoke dazed and breathing heavily. Hardly knowing what he was doing, he dashed to and opened his door and stood listening. There was no sound. He went back to his room, switched on the light, lit a cigarette and sat down in his armchair. Well, what was the meaning of this?

He was the subject—victim—of a recurrent and apparently developing dream, the "theme" of which was that someone hanged himself on the door of the room opposite. It sounded utterly fantastic, but the evidence was undeniable. His subconscious might be constructing this sequence out of some recent waking experience. He

could recollect none such, but that subconscious knew better, that was the "commonsense," orthodox theory, but it was useless to pretend it was the only one. For example someone might have committed suicide in that room. There was even the possibility that someone might be going to do so. He would not be the first who had experienced something of the sort, the evidence for that was also irrefutable. What to do about it? "Clear out" was the obvious answer. He knew he couldn't stand many more repetitions of this highly unnerving ordeal. And what point was there is his doing so?

But here the scientist voiced a protest. What every scientist longed for—especially young ones—was to make the "personal contribution" to the cause of science. Should he eschew and run away from this thing? But Cold-Foot replied, "There is nothing new in your experience. It is nebulous and unrelated. The evidence for such dream-sequences may be undeniable, but nine hundred and ninety scientists out of a thousand would believe you were a thundering liar if you published your experience. After all you are a psychologist, not a psychist. And what about your health—especially mental health? It might easily become a disintegrating obsession." Well, he would consult Gillivan about it, he decided. It would take some courage, but he'd do it. The great man appeared to approve of him and he'd chance it.

He went back to bed and his slumbers were troubled no more.

So he went up to the Professor after his afternoon lecture and asked if he could have a word with him.

"Something urgent? I'm very busy tonight. What's it about?"

Jonathan did a genuine blush—one of the first of his existence.

"A dream-sequence, sir."

"What! Your own?" smiled the Professor.

"Yes, sir. I'm in a difficulty. I wanted your advice."

"Come to my room at eight tomorrow evening and you shall have it."

As he dined, Jonathan wondered what this next night, next and last, very possibly, in Number 84 would have in store for him. For example, had the sequence ended, the last term in the series been reached? Or was there

another scene to be played; and if that were so, would he then be left in peace?

He realised what incredulous derision these speculations would arouse in probably everyone else in the little restaurant. But they hadn't known what he had. These questions in no way seemed absurd to him. Nor would they, he felt convinced, to Richet, Geley or Dunne.

He was feeling quite cheerful and resigned as he walked home. On reaching it, he decided to read for a while. Presently he looked at his watch. A quarter to one. And then his lips parted slightly, his eyes grew staring and he became quite rigid; for he had heard the voice of one doomed murmur, "My God! My God!"

"I'm going mad!" thought Jonathan desperately. "That was an aural hallucination. Waking and dream world have become one, and that is madness."

With an effort he rallied his spirit, and flashing to his memory came a little story by Gillivan of how a doctor in charge of some cases of botulism, an inevitably fatal infection of which a prominent symptom is double-vision, had gone into the kitchen of the hotel and had seen two cooks standing by the table. In a flash he knew he, too, was doomed and felt other symptoms stirring to life within him. But it was only the cook's twin sister.

Suddenly there came that other sound as of a chair sent wildly sprawling, and then, following hard, that hell-tattoo was drummed on the door of the room opposite and then the horrid gasping of a stangling man.

Then Jonathan understood.

He dashed to the door of that other room. He had to thrust it open, for it was heavy to his hand. Something was tossing and writhing there, something that swayed down enveloping him. He broke loose, dashed to the wall searching for the light-switch, found it, and there on the floor, an over-turned chair beside him, was one with eyes staring from their sockets, tongue stretched horribly and an old blue tie clamped around his neck.

* * * * *

"Extremely interesting," said Gillivan, "and the young man has recovered?"

"Yes, sir, and spends his time cursing me."

"I suppose they've put him in a cell?"

"Yes. Isn't it a damn shame!"

"Theoretically, yes. Practically, don't you believe it! They seldom jail 'em. I suppose it was money?"

"Yes."

"Well, he never need worry about that any more. He's drawn attention to his plight, the charitable will do the rest. If I were hopelessly broke, I'd stage a fake, unsuccessful suicide. He'll live to bless you!"

"Tell me, sir," said Jonathan, "*is* there any explanation of this sort of thing? It seems so urgent and yet so purposeless."

"Ever read *Modern Metaphysics* by Sir Anstruther Sawbridge?"

"No."

"Few have, though it's a monumental work. I'll lend you my copy. He holds that every event exists eternally and universally. The first man on Mars might have seen, the last man on Earth may yet see, your friend drop as that hook went, but only if they were privileged—or accursed—persons called clairvoyants. Sawbridge is markedly one, apparently, and, equally apparently, you are another. An attempt to define a clairvoyant results in a vicious circle. It is an ingenious little theory well worthy of your scrutiny and criticism."

"It certainly never occurred to me I was clairvoyant," said Jonathan.

"Well, don't feel uppish about it. Sawbridge states that clairvoyants are often rather below the general level of intelligence!"

↑ *The First Sheaf* ↑

"IF only they realized what they were doing!" laughed old Porteous, leaning over the side of the car. "They" were a clutter of rustics, cuddling vegetable marrows, cauliflowers, apples and other stuffs, passing into a village church some miles south of Birmingham. "Humanity has been doing that, performing that rite, since thousands of years before the first syllable of recorded

time, I suppose; though not always in quite such a refined manner. And then there are maypoles, of all indecorous symbols, and beating the bounds, a particularly interesting survival with, originally, a dual function; first they beat the bounds to scare the devils out, and then they beat the small boys that their tears might propitiate the Rain Goddess. Such propitiation having been found to be superfluous in this climate, they have ceased to beat the urchins; a great pity, but an admirable example of myth-adaptation. Great Britain swarms with such survivals, some as innocuous and bland as this harvest festival, others far more formidable and guarded secrets; at least that was so when I was a boy. Did I ever tell you how I lost my arm?"

"No," I replied, yawning. "Go ahead. But I hope the tale has entertainment value, for I am feeling deliciously sleepy."

Old Porteous leaned back and lit a cigar. He had started his career with fifty pounds, and turned this into seven figures by sheer speculative genius; he seemed to touch nothing which did not appreciate. He is fat, shrewd, cynical, and very charitable in an individual, far-sighted way. A copious but discriminating eater and drinker, to all appearances just a superb epitome of a type. But he has a less mundane side which is highly developed, being a devoted amateur of music with a trained and individual taste. And he owns the finest collection of keyboard instruments in Europe, the only one of his many possessions I very greatly envy him. Music, indeed, was the cause of our being together that Sunday morning in August, for I make my living out of attempting to criticise it, and we were driving to Manchester for a Harty Sibelius concert.

When I was a boy of thirteen [he began] my father accepted the living of Reedley End in Essex. There was little competition of the curé as the place had a notable reputation for toughness in the diocese, and the stipend was two hundred and fifty pounds a year and a house which, in size and amenities, somewhat resembled a contemporary poor-house. However, the prospect appealed to my dear old dad's zeal, for he was an Evangelist by label and temperament.

Reedley End was in one of those remote corners of the country which are "backwaterish" to this day; and

was then almost as cut off from the world as a village in Tibet. It sprawled along the lower slopes of a short, narrow valley, was fifteen miles from a railway station, and its only avenue to anywhere was a glorified cart-track. It was peopled by a strange tribe, aloof, dour, bitter, and revealing copious signs of intensive inter-breeding. They greeted my father's arrival with contemptuous nonchalance, spurned his ministrations, and soon enough broke his spirit.

"I can do nothing with them!" he groaned, half to himself and half to me. "They seem to worship other gods than mine!"

There was a very real justification for their bitterness. Reedley End was, perhaps, the most arid spot in Britain; drought, save in very good years, was endemic in that part of Essex, and I believe a bad spring and dry summer still causes great inconvenience and some hardship to this day. There had been three successive drought years before our arrival, with crop failures, heavy mortality amongst the beasts, and actual thirst the result. The distress was great and growing, and a mood of venomous despair had come with it. There was no one to help them—the day of Governmental paternalism had not yet dawned, and my father's predecessor's prayers for rain had been a singularly ineffectual substitute. They were off the map and left to stew in their own juice—or rather perish from the lack of it. Men in such a pass, if they cannot look forward for succour, many times look back.

In February they went forth to sow again, and my father told me they seemed to him in a sinister and enigmatic mood. (I may say my mother had died five years before, I was an only child, and through being my father's confidant, was old and "wise" for my age.) Their habitual aloofness had become impenetrable, and all—even the children—seemed imbued with some communal purpose, sharers of some communal secret.

One morning my father went to visit an ancient, bedridden crone who snubbed him with less consistent ruthlessness than the rest of his fearsome flock. To his astonishment he found the village entirely deserted. When he entered the ancient's cottage she abruptly told him to be gone.

"It is no day for you to be abroad, parson," she said peremptorily. "Go home and stay indoors!"

In his bewilderment my father attempted to solve the humiliating mystery, and decided to visit one of the three small farmers who strove desperately to scrape a living for themselves and their hinds from the parched acres; and who had treated him with rough courtesy. His farmhouse was some two miles away and my father set out to walk there. But, on reaching the outskirts of the village, he found his way barred by three men placed like sentries across the track. They waved him back without a word, and when he made some show of passing them, grew so threatening and their gestures were so unmistakable that my father cut short his protests and came miserably home again.

That night I couldn't sleep; my father's disturbed mood had communicated itself to me. Some time in the course of it I went to my window and leaned out. A bitter northerly wind was blowing, and suddenly down it came a horrid, thin cry of agony that seemed to have been carried from afar. It came once again, diminished and cut short. I crept shivering and badly scared back to bed.

If my father had heard it he made no reference to it next morning, when the village seemed itself again. And though the children were brooding and subdued, their elders were almost in good spirits, ruthlessly jocund, like homing lynchers. (I made that comparison, of course, long afterwards, but I know it to be psychologically true.)

My father had made valiant and pathetic attempts to get hold of the village youth and managed to coax together a meagre attendance at a Sunday school. On the next Sunday one of the dozen was missing. This was a girl of about my own age, the only child of a farm-labourer and his wife. He was a "foreigner," a native of Sussex, and a sparklingly handsome fellow of the pure Saxon type. His wife had some claims to be a beauty, too, and was much fairer than the average of those parts. The result was an oddly lovely child, as fair and rosy as her father. She shone out in the village like a Golden Oriole in a crew of crows. She aroused my keenest curiosity, the bud of love, I suppose; and I spent much of my time spying on her from a shy distance. When she failed to turn up that Sunday, my father went round to her parents' cottage. They were both at home. The man was pacing up and down the

kitchen, his face revealing fury and grief. The mother was sitting in front of the fire, wearing an expression my father found it hard to analyse. It reminded him of the appearance often shown by religious maniacs in their less boisterous moments; ecstatic, exalted, yet essentially unbalanced. When he asked after the little girl, the father clenched his fists and swore fiercely, the woman, without turning her head, muttered, "She'll be coming to school no more." This ultimatum was naturally not good enough for my father who was disagreeably affected by the scene. He asked where she was. She'd been sent away. "Where to?" he asked. But at this she became a raging virago and ordered my father to go and mind his own business. He turned to the man, who seemed on the verge of an outburst, but she muttered something my father couldn't catch and he ran from the room.

Late that night my dad heard a tap on his study window. It was the father.

"Sir," he said, "I'm away. They're devils here!"

"Your little girl?" asked my father, horrified.

"They've taken her," he replied hoarsely. "I don't know why, and I don't know where she's gone. But I know I shan't see her no more. As for my wife, I hate her for what she's done. She says they'll kill me if I try to find her. They'd kill me if they knew I was here!"

My father implored him to tell him more; promised him sanctuary and protection, but all he said was, "Avenge her, sir!" and vanished into the night.

Naturally my father was at a loss what to do. He even enlisted my more than willing aid. But all I succeeded in doing was verifying the agonising fact that my darling had gone, and in taking a terrific beating from persons unknown one night when I was snooping near the cottage.

In the end my father wrote a confidential letter to the Colchester police outlining the circumstances. But I suppose his tale was so vague and discreet that, though some enquiries were made by a thick-skulled, pot-bellied constable, nothing whatsoever came of them. But my father was a marked man from the moment of this peeler's appearance, and audible and impertinent interruptions punctuated his services.

Realising he was beaten, he made up his mind, with

many tears and self-reproaches, to resign at the end of the year.

The week after the little girl's disappearance there was a lovely two days' rain, and the spring and summer were a farmer's Elysian dream. My father, with pathetic optimism, hoped this copious, if belated, answer to his prayers would improve his status with his iron-fleeced flock. Instead he experienced an unanimous and shattering ostracism. In despair he wrote to his bishop, but the episcopal counsel was couched in too general and booming terms to be efficacious in converting the denizens of Reedley End.

And one day it was August, the fields shone with a mighty harvest, and it was time to bring it home.

The valley divided the corn-lands of Reedley into two areas tilled against the slight slopes. Those facing north were noticeably less productive than those on the south and do not concern us. Those southern fields were open and treeless, with one exception, a comparatively small circular field in the very middle of the tilled expanse. This was completely hemmed in by evergreens, yews and holm-oaks, not a single deciduous tree interrupted the dark barrier. In the centre of this field was a stone pillar about eight feet high. I was forced to be by myself for many hours a day; and I spent many of them roaming the country-side and peopling it with the folk of my fancy. The local youth regarded me without enthusiasm, but young blood is thicker than old and they did not keep me in rigid "Coventry," though they were very guarded in their replies to my questions.

The circular field stirred an intense curiosity within me, and all my wanderings on the southern slopes seemed to bring me, sooner or later, to its boundaries. Eventually I summoned up courage to ask a lad who had shown traces of cordiality if the field had a name—for some reason I was sure it had. He looked at me oddly—nervously and angrily—and replied, "It's the Good Field; and nought to do with you!" After the little girl's disappearance I was convinced, vaguely but certainly, that this field was concerned with it; intuition I suppose.

"Now that," I interrupted, "is a word that baffles me; and the dictionary seems to know no more than I do."

In a way I agree [laughed old Porteous], I could answer you negatively and quite accurately by saying that it is a mode of apprehension unknown to women. But I believe an intuitive judgment to be a syllogism of which the premises are in the Unconscious, the conclusion in the Conscious, though retrospective meditation can sometimes resolve it into a normal thought process. I have often done so in the case of big deals. It is the speed of the intuitive process which is so valuable. And now I hope you are a wiser man!

Anyway I conceived a fascinated horror of the field, a shivering curiosity concerning it I longed to satisfy.

One evening, early in March, I determined to do what I had never dared before, walk out into the field and examine the stone pillar. It was almost dusk and not a soul in sight. When I'd surmounted a small but deep ditch, broken through between two yews and stood out in that strange place under a hurrying, unstable sky, I felt a sense of extreme isolation; not, I think, the isolation of being alone in a deserted place, but such as one would experience if alone and horribly conspicuous amongst a hostile crowd. However, I fought down my fears and strode forward. When I reached the pillar I found it was square and surrounded by a small, cleared expanse of neatly tiled stone. This stone was thickly stained with what appeared to be red dust. The pillar itself was heavily pitted and indented about a third from its top, with such regularity as suggested an almost obliterated inscription of some kind. I clasped the pillar with my arms, tucked my legs round it and heaved myself up till I could touch its top. This I found to be hollowed out into a cup. I stretched up farther and pushed my fingers down. The next moment I was lying on my back and wringing my fingers; for if I had dipped my hand into molten lead I couldn't have known a sharper scald. This emptied my little bag of courage and, with "zero at the bone," I got up and ran for it. As I stumbled forward I took one look over my shoulder, and it seemed to me there was a dark figure standing by the pillar and reaching high above its top; and all the time I gasped homewards I felt I had a follower, and the pursuit was not called off till I flung myself through the rectory door.

"What's the matter?" asked my father. "You shouldn't

run like that. And you've cut your hand. Go and bathe it."

They started to reap in the second week of August and I found the process of great interest, for it was the first harvest I had seen. I hovered about the outskirts of the activity, fearing my reception if I ventured nearer. I found they were working in towards the Round Field from all points of the compass; and, young and inexperienced as I was, it seemed to me the people were in a strange mood, or rather mood-cycle, for at times there would be outbursts of wild singing, with horse-play and gesticulation, and at others they would be even more morose and silent than had been their sombre wont. And day after day they drew nearer the Round Field.

They reached it from all sides almost simultaneously by about noon on a superbly fine day. And then to my astonishment, they all stopped work and went home. That was on a Tuesday, and they did nothing the next day in the fields, though they were anything but idle. There was incessant activity in the village of a sort which perplexed my father greatly. It struck him that something of great importance was being prepared. The hive was seething. Needless to say no knowledge of it was vouchsafed to him. He discovered by humiliating experience that a meeting of the older men was held in what was known as "Odiues Field," for the sentries posted round all the approaches to it brusquely and menacingly refused him entrance.

Now whether it was our old friend, Intuition, or not, I was convinced these plans and consultations concerned the Round Field, and that something was due to be done there on the morrow. So I crept out of the house an hour before dawn, leaving a note on the hall-table telling my father not to worry. I took with me three slices of bread-and-butter and a bottle of water. I made my way to the Round Field by a devious route so as to avoid passing through the village, creeping along the hedgerows and keeping a sharp look-out with eye and ear. I have said that a ditch encircled the field, and in it I crouched down between two yews, well away from the gates. By creeping into the space where their branches touched, I believed I could spy out undetected.

Dawn broke fine, but very heavy and close, and there

were red strata of clouds to the east as the sun climbed through them.

To my surprise no one appeared at six, their usual hour for starting work, nor at seven, eight or nine, when I ate half my bread-and-butter and sipped the bottle. By ten o'clock I had made up my mind that nothing would happen and I'd better go home, when I heard voices in the field behind me and knew it was too late to retreat if I'd wanted to. I could see nothing ahead of me save the high, white wheat, but presently I heard more voices and two men with sickles came cutting their way past me, and soon I could see an arc of a ring of them slashing towards the centre. When they had advanced some fifty yards I had a better view to right and left, and a very strange sight I beheld. The villagers, mostly old people and children, were streaming through the gates. All were clad in black with wreaths of corn around their necks. They formed in line behind the reapers and moved slowly forward. They made no sound—I heard not a single child's cry—but stared in a rapt way straight before them. Slowly and steadily the reapers cut their way forward. By this time the sun had disappeared and a dense cloud-bank was spreading from the east. By four o'clock the reapers had met in the centre round the last small patch of wheat by the stone pillar. And there they stopped, laid down their sickles and took their stand in front of the people. For, perhaps, five minutes they all stayed motionless with bowed heads. And then they lifted their faces to the sky and began to chant. And a very odd song they sang, one which made me shiver beneath the yew branches. It was mainly in the minor mode, but at perfectly regular intervals it transposed into the major in a tremendous, but perfectly controlled, cry of exaltation and ecstasy. I have heard nothing like it since, though a "Spiritual," sung by four thousand god-drunk darkies in Georgia, faintly reminded me of it. But this was something far more formidable, far more primitive; in fact it seemed like the oldest song ever sung. The last, fierce, sustained shout of triumph made me tremble with some unnameable emotion, and I longed to be out there shouting with them. When it ended they all knelt down save one old, white-bearded man with a wreath of corn around his brow who, taking some of the corn in his right hand, raised it above his head and stared into

the sky. At once four men came forward and, with what seemed like large trowels, began digging with them. The people then rose to their feet somewhat obstructing my view. But soon the four men had finished their work and stood upright. Then the old man stepped out again and I could see he was holding what appeared to be a short iron bar. With this he pounded the earth for some moments. Then, picking up something, it looked as if he dropped it into a vessel, a dark, metal pot, I fancied, and paced to the stone-pillar, raised his right arm and poured the contents into the cup at the pillar's top. At that moment a terrific flash of lightning cut down from the clouds and enveloped the pillar in mauve and devilish flame; and there came such a piercing blast of thunder that I fell backwards into the ditch. When I'd struggled back, the rain was hurling itself down in such fury that it was bouncing high off the lanes of stiff soil. Dimly through it I could see that all the folk had prostrated themselves once more. But in two minutes the thunder-cloud had run with the squall and the sun was blazing from a clear sky. The four men then bound up the corn in that last patch and placed the sheaf in front of the pillar. After which the old man, leading the people, paced the length of the field, scattering something from the vessel in the manner of one sowing. And he led them out of the gate and that was the last I saw of them.

Now somehow I felt that if they knew I'd been watching them, it would have gone hard with me. So I determined to wait for dusk. I was stiff, cold and hungry, but I stuck it till the sun went flaming down and the loveliest after-glow I ever remember had faded. While I waited there a resolve had been forming in my mind. I had the most intense desire to know what the old man had dropped in the hollow on the pillar, and curiosity is in all animals the strongest foe of fear. Every moment that emotion grew more compelling, and when at last it was just not dark it became over-mastering. I stumbled across as fast as I could to the pillar, looking neither to right nor left, clambered up and thrust down my hand. I could feel small pieces of what might have been wood, and then it was as if my forefinger was caught and gripped. The most agonising pain shot up my arm and through my body. I fell to the ground and shook my hand wildly to free my finger

from that which held it. In the end it clattered down beside me and splintered on the stone. And then the blood streamed from my finger, which had been punctured to the bone. Somehow I struggled home leaving a trail of blood behind me.

The next day my arm was swollen up like a black bladder, the morning after it was amputated at the shoulder. The surgeon who operated on me came up to my father in the hospital and held something out to him. "I found this embedded in your son's finger," he said.

"What is it?" asked my father.

"A child's tooth," he replied. "I suppose he's been fighting someone, someone with a very dirty mouth!"

"And that's why," said old Porteous, "though I have none of my own, I have ever since shown the greatest respect to the gods of others."

↑ *Used Car* ↑

MR. ARTHUR CANNING, senior partner in the prosperous firm of solicitors which bore his name, was convinced—for the purposes of family debate—that he neither required, nor could afford another car. But his daughter Angela, aged nineteen, derided the former objection, while his wife Joan, pooh-poohed the second. A shabby five-year-old which couldn't do fifty with the wind behind outraged Angela's sense of social decency, and her mother knew all about how good business had been lately. So their sire and husband, like a good democrat, bowed to the will of the majority and took a walk one afternoon down Great Portland Street, where are rehearsed the fables of the car-changers and situated the seats of those who sell pups. No new car for him if he could get what he wanted second-hand.

Presently he halted outside a shop and began to examine with apparent interest an impressive saloon which was thrusting its comely bonnet to the edge of the pavement, and which announced by a card slung from its radiator cap that it was a Highway Straight Eight and a superb bargain at £350. This was in the halcyon

middle-twenties before the investing public had been initiated into the arcana of high finance through the agency of juries, coroners' and otherwise, and could still contemplate a box of matches without bursting into tears. In those days one could not buy a magnificent used car for five pounds down and a few small weekly installments; so the Highway *did* look like good value to Mr. Canning.

A trim and sprightly young Semite came out from the interior and wished Mr. Canning a good afternoon.

"I'm rather interested in this Highway," said the latter. "I frequently drove in one in America, but I can't remember ever having seen one over here."

The young man had been discreetly diagnosing Mr. Canning's shrewd and determined countenance, and had already decided that he was a foeman worthy of his steel. (Sometimes it was merely a pleasure to serve a customer!) But this person was clearly not one whom he could easily persuade that £350 was an irreducible minimum. "No, sir," he replied, "they're very fine cars, but their output is small and they're too expensive for the British market."

"How did this one come into your hands?"

"An American gentleman brought it over with him and disposed of it to us. It's a 1924 model and a *marvellous* bargain."

"Of course that remains to be seen," replied Mr. Canning with a sophisticated smile, and in the tone of one who had enjoyed, more or less, a higher automobile education. Whereupon he made a thorough superficial examination of the car, and then made up his mind.

"I shall want it vetted by my expert," he said, "and if his verdict is favourable, I will make you an offer."

"I'm afraid—" began the young man.

"Here's his address," continued Mr. Canning imperturbably. "Deliver it there tomorrow, and I'll let him know it's coming. Good afternoon."

In the course of the next few days Mrs. and Miss Canning inspected the Highway and pronounced a qualified approval of its appearance and appointments, and the expert gave its mechanical doings an A1 certificate, with the result that a cheque for £270 changed hands, and Tonks, Mr. Canning's chauffeur, drove it down to Grey Lodge, near Guildford, Surrey. The expert drew Mr. Canning's attention to a rather large dark stain

on the fawn corduroy behind the back seat, saying that he hoped none of his men were responsible. Mr. Canning reassured him by declaring that it had been there all the time. He had noticed it in the shop, he said.

Mr. Canning, on attaining a certain affluence, had built himself a very comfortable and aesthetically satisfying house in West Surrey. Like everything else about him and his, it suggested super-tax but not death duties. His social standing was well established in the neighbourhood, for Mrs. Canning, a handsome, well-upholstered matron, had a shrewd Scottish flair for entertainment, and a flexible faculty for making the right people feel at home; while Angela was lively and decorative and hit balls about with superior skill. On reaching home the next evening he found these ladies had already taken a trip in the car. Their verdict was favourable. Mrs. Canning like the springing and the back seat, though one of the windows rattled, while Angela was satisfied it would do seventy. "But," she added, "Jumbo loathes it."

"How do you mean?" asked her father.

"Oh, all the time we were out he was whining and fussing, and when we got home he dashed into the garden with his tail between his legs."

"Well, he'll have to get used to it," said Mr. Canning in a firm tone, which implied that he would stand no nonsense from that pampered and good-for-nothing liver spaniel. "Has Tonks got that stain off the cloth?"

"He's working at it this evening," replied Angela, "it only wants rubbing with petrol."

After dinner, while they were sitting round the fire in the drawing-room, Jumbo with his paws in the grate, Mr. Canning tried an experiment by giving his celebrated imitation of a motor-horn, which usually aroused anticipatory ecstasies in Jumbo. This time, however, he stared up uncertainly at his master and the motions of his tail suggested no more than mere politeness. "You see," said Angela, who possessed a deep insight into the animal, "he doesn't know whether you mean the old car or the new."

"Oh rot!" said her father, "he's sleepy." But he was half convinced. "Anyhow," he presently continued, "I'll take him with me to South Hill on Saturday. I've always said he was a perfect halfwit."

"He's a perfect *darling!*" said Mrs. Canning indignant-

ly. "Come here, my sweet." Jumbo lurched reluctantly over to her, his demeanour suggesting that, while affectionate appreciation of his charms was gratifying, when a fellow was sleeping peacefully with his paws in the grate it was a bit thick to keep on disturbing him. "We're going over to the Talbots tomorrow," Mrs. Canning went on, "but we'll be back in time to send the car to the station if it's raining." Her husband grunted drowsily and returned to his perusal of *Country Life*.

"Hullo, William," said Angela at three o'clock the next afternoon, "I see you haven't done anything about that stain."

The chauffeur appeared somewhat piqued at this insinuation, his manner implying that, considering he had taught Miss Angela to drive when her hair was still in a pig-tail, she ought to treat him with more deference. "I did my best, Miss," he replied. "I gave it a stiff rubbing with petrol, but it didn't seem to make no difference."

"I wonder what it is?" said Angela.

"I don't know, Miss, but last night it felt sticky to the touch."

"It's quite dry now," she declared. "Have another go at it this evening. Ah, here's mother."

The Talbots lived some twenty miles away. Miss Talbot had been at school with Angela. Bob Talbot had lately taken to blushing heavily when her name was mentioned, much to his chagrin and the delight of the local covey or giggle of flappers. The Talbots were nice people, well-connected, best-quality-county and rather hard up. The Cannings were nice people, only just emerging from the professional-urban chrysalis and on the financial upgrade; so the two families were at once contrasted and complementary. They enjoyed each other's company, and so it was after six when the Cannings started for home in the much admired Highway. After they had covered a short distance Angela said, "Rather a frowst, mother, shall I open a window?"

"Yes, do, dear. Have you noticed a queer smell, musty and sickly?"

"Yes, it's just frowst," replied Angela. "I'll open the one on your side, the wind's blowing hard on mine." She leaned and then said sharply, "Don't mother. Why did you do that?"

"Do what, dear?"

"Put your hand on my throat?"

"What *are* you talking about? I never did anything of the sort!"

Angela let the window down and then was silent. Why had Mama told that silly lie? She'd caught her throat quite hard. It had almost hurt. It wasn't a bit like her either to do such an idiotic thing or to pretend she hadn't. Oh well, everyone was a silly ass at times; she'd think about something else. She'd think about that old mutt, Bob; he really had been rather sweet. "Mrs. Robert Talbot," how did that sound? Not too bad, but she didn't want to be Mrs. anybody yet awhile. She mustn't let him get too fond of her till she was sure; but she mustn't choke him off too much. How this judicious *via media* was to be followed was by no means clear to her; but the feat of having settled the principle of the thing so satisfactorily soothed her and restored her temper, that she now regarded her parent's infelicitous pleasantry with tolerance. When she was getting out of the car she touched the back of it to steady herself. Before following her mother into the house she turned to Tonks, prinking her fingers together.

"That stain's damp," she said to him.

Tonk switched on the light and felt it for himself. "P'raps it is a bit, Miss," he said doubtfully. "I'll work on it again tonight."

In the hall Angela examined her fingers closely. Then she rubbed them with her handkerchief and scrutinized that. She wrinkled her nose as if puzzled and went up to her room.

The next morning, Saturday, was brilliantly fine, so Mr. Canning ordered the car to be round at nine-thirty. He was awaiting it with Jumbo by his side when it entered the drive from the garage turning. Jumbo gave it one searching glance and off at a hand-gallop for the garden. "Jumbo, Jumbo, come here!" cried his master imperiously. There was no response, so Mr. Canning, a gleam in his eye, set off in pursuit. There he was, the old devil, peeping round from behind the silver birch. A fruitless and temper-rousing chase ensued, but Jumbo, though obviously alarmed and despondent, was neither to be cajoled nor trapped, so Mr. Canning, after reviling him copiously from a distance and promising him prolonged corporal punishment in the near future, went

back to the car. He was ruffled, and the sight of that stain irritated him still more. "Can't you get it out, William?" he asked sharply.

The chauffeur had reasons of his own for disliking the subject and replied respectfully but firmly that he'd done his best but could make no impression on it.

"Humph," said Mr. Canning, "South Hill," and lit a cigar.

He defeated his ancient rival, Bob Pelham, both rounds, lunched well, perspired satisfactorily and had a large whisky and soda just before leaving for home. So he was feeling full of good cheer, but inclined for repose when he came out from the club-house to drive home. He noticed Pelham emerge from the locker-room, go to the car and look in at the window. A moment later he was by his side. "Hello, *there* you are," said Pelham. "Funny thing I could have sworn I saw you inside."

"Then don't have another drink," said Canning.

"Must be that," replied the other; "all the same I could have sworn it. Well, safe home and ten-thirty today week if it's a decent day. I'll have cured that blasted hook by then, so don't forget your note-case."

"If you prefer to slice, that's your business," replied Mr. Canning. "So long. I think I'll sit with you, William," he continued, "it smells stuffy inside there."

It was too dark to see more than was disclosed in the headlight's beam, so he soon closed his eyes. And then of a sudden it seemed to him that the speed of the car increased violently. He opened his eyes with the intention of speaking to Tonks and found he couldn't move, nor could he speak, and there was something pressing hard into his back. What was the matter? What had happened? Where were they? This wasn't the Guildford road! They were tearing madly across a plain, a region dim and hazy, and as they flashed past a cross-roads there was a sign-post of strange shape on which he thought he could just read the letters "Chica." And then he heard a vile whisper just behind him: "Let 'em have it." For a moment he knew the unique, agonised terror of certain and imminent death. There was a scream, a flame through his head, a crash—and Tonks was saying in a very startled voice, "What's the matter, sir? What's the matter? Have you cut yourself?" The car pulled up hard on its brakes. For a moment

Mr. Canning sat trembling and silent, then he said hoarsely, "What has happened?"

"You've put your elbow bang through the glass, sir. Let me look. It's all right, sir, you're not cut."

"What was that scream?" asked Mr. Canning vaguely examining the elbow of his coat.

"Scream, sir?"

"Yes, a woman's scream."

"I 'eard no scream, sir."

"It's all right," said Mr. Canning after a pause. "I went to sleep and must have had a dream. Drive on but go slowly. Get a new glass put in on Monday," he said as he got out of the car half an hour later; "I'll explain to the ladies."

"Very good, sir," replied Tonk, "are you feeling all right, sir?"

"Quite, quite."

Jumbo was peering round the banisters on the first landing, his eyes rolling with apprehension. "Hullo, Jumbo," said his master. "Good boy!" Jumbo's ears soared in sheer astonishment and relief, and he lumbered hurriedly down the stairs to consolidate this unexpected armistice. Mr. Canning twisted his ears and smacked his rump. "You deserve a good hiding you old rascal, but somehow I think I'll let you off this time."

At dinner he alluded with rather elaborate casualness to his encounter with the glass. "What a funny position to get your elbow into," commented his wife.

"Oh, I don't know," he replied; "I was asleep and it was jerked up, I suppose."

"Has Tonks got that stain out?" she asked.

"Oh, damn that stain!" said Angela brusquely. "I'm fed up with it, and anyhow it doesn't show much."

"Yes, I think we'll leave it for the present," agreed Mr. Canning. "The stuff, whatever it is, seems to have soaked right into the cloth." He felt he didn't want to hear another word about that car for the time being.

Later, as he lay in bed waiting for sleep, he was uneasily wondering if he was going to experience another beastly dream like that other one. Of course it had been a dream, though he'd never had one like it before. That scream! He could still hear it in a fading, echoed way, a cry of agony and terror. And that filthy whisper! He shivered a little. Oh, well, it was simply that he wasn't used to dreaming so vividly. That was all. He began to

play over again in his head his first round. First hole: good drive, fair brassie to the left of the green, nice pitch over the bunker and a couple of putts. One up. Second hole. Rather a sliced tee-shot, a slightly topped number three iron and then—and then it was eight o'clock on Sunday morning, and Jumbo was scratching on the door for entry and a biscuit, the just reward of a blameless, though often misjudged, dog.

During the next few days neither the ladies nor Mr. Canning had occasion to use the car after dark. Mrs. Canning developed a relaxed throat, and cheery, chatty Dr. Gables came to have a look at it. "Like to see the new car?" asked Angela as the doctor was taking his leave.

"All right," said the doctor. "If only we'd had a decent 'flu winter, I'd have invested in another one myself."

"Cheer up," replied Angela, "the mumps and measles season may be better. You go on. I'll get the garage key and catch you up." As she came out of the front door she saw the doctor disappearing round the turning to the garage. A moment later she was mildly surprised to hear him saying, "Hullo, good evening." When she caught him up he remarked in rather a puzzled tone, "What's the matter with Tonks?"

"Tonks?" said Angela. "He's home ages ago."

"No, he hasn't. I saw him standing at the garage door, but when I spoke to him he disappeared round the corner. Rude fellow!"

"I don't think it could have been he," said Angela rather shortly. She unlocked the door, switched on the light and they went in.

"Nice looking bus," remarked the doctor, "never seen a Highway before; looks like a very neat job." He lifted the bonnet flap and gazed knowingly at its digestive system. "Let's see the inside." He opened the door, peered in and then sniffed once or twice. He climbed in, sat down and put his head back. "Hullo," he exclaimed, "my head's sticking to something." He turned round and saw the stain. "It was sticking to that, what is it?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Angela, "it was there when we got the car. Seen enough?"

"Yes," replied the doctor getting out. "Nice bus. And now I must be off. I've got to assist in increasing the

population in an hour, in these times a thoroughly anti-social act, but a man must live. Ring me in the morning and tell me how your mother is. Make her keep on at that gargle. Good night, my dear."

As he strolled home he was thinking to himself, "That car has a very odd reek. When I smelt it I could almost believe I was back at the dressing station near Bois Grenier. Perhaps that's why I took a mild dislike to the car. I suppose that chap Tonks is O.K. Always thought he was a very steady fellow, yet it was queer the way he slipped off just now. Of course it *might* have been someone else. None of my business anyway."

Saturday morning turned out to be chilly and boisterous with a falling glass and an unmistakable smell of coming rain, so Mr. Pelham, who had drunk more port than he'd realised at a Masonic dinner the night before and greeted the dawn with loathing, quite agreed with Mr. Canning that it was no day for golf. The latter took a stroll round his domain after breakfast. Eventually he turned into the garage; Tonks was cleaning the car outside it. Mr. Canning greeted him and asked him how he was. "Quite well, thank you, sir," he replied. However, his looks and the tone of his voice somewhat belied him.

Hullo, thought Mr. Canning, something wrong. Tonks was a cockney and so was his master; they belonged by origin to much the same class. They therefore had an instinctive understanding of each other. Between Mr. Canning and rustics of all social strata there was a great gulf of misunderstanding fixed, but he knew his Londoner of the Tonks type like the back of his hand, and there was something on his mind.

"Now then, William," he said gently but firmly, "what's the matter?"

"Nothing, sir."

"You've been with me seven years and six months."

"Yes, sir," he replied, rather gratified at this accuracy.

"And how many lies have you told me in that time?"

"None deliberate, sir."

"Then don't begin now, William. What is it; money, a woman, some such trouble?"

"None of 'em, sir."

"I didn't expect so; then what is it?"

Tonks stared at the ground for a time and then he said, "It sounds like foolishness, sir."

"Leave me to judge of that."

"Well, sir, I get a bit scared."

"Scared, scared! In what way?" asked Mr. Canning, wondering vaguely why he'd somehow expected some such answer.

"That's what I'm not sure about," replied Tonks, his confidence released now the ice was broken. "That's why it sounds like foolishness, but it seemed to begin like just as soon as the 'ighway came in."

"Came into the garage, d'you mean?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, what happened?"

"At first it was just that I had a feeling of someone about, someone watching me. I looked around but couldn't exactly see no one. But somehow it seemed to me there was three of 'em. And it's been like that since, sir. It's always after dark. And I've felt they was coming along be'ind me and then standing and watching."

"Is that all?" asked Mr. Canning after a pause.

"Well, sir, one evening when I was putting her away —I'd just opened the door and was about to switch on the light—it seemed to me there was whispering going on just by me, and I thought someone touched me. And there've been other things, other goings on as it were, whenever I've been 'ere after dark. I never feels alone, sir, always expecting something. Now I 'ad an aunt, sir, who saw things and 'eard things that wasn't really there, and she went out of 'er mind later on, and I've got the wind up that I'm going the same way. I was thinking, p'raps I oughtn't to drive, if I was going that way."

"Nonsense!" replied Mr. Canning sharply. "Nothing of the kind. You're as sane as anyone else."

"I certainly feels it, sir, but then why do I think I sees and 'ears and feels things?"

"It's nothing, nothing! Many people have that sort of experience."

"Do they really, sir?"

"Yes! Yes! Think no more about it."

"All right, I'll try, sir."

For the next hour Mr. Canning walked round and round the garden. An ugly, insinuating notion was knocking for admittance to his mind. Something at which he'd always scoffed; something the possibility of

which he'd always eagerly derided. For a moment the echo of a scream rang in his head, and the memory of a look on Angela's face came back to him. Of course it was all ridiculous. Silly fancies! He'd shake his mind of them. It was a depressing day and he'd done a very hard week's work. It was all tommy-rot! He began to whistle a cheerful little tune, and went indoors for a glass of the most excellent new sherry.

On Thursday, Angela drove over to a neighbour's house to play tennis on their hard court. When she got home again, Walker, the butler, who let her in noticed that she was looking tired and upset. She told him rather brusquely to get her some brandy. She swallowed it at a gulp and her colour began to return. During dinner she was silent and preoccupied. Her father noticed it and suggested she might have caught her mother's cold. She answered irritably that she was perfectly all right; but he observed also that she drank more wine than was her wont and that her nerves had got somewhat the better of her. After dinner she pretended to read, but went early to bed.

By Monday morning Mrs. Canning's throat was better, but Dr. Gables refused to allow her out of doors. She was a busy, active person who resented any kind of restraint. What made it worse was that Angela had gone up to Town to shop. She felt lonely and bored. Household chores occupied the morning more or less. After lunch she slept a little, did her nails, and tried to concentrate on a novel which its publishers adroitly insinuated had almost been banned. But she found that its author, a young woman of twenty, had really very little to teach a wife and mother of forty-nine. Sex, she thought with a yawn, was nearly always just the same, however much one stupidly hoped it was going to be different. After tea she felt something had got to be done. Her temper was going; Angela oughtn't to have left her; Jumbo's snores got on her nerves; she wanted to scream. Dr. Gables was just an old fusser. Suddenly she made up her mind, rang the bell and told Martha to tell William she wanted the car round at once. She soothed her conscience by wrapping herself up in many garments and went downstairs.

"Just drive around for an hour or so," she told Tonks, "and keep off the main roads."

For a time she gave herself up to the delight of being

on the move again and thinking how lovely the county of Surrey looked in the last rays of the sinking sun. Then she began considering this and that rather lazily. It was very warm in the car. Her thoughts became even less coherent and presently her head nodded. Sometime later she woke up with a start under the vague impression that someone had touched her. It was quite dark, she noticed. Weren't they going very fast? What was the matter with her? She opened and closed her eyes very quickly several times. Then very stealthily she tried to move her elbows. She must keep quite calm and think. She had gone out for a drive with William and must have gone to sleep. Why was William wearing that funny cap? And who was that on the seat beside him? And why couldn't she move her elbows; it was just as if they were gripped by two hands. What had happened? Had she gone mad? Suddenly she lunged forward convulsively and it seemed to her that she was wrenched back and a hand went fiercely to her throat. She twisted, writhed and tried to scream. There were flashes of flame before her bursting eyes, and as her head was forced agonisingly back, she felt life choked from her.

She was lying on a grass bank beside the road. Tonks was bending over her and trying to force something in a glass between her lips. Someone else was supporting her head. "Is she subject to fits?" asked the latter.

"No, sir. I don't think this is a fit. She's coming to."

Mrs. Canning's eyes opened and her hands went to her throat. "Where are they? Who's that?" she screamed.

"It's all right, madam," said Tonks gently, "you fainted." Her head fell back again and her eyes closed.

"We'd better take her into the house," said the stranger.

"It's very good of you, sir," said Tonks, "but I'd rather get her home."

"As you say," replied the other. The two men carried her into the car.

"Would you mind driving, sir," said Tonks. "I think I'd better be inside with her. It's the first turning on the left about two miles along."

"She's better," said Dr. Gables, two hours later, "but she'd had a very severe shock of some kind. She seems to imagine she was attacked in the car—not quite herself mentally yet. I've given her a strong seda-

tive and the nurse knows what to do. I'll be along first thing in the morning."

"Father," said Angela, when he'd gone, "there's something vile about that car!" She was very white and still trembling. "I know it! I know it! I didn't say anything about it at the time, but on Thursday when I was driving home, it got dark just before we entered the drive and I suddenly felt someone beside me. It was only for a moment—till I saw the lights of the house—but there *was* someone there."

Mr. Canning stared past her for a time before replying. Then he said, "It shall not be used again."

The next day he made some inquiries, first at the shop in Great Portland Street and then at the American Express Company, with the result that he sent the following letter to an address in Chicago.

"Dear Sir,

"I understand that you were the previous owner of a Highway car which I recently purchased. It is not easy to put into words what I have to say, but as the result of certain experiences which I and members of my household have had with this car I have decided to dispose of it in some way. At the same time I feel a certain strong reluctance against allowing others to suffer the same experiences, which might happen if I sold it. All this may be incomprehensible to you; if so, please do not trouble to reply. If, however, you can throw any light on the matter it might be very useful as a guide to me.

"Yours faithfully,

"A. T. Canning."

Three weeks later he received the following reply:

"—Michigan Avenue,
Chicago, Ill.

"Dear Mr. Canning,

"In one way I was very glad to get your letter; in another it made me feel terribly bad. I knew when I did it, and I've known ever since, that I'd no business to turn in that Highway. It was just a case of feeling one way and acting another. Now I can't figure out just what's wrong with that car, but I *do* know I wouldn't take another night

ride in it for a thousand bucks. That's why I was dead wrong to turn it in and I've no alibi. Hehere's its record. Now, there was a well-known moll in this city, named Blonde Beulah Kratz, who was in with a bunch of tough gangsters—she covered the blackmail and vice angle. She had a temporary boy-friend, a thirty-minute egg, named Snow-Bird Sordone. And they figured it that they ought to have collected more of the loot from some job. So they tried to double-cross the rest of the gang. Well, they were taken for a trip in the country one night, and their bodies were found in that Highway next day—it ran out of gas, I guess. The blonde was knifed and strangled—that gang took no chances—and the Snow-Bird had some big slugs through his back. Well, our District-Attorney, a friend of mine, took over the car, and then pretty soon didn't feel so crazy about it and passed it on to me just when I was coming to Europe, so I took it with me. Well, after I'd had a few rides in it I turned it in quick, just like that, and I guess you know why.

"Now, Mr. Canning, what I want you to do is this. First of all forgive me for letting you in for an unpleasant experience. And then, just fill in the enclosed check for the amount you paid for the Highway. Then I want you to take that automobile and tip it into the ocean, or stall it on a level crossing, or match it with Carnera—anyway do something to it so that no one will ride in it again and get so scared the way I did, and I guess you did. I forgot to say the birds who bumped the blonde and the Snow-Bird got the electric chair here.

"If I get to Europe again I'll look you up, if I may. Now, please, Mr. Canning, fill in that check right away, and then I'll know you've forgiven me and I'll feel better.

"Yours truly,

"George A. Camshot."

Mr. Canning, with a clear conscience, subsequently carried out all these instructions.

Death of a Poacher

(I have put this narrative in the first person as it was told to me by "Napier Tyrol," a name which disguises

the identity of someone of high distinction and repute. He is perfectly aware that it will be utterly disbelieved by those who know nothing of the dark secrets of Africa. But he is also convinced that there are a hundred or two white men who would not for a moment doubt its absolute authenticity.

—H. R. W.)

"Now do come, Nap. I'm certain you'll find it worth your while," said Marshall Raikes.

"But are you sure I'll be welcome?" I replied.

"Perfectly certain. He said most emphatically that he wanted me to bring you."

"But why?"

"I must tell you something about him. He's about forty-five and I've known him most of my life. I'm very fond of him and admire him greatly. He's always had pots of money and a passion for travel. He's a zoölogist of great renown. Till his last African trip he was a fearless, happy-natured, dominating creature, with an abnormally active mind in an abnormally active body.

"When he came back six months ago I noticed a very great change in him. Physically he had degenerated; he was hollow-eyed, almost emaciated, muscularly listless. Psychically, the change was even greater. All his buoyancy had gone. Mentally he was almost as sharp as ever, but his nerves were broken. He was jumpy, staccato, and uncertain in his movements, and so on. He'd had fever pretty badly and I put it down to that at first. But I expected slow but sure recuperation, both of body and nerves. It hasn't taken place. I'm frightfully worried about him."

"I suppose he's had a blood test recently?" I asked.

"I don't know," replied Raikes, "but he said he got no attacks nowadays."

"He realizes his condition?" I asked.

"I'm sure he does, though he's curiously reticent about it."

"To what does he attribute it? A person of his intelligence can be under no illusions about himself."

"That's just it," said Raikes emphatically, "he must realize it. But he's almost morosely secretive about it. It is as if he wanted to talk about it, yet some obscure censor forbids it. That is why I want you to see him. You're an expert in psychopathy and it's possible you

can help him. I'm certain you'll find his case interesting."

Why has he asked us down? It is just an ordinary weekend visit?"

"No, I don't think so. His voice on the telephone revealed a sort of urgent anxiety, as if he implored me to come and come quickly."

"Has he talked about his last trip much?"

"No, he seems to flinch from the subject. It's very odd, because always before he's discussed his journeys with detailed enthusiasm."

"Well, I'll come," I said. "And, of course, I'll do what I can for him, but I'm afraid it will be precious little. If he's completely recovered from fever, I can only attribute this degeneration to a shock of some kind. And if he won't talk about it, what can one do? I suppose he sees a doctor?"

"No, he refuses to."

"It's often the way in such cases, a sort of desperate obstinacy. But where do I come in? He won't want me probing into him."

"You've got enough tact to prevent it looking like a probe, and you're just the sort of person he might make a confidant of. Anyhow, you ought to see 'Fannings.' It is a perfect specimen of the small-great Tudor house and the grounds are superb."

"When do you want to start?" I asked.

"I'll bring the car along to your flat at about five tomorrow; you can manage that?"

"Yes," I replied, "but I must be back by lunch time on Tuesday."

"So you shall be. Four days will be more than long enough for you to make up your mind about him."

"What's the address and phone number?"

"C/o Sir Willoughby Mantlet, Bart., Fannings, Near Silcombe, Sussex. Telephone: Silcombe 4."

I made a note of this and told Raikes I must be off.

"Tomorrow at five, then," he said.

This conversation took place on November the fifteenth some years ago in the Pessimists' Club. Raikes was one of my best and oldest friends—not always the same thing. He is an astute and reputable collector of company directorships, and none of those concerned with these enterprises had ever had reason to regret his

presence on their boards. For he has a zestful flair for organization and a remarkable eye for a trading situation. He's dark, hefty and possessed of a kind heart; and he has many interests outside the making of money.

If you want to know what I'm like, here is a fairly impartial portrait: Forty-eight, five feet seven, very dark, aquiline, pretty strong and wiry for my vast age. Once upon a time I was a tolerably competent nerve specialist, but I realized I made my money chiefly out of mumbo-jumbo, and I developed Writer's Itch, an incurable complaint. To make money out of pen and ink is twenty per cent talent, eighty per cent luck—I had the luck. Five plays, eighteen thousand pounds. Not bad. The sixth will be infinitely the best. Enough about me.

When Raikes came to fetch me at five o'clock on Friday I had done a good day's work and was feeling pleased with myself. Seven hundred words of pretty adequate dialogue, with several actor-proof laughs and sufficient plot development. Raikes drove a car with virtuosity; very fast but perfectly reassuringly. The big Bentley, with an effortless nonchalance and dignity, flicked the darkening miles behind it, and in eighty minutes was feeling its way up the serpentine drive from the main road to "Fannings."

And there on the doorstep was our host to greet us.

I am, perhaps, inclined to over-estimate the validity of first impressions; but a busy practitioner has to put reliance in them. A faulty diagnosis may result in a certain number of cases, but a doctor's job is always a race against time.

The impression made by Sir Willoughby was at once precise and enigmatic. Precisely, he was a very sick man, but the conditions, precedent and prevailing of his *malaise,* completely defied immediate diagnosis.

He was a medium height, very symmetrically made, with the body of an athlete. His face was of the aquiline type, with a high, broad forehead, and finely modelled chin, narrow but resolute. But his eyes betrayed away all these indications of strength and well-being. One of his troubles was pathetically palpable: he stayed awake at night instead of sleeping. Those eyes had in them that forcedness, that melancholy glare, which comes from the overwhelming but ever-frustated desire for unconsciousness. The muscles of those eyes were working on a dreadful overtime. His manners were

exquisite, his poise perfection, but I could almost feel that hot, aching band of pressure which coiled around his head and burnt behind those eyes. He exchanged greetings affectionately with Raikes, cordially with me—he regarded me searchingly with those aching eyes, and then we went to our rooms to dress for dinner. I was glad to be tying a tie between oak panelling again, whose light stretching was the only sound to break the silence.

When I got downstairs I found Raikes and my host in the Great Hall, a lovely room with an immense fireplace and a gallery surrounding it. The portraits on the walls, though for the most part merely the crude daubs of time past, ancient worthies, a bishop, a judge, and several with the unchanging and risible masks of fox-hunters, showed all of them a varying but unmistakable likeness to Sir Willoughby; obviously there was a dominating strain in the breed.

We exchanged some conventionalities, drank a glass of sherry and went in to dine. I must resist the temptation to describe "Fannings," but the diningroom was an even finer example of its period than that of "Chequers." Nor will I expatiate on that most delicate repast; more to the point was it that Sir Willoughby had no appetite for it. He did not attempt to lash it back with alcohol; he accepted it, as I felt he would accept all such things, as a fact to be faced.

After some vague, disjointed talk he turned to me with a half-smile and said: "It is no good disguising from you, Mr. Tyrol, that I am poor company and that there is a cause for it. I imagine Marshall has prepared you for it?"

"I told him," said Raikes quietly, "that you had changed, and that I was convinced there was some very definite reason why. I told him that I thought he might be able to help you, for he is in some ways an intuitive, subtle and reassuring bloke. In other ways, of course, he is intolerable."

For a few moments Sir Willoughby regarded me thoughtfully, looking in upon himself, as it were, at the same time. Then he seemed to make up his mind and began to speak in an unhurried but nervous way.

"I made my last trip to Africa with a definite purpose in view, one that will probably seem to you utterly fantastic. Briefly I have always been fascinated by what I may call with ridiculous simplicity the 'Vampire Le-

gend.' The myth, the legend that certain persons were capable of turniing themselves into beasts. That legend has an immense and versatile history. Its distribution is almost world-wide. The Were-Wolf of southeastern Europe is still firmly believed in to this day. The Tiger-Men of India and Burma, the Elephant-Men of Central Africa, the Voodoo cult in Haiti—there are many other examples. Suffice it to say that at this moment there are millions of human beings—and not all illiterate savages—who are convinced beyond all argument that certain specially endowed individuals—if you will accept the term—are capable of taking upon themselves the likeness of animals."

"Let me emphatically state," I said, "that what you have referred to will never seem ridiculous to me. My knowledge of such phenomena is far inferior to yours, of course, but I have read and examined the evidence for them and have been left with a profound conviction that they defy what is called rational explanation."

Sir Willoughby took out his handkerchief and brushed it across his forehead.

"That makes it," he said, "far easier for me to tell you what happpened to me. It is an odd thing. There is more evidence—using that word coldly, precisely and unemotionally—for the existence of a Were-Wolf, than that the Buddha ever preached, that a myth labelled 'Shakespeare' ever wrote a play, or that Christ ever rose from the dead. That is by the way, but it is a perfect example of the vagaries and irresponsibility of human credulity." A certain strength, lacking before, came into his voice as he uttered this obvious, but fundamental generalization: an echo, as it were, of the man who once had been.

"I had never been," he continued, "in the Mount Elgon district before. I had skirted it, but that was all. This time I settled down there. The mountain has a dominating excellence of some fourteen thousand feet. I made my residence in a hut attached to the Elgon Rest House, a somewhat grandiose description for a quite primitive bungalow, but the Elgon Rest House is a famous African hostelry.

"I arrived there just at the beginning of the wet season, early in October. That region is the adopted home of the Masai, a tribe of Nilotic origin. They are of superb physique, the highest courage, and one deep

dread, that of the hyena. Dread is not the precise word. Nor would it be quite accurate to say they regard the hyena as a sacred animal. The fact is that the vocabulary of the West does not contain a word to describe the feeling a Masai has for this beast. It is an indefinable emotional complex.

"A word or two about that strange and horrid creature." Sir Willoughby paused again; raised his glass to his lips and jerked it down again. He stared up at the ceiling and began to speak again.

"The hyena's origin lies far, far down in the evolutionary scale; he is a very ancient creature, actually, though such details are no part of what I have to say, a developed mongoose. In all places where he is known he is regarded with strong emotion, usually detestation and fear. He deserves to be. His appearance is, as you know, repulsive to the *n*th degree. His evil, skulking gait, his two sinister cries, a horrid hoot, and such a laugh as seems the very making audible of the spirit of evil itself, his faculty for bestial mimicry, his mythical hermaphroditism; all these combine to make this scavenger uniquely loathsome.

"How do the Masai regard him? Like the fundamental suspicions of most savage tribes in a confused and variable way. For example, the Masai live in clay huts and, when a member of the tribe dies, a hole is made in the hut and the corpse placed therein, then a hyena comes and bears it away. The transference of idea is, of course, obvious; a myriad superstitions have such an origin. But there is more to it than this, as I have too much reason to know." He brushed his hand across his head again.

"Such a *rapproachement* is not always post-mortem.

"I had not been long in this region before I had reason to believe it housed a secret. Briefly, there was a conviction amounting to certainty that some strange animal had there its habitat.

"This belief was held by the white population, though they were disinclined to discuss the matter with strangers. The Masai were elusive and enigmatic about it, as only savages can be.

"Now at that time there was a serious plague of zebras in the region." Here Sir Willoughby's expression lightened to an uncertain smile, which somehow revealed

to me what manner of man he must have been before his trouble took him.

"No doubt," he said, "a plague of zebras sounds supremely ridiculous to you. I remember a sceptical Scotsman when informed of this phenomenon, staring hard at his informant and remarking: 'I canna believe you. Locusts, yes, zebras, no.' Yet they are most destructive creatures, and very literally a plague at times. I disliked shooting them, but I came to the conclusion that the majority must suffer. So I hunted them with Masai guides.

"Now I occasionally found dead zebras with marks upon them for which I could not account. I need not go into details, suffice it to say that the injuries and lacerations they had received were irreconcilable with the lethal armament of any of their natural foes. I was puzzled to observe that my trackers gave these cadavers a wide berth, and were palpably ill at ease in their neighbourhood. No amount of questioning ever produced the slightest explanation.

"One evening, when returning from a hunt, we reached a slightly swampy place, and printed upon it were the footmarks of some animal. I had never seen anything resembling them before. The pads were enormous and four-toed. I examined them closely and then, looking up, found I was alone. My four trackers had disappeared, nor did I see them when I reached the hotel, though all through the night the Masai howled and made tumult in their compound.

"Now, as I have said, the Masai are brave and loyal men. They are not in the habit of deserting a white man in the bush, but will stand by him to the death. Yet these had just deserted me and slunk home. The only possible cause was that they had seen those tracks, just some odd markings in a swampy spot. I was greatly puzzled and resolved those markings required investigation. That sounds reasonable enough, but in many cases in Africa such investigation and a blank wall are synonymous.

"The owner of the hotel was a woman who had succeeded to it on the death of her husband. She was English and possessed remarkable qualities. For one thing she knew her Africa with an imaginative intimacy hardly ever found in women. I often talked to her and usually learnt something. So a day or two after I alluded to

those tracks rather obliquely. She looked at me sharply and shrugged her shoulders.

" 'So that was why there was such a racket in the compound; I half suspected it.'

" 'Well, tell me,' I said.

" 'You're almost as capable of telling me,' she replied. 'Perhaps more, for you've seen that spoor; I haven't. I've known two people who said they'd seen what made that spoor. They talked about it very little; nobody likes to be considered a liar or a drunk.'

" 'Do you believe they were lying or drunk?' I asked.

" 'If I did,' she replied, 'I should have to be rude to *you*.'

" 'Are you sure,' I asked, 'that what I saw, those marks, were the cause of that row in the compound?'

" 'I'll tell you all I know, I've been out here fifteen years, and five times I've been asked just the questions you're asking me. Each time by someone who saw such marks, lost his trackers and wondered why. Each time the Masai have celebrated the fact in their compound. Remember this is Africa, not England, and perhaps we're all a little mad out here—inclined to be rather imaginative. If I were you I wouldn't think any more about those marks. I know you're scientifically minded, and when your curiosity is aroused you feel compelled to investigate. But in this case I advise you very strongly not to; it can't do you good and might do you harm. I'm sorry to be so vague, but I've got this country more in my blood than you have, and I know by instinct rather than by reason that I'm right.'

"It would have been better for me if I'd taken her advice, but it was almost inevitable that I should have disregarded it. To an ardent zoölogist the possibility of being the first to discover an animal unknown to science was irresistible. Having seen those prints I should have felt a traitor to that science if I had made no attempt to solve so fascinating a mystery. In any case I never hesitated. I realized I could get no help from the Masai; I must work alone.

"For several weeks I spent every day in the bush quite fruitlessly. Then one evening, just as it was growing dusk,"—here Sir William paused once again and brushed the sweat from his forehead—"I felt a sharp sense of some presence near me. I was at the edge of a small clearing. I stayed motionless and waited. Sud-

denly something slunk out from the scrub into the clearing. It was a hyena, but it was as large as a full-grown tiger, and it was infinitely loathsome and sinister. For a moment I stared at it horrified, and then I raised my rifle and fired both barrels. This is what then seemed to me to happen. I cannot expect you to believe me. The great beast rolled over, writhing and snarling, and then out from its body came a huge negro and the beast seemed to roll away around his feet. The negro raised his arms high above his head in an attitude of poised menace, his fingers were curved down, and his eyes blazed with agony and hate. He was the personification of malevolence. He gave one horrible, animal scream—and I found myself alone. Somehow I staggered home; I have no recollection of that journey, and Mrs. Teller was awaiting me. She was distraught but keyed up to action.

" 'You must go at once,' she said. 'The Masai know, and they will kill you if they find you. I've got the car ready, and will drive you to railhead. But you must go *this minute*.' Her voice revealed just controlled hysteria.

"I could hear the Masai shouting as we went."

Sir Willoughby paused again. The expression on his face was drawn and hunted. His eyes darted round the room, and then he seemed to be listening. He pulled himself together and began to speak again.

"And now I must tell you something else which will seem incredible to you. Ever since that day I have known an almost incessant and ghastly obsession, hallucination—what you will. It began with a peculiarly vivid picture seen by my inner eye when I turned out the light on going to bed. Always a gigantic hyena's mask came insinuatingly in; stared into my eyes and grew and grew. I cannot describe the sensation more precisely, but it moved—that was the horrible part of it, it moved. That happens still, and if I get to sleep, I have always the same dream. I seem to be merged in the vile brute. I have felt my teeth in carrion. At first it was only a night-time hallucination, but after a time the day was haunted, too. For a while it was just at the margin of vision there was something I could not quite see clearly, and that moved, too. I knew it was striped and fiery-eyed. Then it became more distinct, and it was as if it followed me from room to room,

and when I sat down it crouched on its haunches, glaring up at me. So it has gone on. I have tried the obvious, futile remedies, sedatives, change of scene, and so on, but it is always the same thing; and every night that vile and hellish mask staring into mine, and then that merging. . . . " He shuddered. "It is as if I were gazing through its eyes. Well, that is what has happened to me. It is killing me. I have lost hope. I am damned." He dropped his head into his hands. It made my scalp tingle to see him.

It was not easy to say anything. It was too strange a tale. He had gone far down the road to hell. I had known somewhat similar cases, and never had those who started on such a journey retraced their steps. But I *had* to say something.

"Sir William," I said, "I will help you if I can. You have suffered a great psychic shock. As to its origin—well, against all my natural scepticism, I believe such things can be. They belong to some as yet totally unexplained complex of phenomena. When white men experience such phenomena they become profoundly spiritually disturbed. I use that weak word deliberately, for I do not believe the effect is permanent; it is no more than a temporary psychic unsettlement. I believe the equilibrium can be re-established."

"How?" asked Sir Willoughby, looking at me with haggard eyes.

It was a damned awkward question.

"Partly by time," I replied, "and partly by counteracting agents. For example: I think you should be alone as little as possible. Then your time should be fully and versatilely occupied. I don't believe drugs are much use in such a case. Give me a little time to think; and, if you feel inclined, put yourself in my hands. Feel that we are fighting for you and with every hope of victory."

It was feeble, unconvincing stuff, and I knew it.

"Of course I will," he said listlessly, "and I am deeply grateful to you."

Soon after we went up to bed.

"Well, what do you think of him?" asked Raikes upstairs in my room.

"That he's far gone," I replied, "but we may be able to do something."

At that moment the sound of a shot came in a muffled way through the window.

Raikes looked up, listening.

"Poachers," he said, "he has no keepers and this is a happy hunting ground for them. We *must* do something for him, Napier. It's ghastly to see him like this. Do you believe his tale? I don't mean do you think he's lying; but can it be some horrible fantasy?"

"I believe," I replied, "that he experienced exactly what he says he experienced, but we are plunged into dark and ghostly depths."

We said good-night.

I couldn't get to sleep. Something about that tale I'd heard stirred some strange, atavistic sense in me. At last I dropped off, only to be jerked back to full consciousness, the echo of a sound in my ears. The echo of a long-drawn-out and snarling laugh.

I slept no more that night.

At breakfast we were told that Sir Willoughby had had a bad night, and would not be down till luncheon. He suggested we might take a stroll round the estate with a gun. I don't shoot, but Raikes took a sixteen-bore from the gun-room, shoved a dozen cartridges in his pocket, and we set off.

It was a very quiet, fine day with a thin November mist. Fannings is on the edge of the North Downs in a lovely stretch of rolling country. At one place the ground, heavily wooded, fell almost sheer down to a dog-leg valley with a lively dark stream running through; a charming and almost impressive little scenic piece. The last few lifeless leaves looked like huge flies caught in titanic spiders' webs as they stirred lightly on their twigs.

"Did you hear a row in the night?" asked Raikes as we scrambled jerkily down.

"I thought I did," I replied, "but I had dozed off, and only caught its echo."

"I was awake," said Raikes. "Very odd sound. They must breed big owls round here."

"Yes, I vaguely supposed it was an owl."

"Must have been," said Raikes shortly.

We had almost reached the bottom of the slope when he stopped and bent down.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"I was wondering what made those."

"Those" were some fairly deep, irregular indentations in the carpet of leaves. The spot was a little swampy.

The problem seemed to me of little interest. At that moment a rabbit dashed from a small bush and Raikes shot it. I picked it up and we walked on.

"I think we ought to make a great effort to get Willoughby away from here," said Raikes. "With all its charm, I've always found "Fannings" a shade depressing. The last place I'd choose if I were in his spiritual state. Well, that's an exaggeration, but it's not a place to exalt one's joy in life."

"I agree with you," I replied. "I feel that also. It is somehow sombre, irresponsive, as it were."

"Yes. Well, we'll see what we can do."

Raikes shot a snipe we flushed from a patch of reeds near the river, and then we went back to the house. Sir Willoughby was awaiting us in the smoking-room. His eyes were falsely bright from lack of sleep. At lunch we broached the subject of his leaving "Fannings" for a while. He was indefinite; said he'd tried London and it had done him no good. Raikes suggested a trip to the West Indies. He'd go with him, he said. He got a half-promise, but it seemed to me that Sir Willoughby had reached a state of defeatism where his recovery was concerned. I felt he was a case for a nursing-home, and very careful treatment. But nursing-homes drive some men mad. Better try the voyage first. I also felt something very hard to put into words. It was as if he and "Fannings" were occultly linked together. No, I can't put it into words.

He took a short walk with us in the afternoon. His behaviour was curious and disconcerting. He was obviously making a desperate effort to maintain his self-control, but, to his great distress and mortification, failing. He would look around him with sudden, uncontrollable glances. There was nothing to see save quiet, country things in the dying light of a dying day. Yet all the time his eyes were slippery and searching. We talked of commonplace things in a forced, uneasy way.

It was impossible to concentrate; somehow his psychic *malaise* communicated itself to me. It may sound fantastically exaggerated, but I felt in the presence of some thing of darkness. I would have done anything to help him, but what was almost incipient panic urged me to be away.

When we were back in the house, his eyes flickered

and drooped and he fell asleep, but it was not that profound sleep which sufferers from insomnia sometimes gain; and which, indeed, preserves their sanity. That sleep which is very close to death. He seemed in a sense *alert*. As I watched him I received a strange and disturbing impression. The expression on his face was transformed and degraded, to become almost bestial, as though he were dreaming vile things. I had seen something like it before several times in cases of developing insanity in the intellectual area; such as I judged this to be. But never such a change as that.

Raikes and I left him sleeping and went to the smoking-room.

"You think it's hopeless, don't you?" he said.

"I'm afraid I do," I replied.

"Is it possible he picked up some ghastly bug in Africa?"

"It's possible. It might be glandular deterioration."

"But then what becomes of that strange tale of his? Do you notice an odd smell about this house, sort of musky?"

I had, subconsciously, and said so.

"It rather gets my tummy," said Raikes. "I can smell it now," he continued, pursing up his nose. "Dirty kind of stink."

At dinner Sir Willoughby seemed the better for his sleep and his mood had changed. Now he seemed almost feverishly anxious to get away. Of course, such changes are characteristic of an unstable mental equilibrium. Naturally we did all we could to reinforce this favourable development; and we got him to promise to come up with us next day and fix up all the arrangements. But after dinner the reaction set in. He became highly restless and preoccupied. His eyes began to flicker round the great hall. At length he got up abruptly, wished us good-night and went out.

Raikes and I talked for a while over a drink and then we went to bed. The night was very still and a half-moon was climbing. This time I got to sleep almost at once. Suddenly I found myself sitting up in bed, my hair rising, a high, piercing scream, ringing in my ears. It came again and then again. A moment later Raikes dashed in.

"What the hell's that?" he cried.

"God knows!" I said.

"Come on," he said.

I tumbled on some clothes and rushed downstairs; Raikes was already in the hall, a gun in his hand. We dashed out into the night.

"It came from the deep gully," he said.

But for the moon it would have been awkward going. As it was, taking that descent in semi-darkness was no joke. When we reached the bottom we halted and looked around us. I think we both saw it at the same moment. It was huge and it was crouching over something stretched out beneath it on the margin of the stream. It looked up and its eyes were slanted, orange and utterly evil.

Raikes gave a sharp cry, raised the gun and fired both barrels, the almost superimposed echoes ringing through the gorge.

There came a high snarl of agony. The beast writhed and twisted on the ground. Suddenly a figure seemed to rise from it. The face was horribly distorted; arms flung high. And then there was nothing but a great silence and a figure stretched out on the grass. I bent over it. It had been a man. Now it was a thing from whose throat the blood was pouring. A gun and a pheasant were by its side.

"Is he dead?" said Raikes, his voice shaking.

"He is," I said.

We dashed, stumbling and panting, back to the house. As we reached the door the butler came out to meet us.

"Sir, sir," he cried, "Sir Willoughby!"

"Well?" said Raikes, gripping his arms.

"He's dead, sir! I heard him scream, and when I reached him he was rolling on the floor, sir. And then he died."

Printed in U.S.A.

DWELLERS ON THE THRESHOLD

"That there are many things in Heaven and on Earth for which we have no explanation, and for which, in all probability, we shall never have an explanation is certainly part of my philosophy; and I have never written a tale in which are recorded happenings that I do not believe could occur."

Thus writes H. Russell Wakefield in his Introduction to this book: and his thesis is fully borne out by the effect of stories in the realm of the spectral which are all the more nerve-chilling because they have their roots in recognizable reality.

THE CLOCK STRIKES 12

WAKEFIELD

35¢

BB

SCAN COURTSEY OF EXCITER