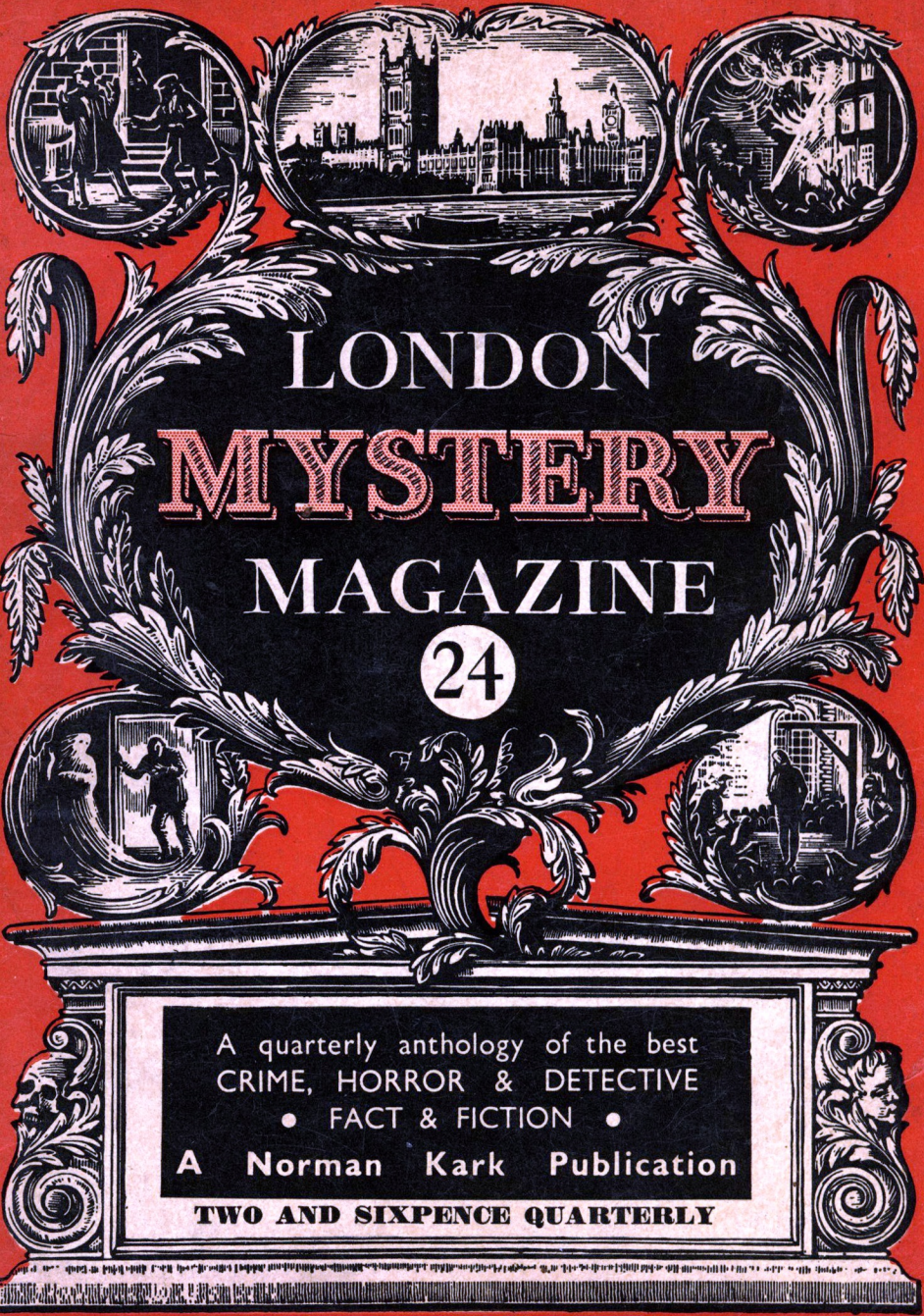

LONDON MYSTERY MAGAZINE

24

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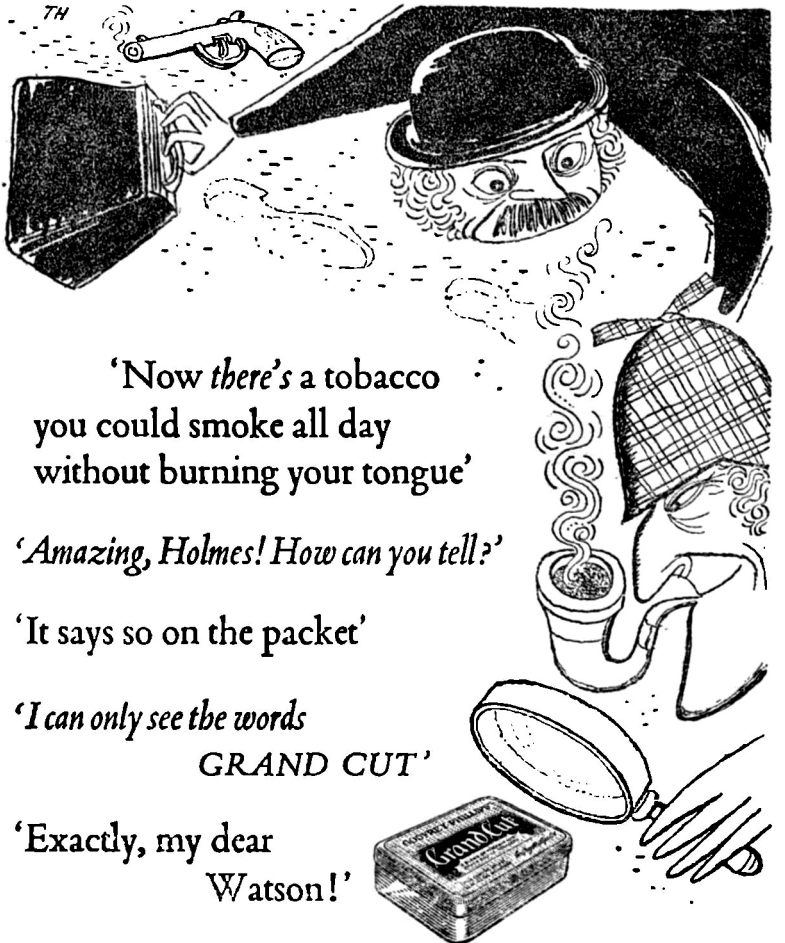

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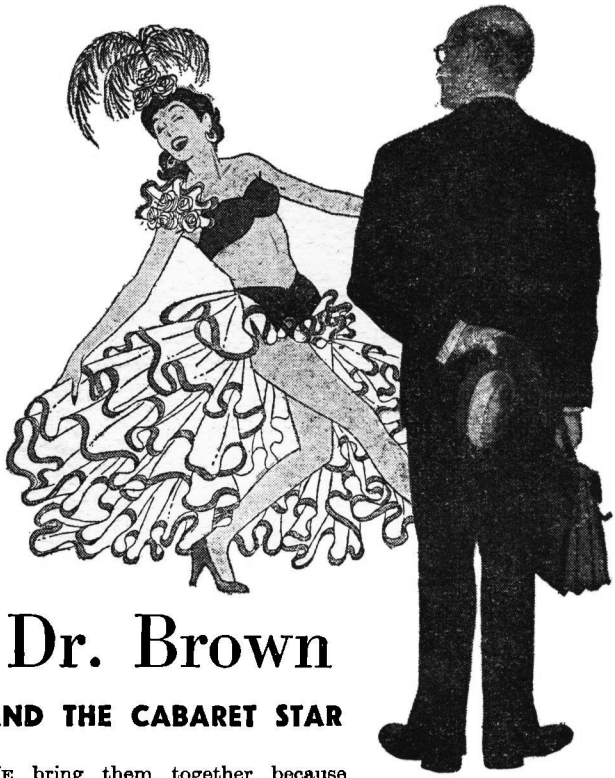

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(P.193B)

THE LONDON MYSTERY MAGAZINE

In this issue we are offering you something in the nature of an *entente d'horreur*. All these exercises in the macabre, save one, have either British or French backgrounds. The exception is a gruesome sea story of black magic and dark superstition, and even this is not wholly outside the pale, if one takes the cynical view of Douglas William Jerrold who believed "the best thing between France and England was the sea."

For the rest, both national backgrounds are but the settings for various expositions on the theme of betrayal. In France we range from calculated personal treachery in "The Oubliette" and "The Mistress of Death" to the involuntary and tragic deception "At the Villa Janine," and from thence to the horror of the supernatural ambush of "she" who "never lets you go."

In England the pattern is clearer, and more immediately diabolical, as in the grisly tales where "The Devil Weeps," "The Saint" is at his least beneficent, and the most guileful of baited traps is sprung in "Professor Hartmann's Second Most Interesting Case." This is not to say that the island background affords no subtlety. On the contrary, in "The Fatal Glass" we witness the terror of animate spite, and in "Myself When Young" there is the final, cold-sweat betrayal of a man, by himself.

There is much else here of moonlight, castles and devils, to chill and fever the imagination. England or France; there's the choice. You may prefer the domestic backcloth for horrible imaginings, or you may agree with a paraphrased Laurence Sterne that "they order these matters better in France." Either way your taste will be fully satisfied in this twenty-fourth issue of LONDON MYSTERY MAGAZINE which, as ever, maintains its flesh-creeping pre-eminence.

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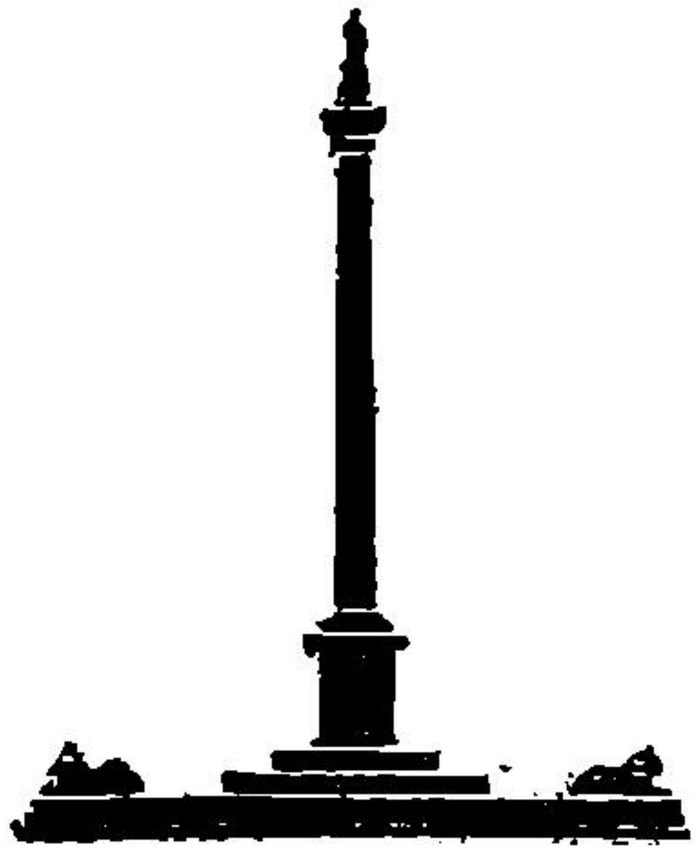

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SEA SHROUD

FREDERICK E. SMITH

Illustrated by Anthony Baynes

Black Magic is a dread phrase to all civilized people, and Frederick E. Smith here invokes some of its awfulness to provide the bait in this most grisly of fisherman's stories, and to show how it may still enslave a primitive mind.

AS THE MOON broke free, I was at last able to see her clearly. She was standing at the end of a promontory of rocks that ran as a natural groyne into the sea, and my curiosity drew me nearer. It was after midnight, and one does not expect to find lonely figures poised over the sea at such a time. The sight is full of disturbing possibilities. . . .

Crossing the beach, I climbed on to the rocks and made my way forward. A dark cloud hid the moon, and by the time it had passed I was within thirty yards of the girl. Pausing, I stared in astonishment. Her arms were now outstretched to the sea, and she was chanting aloud in a language I did not understand. There was something eerie about the tableau; something that sent a thrill of the unknown through me and held me spellbound.

Her invocation ended. Dropping her arms, she stared at the sea for a moment more, and then stooped down over what appeared to be a pool among the rocks and began moving her arms about rhythmically inside it. Swish, swish, the splash of the water came clearly to me over the gentle lapping of the sea, and with it a low muttering, as if the girl were whispering instructions to someone beside her on the rocks. I stared around, but could see nothing except the black rocks and the moonlit waves. The girl turned slightly, and then I recognized her. It was Nunda, the native girl from my lodgings.

My imagination was now running away with me, and I was determined to see what she had in the pool. Her concentration was intense, almost fanatical, and in ordinary circumstances I could have crept up to her unnoticed. But to reach her I had to descend one rock face and clamber up another, and in the attempt I slipped on a clump of seaweed.

Her reaction was instantaneous. In a flash she whipped up an oilskin from the rocks beside her, and from the frantic movements of her arms it was obvious she was wrapping it around the thing in the pool. Her startled and fearful face kept staring back at me over her shoulder.

I stood upright, feeling guilty as well as foolish. She obviously regarded me as a spy, and I could not blame her after my behaviour. But my curiosity remained, and I called and smiled encouragingly at her in the hope that she would draw nearer to give me a closer look at that mysterious bundle now wrapped in oilskin and hugged protectingly under her arm. But it was no use. Her attitude told me clearly that she was prepared to stay there all night rather than pass me with her bundle; and so at last, recovering as much dignity as I could from the encounter, I made my puzzled way back to the bungalow on the beach.

Sleep came very tardily. Each time I closed my eyes I saw again the figure of the girl with outstretched arms, silhouetted against the night sky. To whom had she been talking? What had she been doing in the pool? What was in that mysterious bundle? In an effort to woo sleep, I tried to convince myself that there must be some simple explanation for her behaviour. What mystery could there be here in this quiet little bungalow? On my arrival only three days ago, I had congratulated myself that I was going to have the restful holiday my doctor in the Transvaal had ordered. Two quiet old spinster ladies, a snug bungalow, a beautiful coast to explore, and few neighbours —all the ingredients for a successful holiday and convalescence. It was hard to imagine that Cape Town, with its busy streets, fashionable hotels, its docks and traffic, was barely fifteen miles away. Here all was peace and beauty. Yet, try as I did, I could not forget that strange tableau on the rocks and the odd psychic shock I had felt on seeing it. Something unnatural had been there, of that I was certain. And my dreams later confirmed it. They brought

vision after vision of the girl standing before a grey sea, and they brought a sobbing that was terrible in its loneliness and despair. But the cries came not only from her—they came from the waves also, from the desolate greyness that heaved around her and could never rest. . . .

The few discreet inquiries I made about the girl the next morning brought me some startling information. She had been with the old ladies nearly two years, having been sent down from the Transvaal by some relation of theirs. After twelve months she had married a coloured fisherman. Fortunately for her she had kept her employment—fortunately, because only three weeks before my arrival her husband had been drowned when his boat overturned in a squall. His two companions had managed to reach the shore, but he, unable to swim, had gone down. His body had not been recovered, probably it had been swept out to sea by the currents that sweep strongly round this coast.

They had been a happy couple, and the old ladies, sorry for the girl, had offered her leave to go up country until fully recovered from her loss; but this offer she had refused. The old people had noticed nothing unusual about her behaviour since the accident, and I thought it better to keep the things I had seen to myself. There might be some rational explanation to them, and, in any case, it seemed pointless to worry the old ladies without reason.

One point I soon established—her excursions to the rocks were made nightly. The next two evenings assured me of that, for I made it my business to stay awake and follow her movements. The nights were clear, the moon approaching the full, and by keeping clear of the rocks I was able to watch her unobserved. Each night the ritual was the same. First the invocation to the sea, and then the mysterious performance in the pool with the bundle she carried to and fro with such secrecy. I wondered how long she had been observing this ritual. Probably for weeks, I thought, and racked my brains to find a way of solving the mystery.

One morning, later in the week, brought me the clue for which I had been searching. Finding myself without cigarettes, I went to the store on the main road above the bungalows, and there saw Nunda talking to another native girl, whom I recognized as being the maid from a neighbouring bungalow. Nunda left the store on seeing me, but the other girl was still collecting her groceries and I waited outside for her. Remembering I had seen Nunda talking to her on other occasions, I decided she might be the one person who could help me. As she left the store I approached her.

"You know Nunda," I said. "The girl who works for the Misses Johnson?"

The girl looked up, then dropped her woolly head shyly. "Yes, baas," she muttered.

"You are her friend," I said. "You know all things about her. Tell me, why does she go out on the rocks at

night and talk to evil spirits?"

The girl's eyes rolled in sudden fear. She did not answer.

"You are her friend," I went on. "You do not want harm to come to her. Tell me what she is doing. I want to help her."

"I don't know what she does, baas." The girl spoke in a frightened whisper.

"She is practising magic," I said sternly. "You know that, don't you?"

The girl's terror grew, and I spoke more gently. "You know it is a wicked thing to call on evil spirits for help. I know she has lost her man and that she is unhappy, but she should not turn to magic for help. Only ill can come of it. What is she trying to do—bring him back to life?"

Her lips trembled. "No, baas; she knows she cannot do that. Her man is dead; he cannot live again. . . ."

"Then what is she trying to do?"

Fearfully she looked round, then up at me. "She has been to the Iqira, baas."

"To the Iqira—in Cape Town. Are they here, too, then?"

"Yes, baas. They are here. Nunda has been to them for help. That I know."

"But why? What does she want?"

"I don't know, baas. She will tell nobody. . . ."

I put a coin in her hand and let her go. Turning to the sea, I stared down at it. How vast, how endless, and unfathomable it must seem to the up-country native, born and bred on the veld with the solid earth under and around him. Death was death, an inevitable thing, he could accept its coming with simple resignation. But rest was death's companion; the two should be indivisible. I watched the flat, restless heave of the waves below and wondered about the girl. . . .

That night I watched Nunda's movements with even greater interest. At first they were the same as on the previous nights, but, after the performance in the pool, they changed with dramatic suddenness. Instead of wrapping up the mysterious thing in the oilskin prior to returning to the bungalow, she took it to the water's edge, paused a long moment, and then dropped it among the waves. Strain my eyes though I did, it was too far away for me to make out any details. As I saw its floating black speck, dark among the shining waves, the temptation came over me strongly to swim out and settle my curiosity once and for all. But the tide must have been running out fast, because the thing receded at a surprising speed. Standing quite motionless, the girl watched it, and only when it had vanished completely from sight did she turn and make her way back. More mystified than ever, I returned to my room.

I spoke to her the next evening behind the bungalow, where she was taking in washing from the line.

"Nunda," I said quietly. "You should not go to the Iqira. Your man is at rest; he is both safe and happy. The Iqira's magic is evil—it will not help your man or give

him peace. He is at rest now. It is wicked to disturb him."

Her body stiffened. In the gloom I could see only the white circles of her eyes clearly. Her voice sounded as a whisper.

"Leave me, master. You are a white man and do not understand. Leave us to the things that are ours. . . ."

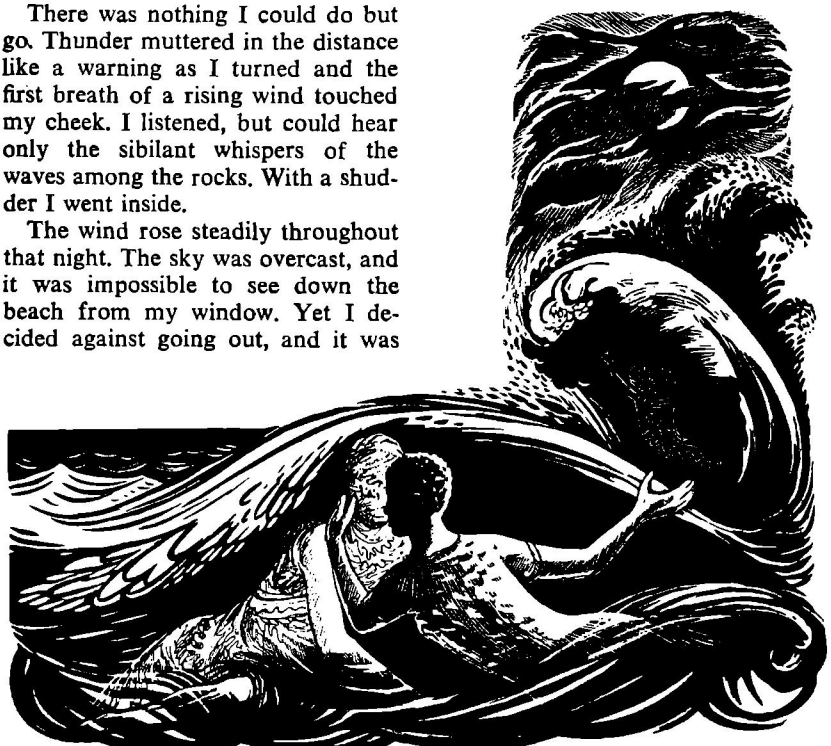
"The Iqira is evil, Nunda. Harm will come upon you."

She answered again from the darkness. "Leave me, master. I know what I want. Leave me alone."

There was nothing I could do but go. Thunder muttered in the distance like a warning as I turned and the first breath of a rising wind touched my cheek. I listened, but could hear only the sibilant whispers of the waves among the rocks. With a shudder I went inside.

The wind rose steadily throughout that night. The sky was overcast, and it was impossible to see down the beach from my window. Yet I decided against going out, and it was not the cold that checked me. Somehow, instinctively, I felt there would be nothing to see tonight. If Nunda went it would only be to watch. Now, from what I had seen and heard, my fears had become convictions in my mind. The moment had not yet come; I would know when it did. Somehow I felt we would all know. . . .

All next day the wind blew, and the sunset was like a torn red wound in the sky. After dinner, feeling the need for company, I sat talking to the old ladies until they retired. After



another half an hour I went to my own room, picked up a book and tried to ignore the wind. That proved impossible, there was a frenzy about it that would not be dismissed, and at last I switched off my light and stared out of the window.

The moon was full and the wind too fierce to allow the clouds to mass long before it. Its fitful light showed the manatocka trees bending in torment and the spindrift whirling across the beach. The wind was off the sea, from the great wastes that stretched to the Antarctic itself, and it was screaming of its loneliness. Grey, wraithlike shapes writhed across the moon and shadows moved with purpose over the cold sand. There was fear in the wind, and even in my room it seemed to gain ingress, a dark miasma whose chill reached my heart.

It was just after midnight, just after a wild, tearing gust had threatened to claw off the roof, that I saw Nunda. Clad only in a thin dress, she was struggling against the wind to reach the rocky promontory that was half hidden in foam and spray. There was a dreadful urgency about her movements, a haste that brought my fear into my throat. It was as if the wind had brought a message and she was now hastening to some awful rendezvous. Throwing on my coat, I ran on to the beach.

But there was no hope of catching her. She was already on the rocks, and running over them with complete disregard for her safety. As I watched, spellbound in the light of the tattered moon, she reached the end of the promontory, swayed there and threw out her arms like a pagan priestess. A moment, while the waves leapt up like hungry beasts trying to claw her down, and then a dark cloud hid her in its shadow.

Fearful for her safety, I ran along the beach and made my way forward over the slippery rocks. Step by step, sometimes on all fours, I edged my way along, the spray hissing down like heavy rain. At last I saw her dark shape ahead of me, and over the scream and rush of the wind I imagined hearing her imploring chant. As I paused for breath the moon shone again, its light falling on the foaming water and the hard blackness of the rocks. The girl's eyes were fixed ahead, and suddenly her arms reached out frantically and her voice rose in an exultant scream. I tried to shout, to call her back, but the cry died in my throat as I saw the thing she was seeing.

It was out there among the waves, black against their threshing whiteness, rising on their crests and falling in their troughs, but always drawing nearer, nearer; not aimlessly like a piece of flotsam, but steadily, purposefully, as if of its own volition. Nearer it came and nearer, until, as it was flung forward by a huge wave, I saw its shape and movement. . . .

I tried to save the girl, but a fear of things beyond this world held me in bonds of ice. Reaching down for it she did not notice the massive wave that swept suddenly out from the darkness. I had a vision of her body being flung sidewards and away into the boiling sea; then I was coughing

and choking, and clinging for my life to the rocks.

When I arose the sea was empty around me. Soaked to the skin and more than half stupned by what I had seen, I staggered back to the beach to give the alarm.

They found the bodies the next morning. There was hers, limp and lifeless, yet hardly touched by the sea. And then there was her husband's. They had covered his body in an oilskin to hide it from view, but I had to look at it. Even then I did not fully understand. Not immediately. I did not understand why his body and face were wrapped in seaweed like a mummy in its bandages, and why only the arms and legs were bare and free to move. They were bleached and very terrible to look on, but somehow they were not as terrible as the rest, which had been so strangely preserved by the seaweed. There was something unnatural about those wrappings, something that made people talk in whispers and hesitate to venture out of doors on nights when the wind was sobbing of its loneliness. Yet their fear was blind; they did not know of what they were afraid.

Nor would I have known had I not seen Nunda's nightly ritual on the rocks and had I not discovered at the end the contents of her mysterious bundle. For it had returned, too. . . . I came across it among the rocks, and the full horror gripped me when I understood at last what Nunda had done to bring her husband's body back.

It was a doll, perhaps two feet in length. Wet and crumpled, it lay under a rock where the tide had swept it; but it did not look innocuous as a doll should look. Round its head and body seaweed had been wrapped, not by the sea but by human hands, and only its legs and arms were bare and free to move.

As I stared at it, I remembered. The fisherman had been unable to swim—*that was why he had been unable to return*. And so I realized what manner of thing had been done on the rocks at midnight. What the girl had been teaching the doll to do, and why. . . .

THE DEVIL WEEPS

IAN McLEOD

ELLA WAS STANDING quite still in the faintly lighted room, staring at the cold, oddly shaped coffin that contained her husband, when the doorbell rang. Listlessly she ambled across the carpeted floor to answer, only the golden twinkle of her wedding-ring lightening the dark black mournfulness of her clothes. It was Jenny, dear Jenny. . . .

"Hello, Ella," Jenny said.

Ella nodded her head with a ghost smile on the thin lips.

"Come in, Jenny," she mumbled.

"I—I'm not too early, am I? If you'd rather be alone for a little while longer——?"

"No, it's all right. I'll make you a cup of tea."

Jenny entered with a rustle of newly bought clothes, a little black handbag clasped in her fingers.

"Smoke if you want to," Ella murmured.

"Oh no. No, thank you."

"It doesn't matter, Jenny. Honestly, I don't mind. Nothing really matters now that Archie is dead."

"I—I'm terribly sorry," Jenny stammered. "You know that, don't you? If I could have done anything more—but it was so sudden. I never suspected that he had a heart condition."

She broke off speaking as Ella quickly turned away to hide her agony and made for the kitchen, leaving Jenny alone in the cosy room. If she leaned forward a little she could just see the base of the coffin through the open door of the front parlour. Poor, poor Archie!

"Ella?" she cried out. "Could I go in, do you think?"

"Of course." The voice from the kitchen choked.

Jenny rose and walked into the parlour. A curious expression crossed her face as she looked down at the immobile face on the white pillow. So dear Ella had lost her precious husband. She remembered a time when she was studying at medical school when it might have been she who married Archie, but the dear man abruptly discontinued his wooing when she accidentally smashed the bridge of her nose. It gave, in the after months of the operation, a certain unpleasantness to her features. . . .

When Ella set down the tea-cups on the knee-high table, Jenny was seated once more in her chair.

"Drink up," Ella smiled with mock cheerfulness, but her own cup trembled as she raised it shakily to her mouth. She took a hasty gulp.

"We loved each other very much," she murmured.

"I know," Jenny replied quietly.

They stared at each other for a few moments, trying to think of some

way to continue the conversation.

"You did everything you could," Ella blurted out.

Jenny winced.

"But it wasn't enough," she groaned. "Perhaps if he'd had a better doctor——?"

"You *are* the best, Jenny. You mustn't feel guilty about what happened. You only treated him for pneumonia, nobody knew about his weak heart. Even if you had——?"

Even, thought Jenny? She bowed her head in grief.

"I loved him once, Ella," she whispered. "Did he ever tell you about that?"

Ella was genuinely surprised.

"Why—no, he didn't?"

"Anyway, it was a long time ago. After a while we—sort of drifted apart. He was a good man."

Yes, Ella thought, he was always good. Of course there had been much whispering among the local gossips that Archie had only married her for her money. They were entitled to their foul opinions because she knew them to be wrong. Never once had he asked her for money, although his own wage amounted to so little. It was strange, though, that he had never mentioned the affair with Jenny, probably it was just one of those adolescent things. She certainly wasn't pretty, not with that ugly nose of hers. And yet, she chided herself, she was a dear, she had been there at the very last moment in the bedroom. She had pronounced him dead in her official capacity as a doctor, had signed the certificate. She really was a darling. It must have hurt her, too. . . .

The mourners came in quick procession through the front door, each one offering his or her condolences to the young widow.

"A terrible shock, Mrs. Stark, simply terrible. You have my deepest sympathy."

They went, one by one, to look at Archie's face, then returned to the living-room, respectably sad. The little clock on the mantelshelf pointed to three o'clock.

"Has everyone been in, Mrs. Stark?" a voice at her side asked in a subdued undertone.

Ella smiled at the undertaker, at the delicacy of his implication. Of course they had to close the lid.

"Yes, I think so," she murmured.

"Then with your permission we'll——?"

"Yes. I know."

She stood among her companions and friends as he padded away with his assistant, trying not to think of the face that would from this day forward remain for ever unseen. She tried not to think of the lid being screwed into place. Rather thoughtlessly she glanced at Jenny. She seemed to be—smiling? Probably thinking back to those old days when Archie and she had had their little romance. It was so lonely now.

"We're ready, Mrs. Stark," the professional voice whispered in her ear.

She nodded her head curtly with just a trace of nervousness in the gesture, and stood mutely while the men shuffled past, bearing the coffin upon their shoulders. Jenny caught her arm.

"Coming, Ella?"

"I—I suppose so."

Arm-in-arm they made their way to the waiting line of dark taxis. Jenny wept.

There was nothing to see in the countryside that flashed by the window, not to Ella. Somehow, she thought to herself, it didn't seem real. It didn't seem right that Archie had to die like that, so quickly. Only seven days of the pneumonia, with Jenny never away from his side, taking his temperature, cooling his forehead and giving him those injections with the syringe to make him sleep. Only seven days. Jenny was still weeping.

"Come on, Jenny," whispered Ella. "It's over now. Archie wouldn't want us to cry, he'd want us to be brave."

Jenny sniffed, then fumbled in her handbag for a handkerchief. A glint of metal caught on the weak rays of the sun. The syringe.

"Is that the same one?" asked Ella.

Jenny stared at her.

"Is that the same syringe you used when you were nursing Archie? Don't you remember?"

Jenny was terribly quiet.

"What's wrong, Jenny?"

Jenny replaced the handkerchief in her handbag.

"Nothing really," she muttered, "just thinking. Yes, it's the one all right. I sometimes use it on myself when I'm not sleeping too well."

"Can I keep it, Jenny?"

Ella was startled at the expression on her companion's face. It was as if she was trying very hard not to laugh. And then she chided herself inwardly for such fanciful imaginings. What was the matter with her? She'd have to stop such nonsense. She heard Jenny's soft voice.

"If you want to," it said, "although I don't know why, Ella dear. It's only an old syringe."

"When I look at it," Ella said, "it will bring back the memory of those last days. Does that sound silly?"

"Not at all; I understand."

She looked down as Jenny placed the syringe in her hand. It was so cold, the needle so sharp. There was still a little liquid in the glass tube.

"Thank you," she murmured.

And Jenny replied. "Think nothing of it."

When it was all over, the last rites and the tears, Ella went home. And when it was dark she undressed and lay alone in the double bed where Archie would never sleep again. No sleep came and, switching on the light, she leaned across the bedside table and lifted the syringe, plunging the needle into her arm. Perhaps it would help. But as she lay there sleep did not come, her arm became stiff, then her chest, her head, her whole body. She could think and see, but not move! She could think of monstrous things, of Archie stiff and seemingly unalive, buried under the ground. The death certificate signed by dear Jenny who strained to prevent herself from laughing in the taxi because she had asked for the syringe, the instrument which had opened the gateway to unmentionable tortures. Suddenly a shadow moved in the room. Ella silently screamed as the shape became clear.

"Are you awake, Ella?" said the voice of the Devil.

AT THE VILLA JANINE

ROBERT STANDISH

Set against a background of great wealth and even greater love, and the terrible passions they generate, the curious riddle of Kyril Mandros's suicide is posed as a challenge to the reader's ingenuity and understanding.

"HE WAS A mystery when he was alive," said Inspector Durand of the Nice Sûreté, looking down upon the crumpled body of Kyril Mandros; "but now that he is dead, I find him even more mysterious."

"I do not understand," said Giraud, the dead man's butler. "I see no mystery. There, before your eyes, is his farewell letter . . . see, at the moment the bullet entered his brain he was writing his signature, and the point of the pen tore the paper. . . ."

"And then, I suppose," said Durand with elaborate sarcasm, "having signed the farewell letter and put a bullet through his brain, he hid the pistol . . . just to make things more difficult for the police? Perhaps, also, you will explain to me how when your master committed suicide in this strange fashion, he held the pistol with his left hand against the temple, pulled the trigger *and left no marks of powder burns*. No, my friend, I do not yet know what happened in this room last night, but I do know that Kyril Mandros did not commit suicide. Why should he commit suicide? He was so rich that it was not true. . . . Why, I happen to know that his monthly telephone bills alone were larger than my salary for a year. I saw the bills in connection with another matter . . . in one day he spoke to New York, Rio de Janeiro, London and Singapore. . . . And then there is Madame Mandros, acknowledged to be the most beautiful woman on the Riviera. Did they quarrel?"

"No," replied the butler positively. "I never heard an angry word between them."

"Exactly, and you were in a position to hear angry words if they had been uttered, were you not? Doubtless, like all the other butlers I meet in my work, you spend half your time with an ear against a keyhole. . . . So why, will you tell me, should he have wished to end his life, when all the evidence suggests that there were many inducements to go on living?"

"But there before your eyes is the suicide note," retorted the butler. "I positively identify that as his handwriting, and I will find a dozen people to confirm it. Can you deny that the man who wrote that was contemplating suicide?"

Durand picked up the single sheet of paper from the desk, and for the tenth time, or more, read it carefully.

"And I suppose," he continued, ignoring the question, "last evening's party, which could not have cost him less than five million francs and was the most spectacular affair seen on the coast since the war, was given to celebrate his suicide? You believe that if you will, my friend, but me, I prefer some more reasonable explanation . . . and I shall find it, have no doubt of that. In the meantime, nobody is to come to this part of the villa . . . nobody, do you understand?"

Janine Mandros was a blonde, not just another wishy-washy, run-of-the-mine, flaxen blonde with watery pale blue eyes and anæmic lips, but a ripe, glorious, golden blonde, whose hair, coiled in rich ropes, might have been the precious metal itself. Her lips were full and red, although no lipstick had ever touched them, and her eyes the authentic violet blue.

When Kyril Mandros came out on to the upper balcony of the Villa Janine and saw Janine in the early morning light in the act of peeling a peach, he paused for a moment. "You are so beautiful," he said in a hushed voice, "that sometimes I am frightened."

Kyril Mandros was a splendidly handsome man also, but cast in a different mould. He was trimly built, lean and muscular. The sun had burned his dark skin to a rich warm brown. His age was hard to guess, for with the body of a young man he had a timeless, ageless face, the face of a man with few illusions. He was dark . . . black hair and almost black eyes. People never forgot his smile, which had so much warmth that one forgot that his eyes seldom smiled. Only for Janine did his eyes smile.

While they ate their peaches and drank their morning coffee, Kyril passed across to Janine a specimen invitation-card, just come from the printer, a richly embossed thing which subtly suggested royal entertainment:

MR. and MRS. KYRIL MANDROS
request the pleasure of your company
at
SUPPER
on August 9th, 1952. 9 p.m. to dawn.
Villa Janine *R.S.V.P.*

(This is not a card of admission. These will be delivered by hand on August 8th to guests accepting. Nobody will be admitted to the grounds of the Villa Janine without an admission card.)

"How many invitations are going out, Kyril?" asked Janine.

"Six hundred, or thereabouts. That will be enough . . . my secretary will give you the exact number today."

"Last year we sent out about five hundred and nearly twice as many people turned up . . . it was terrible."

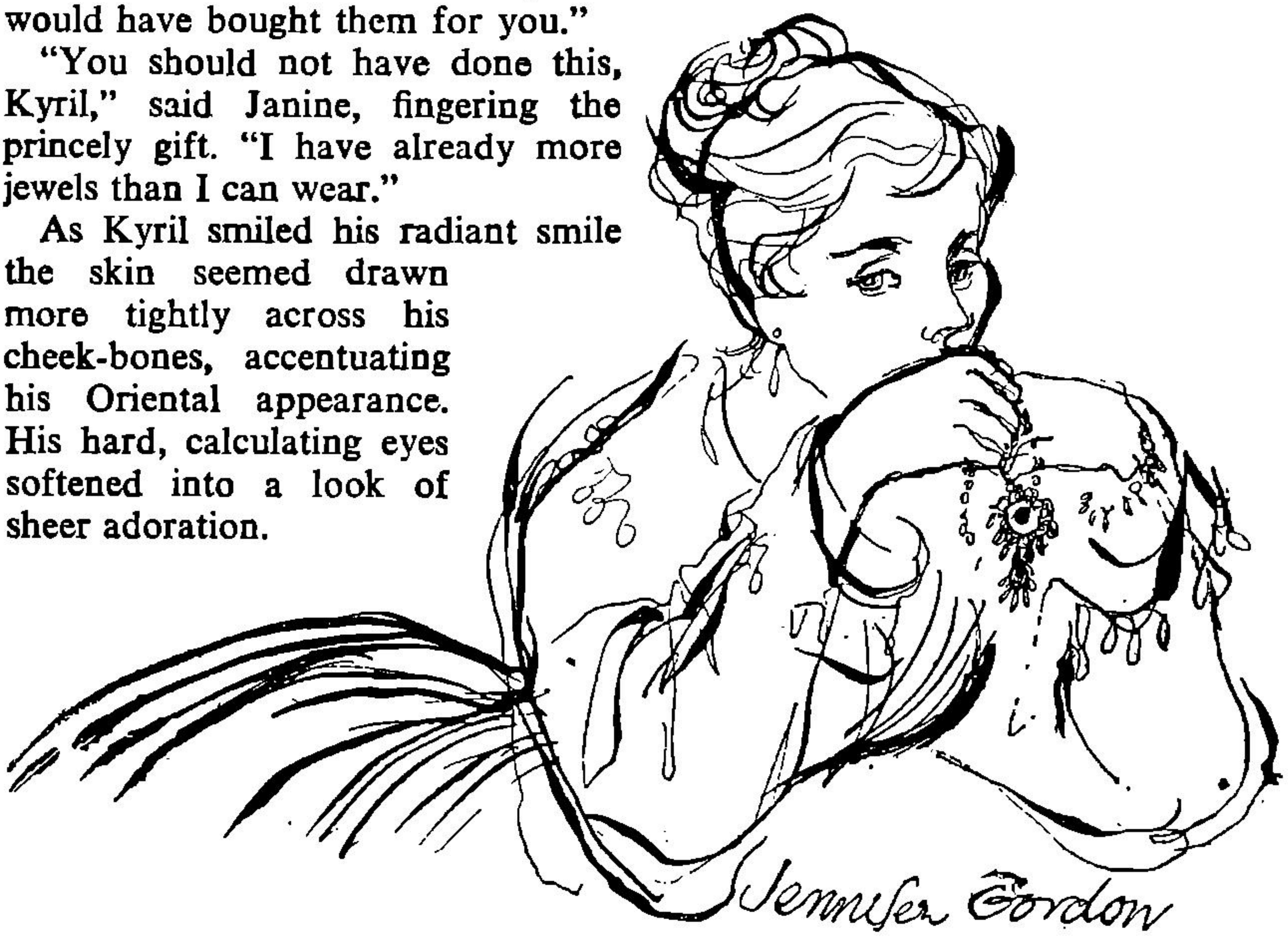
"I have taken precautions this year, as you see," said Kyril. "I will not have that uninvited rabble come here again. . . . God knows, the invited guests are bad enough."

"Then why invite them, Kyril?" asked Janine gently, her brow knitted in perplexity.

"Because I am proud of you, Janine, because I want them to see you wearing . . . these." Kyril opened a flat leather case, which rippled with sheets of green fire as a splendid emerald necklace reflected the early morning sun. "These, dearest, are the Chandore Emeralds, said to be the third finest in existence. The first and second finest were not for sale, or I would have bought them for you."

"You should not have done this, Kyril," said Janine, fingering the princely gift. "I have already more jewels than I can wear."

As Kyril smiled his radiant smile the skin seemed drawn more tightly across his cheek-bones, accentuating his Oriental appearance. His hard, calculating eyes softened into a look of sheer adoration.



"Do not look at me like that, Kyril," said Janine, shivering.

"Not even to please you, Janine," said he sadly, "can I control my love for you."

"Surely, Kyril," she said as though she had not heard, "it is not necessary to invite this horde of people? We do not like them . . . we do not even know them. If they were friends it would be different."

"Next year, if it is your wish, we will give no party," said Kyril in the voice he used when talking to his secretaries, "but this year the arrangements are too far advanced to be cancelled."

"As you like," said Janine wearily, knowing how futile further protest would be. In almost everything Kyril gave way to her, but in some he was adamantine. There were so many things she did not understand about him. He was immensely rich, for that was evident, but how he made his money she did not know. Sometimes, far into the night, she would hear him on the telephone, snarling and bullying men on the other side of the

world in languages she did not understand.

Queer-looking men of all nations came from time to time to the Villa Janine. They came arrogantly, some of them, carrying bulging brief-cases. They stayed an hour, a day, a week, but when they left their arrogance was always gone, their pride deflated under the lash of Kyril's tongue. Janine never met them, for they were housed in a new red-brick building on the other side of the headland, out of sight of the Villa Janine, where they were at Kyril's beck and call day and night.

"What are you, Kyril?" Janine had once asked. "I mean, how do you make your money? What do you call yourself?"

"I suppose I should call myself a merchant," he replied.

"What exactly is a merchant?"

"As I understand the term," Kyril replied, "a merchant is a man who buys in the cheapest market and sells in the dearest. That is what I do."

Janine wished she had not asked the question, for she was no wiser for the reply.

August 9th was a day of brazen heat. A small army of men came at dawn to transform the grounds of the Villa Janine. Fairy-lights were strung between tall cypresses and eucalypts. The terrace below the villa was turned into a dance-floor, while a huge circus marquee was ready to be erected in the unlikely event of rain. During the afternoon truckloads of ice arrived. The long blocks were put into the basin of a huge Carrara marble fountain, brought from a Roman villa on the shores of the Bay of Naples. Here a thousand bottles of champagne were set to chill.

Two orchestras set up their paraphernalia beside the dance-floor. A bar sixty feet in length was improvised from trestle tables and stocked with every imaginable drink. Supper tables, gleaming with silver and snowy napery, appeared on the lawn.

Two trucks carried nothing but boxes of tuberoses, whose sad perfume would not be released until the sun had set.

It seemed to Janine as she surveyed the scene from her balcony that the gardens of the villa had been prepared for the pleasure of Roman voluptuaries, to titillate palates dulled by too much luxury.

A special plane landed that afternoon at Nice airport with caviar from the Caspian. Wild strawberries, the delicate *fraises des bois* which delight epicures, came from Scotland. There were even a few bottles of Imperial Tokay, which had lain in the cellars of Franz-Josef before the rotten edifice of the Austro-Hungarian Empire crumbled to dissolution.

Janine turned to see Kyril standing beside her, surveying the busy scene with a sardonic smile. "All this for people you despise, Kyril," she said wonderingly. "What would you do for them if they were your friends?"

"If they were friends, dearest," he replied sadly, "I would give them something of myself."

At nine o'clock these two stood at the top of the stairs leading down to

the garden to receive the guests who would soon begin to arrive. Janine wore a strapless evening gown of smoke-grey tulle, on which hundreds of little bunches of pearl beads had been hand-embroidered. Around her neck were the Chandore Emeralds, blazing with cascades of green fire. Kyril's lithe figure, clad in conventional evening attire, seemed tense and strained, like that of a boxer entering the ring. The hungry adoration in his eyes as he looked at Janine gave him an appearance of humility. He, too, was worth looking at, for he was so very much alive. There was a drive and urgency about him which could be felt as one approached him.

As the first guests arrived, of course, Kyril and Janine ceased to be themselves. They put on their party faces. There is the temptation to linger over the scene, if only for the reason that it was the last time this splendid, vital couple would stand like that together.

"I have never seen you looking so lovely, Janine," said Kyril softly.

"Thank you, Kyril," she replied, blushing under his hot gaze.

"It is quite absurd how girlish you look," he continued. "Despite seven years of marriage you look . . . yes, the only word is virginal. I think I know why, Janine, and it makes me very sad. Your beauty is still immature, for it lacks the things to bring it to maturity. What things? Surely *you* do not need to ask me that, Janine? Mature beauty comes from suffering and passion . . . and I cannot arouse your passion, nor would I knowingly make you suffer."

"Do not speak like that, Kyril," protested Janine, smiling brightly at two new-comers.

"But it is the truth . . . and we both know it."

Despite the certainty in his voice, Kyril was not quite sure. If Janine at that moment had looked into his eyes, she could have read the doubts in them. He had hoped to hear from her a convincing denial, and he grew cold around the heart when it did not come.

By half-past nine some fifty guests only had arrived, and the host and hostess left their station at the top of the marble stairs. "We have welcomed all those polite enough to be punctual," said Kyril with an indifferent shrug. "The others will not miss us. All they will want is free champagne."

As he spoke a servant came forward, handing Janine a visiting-card. "There is a gentleman outside, madame, who has no card of admission, but he says that if madame knew he were there, he is sure he would be admitted."

"Paul Latourelle!" exclaimed Janine in a shocked voice. "Paul is dead," she murmured, swaying on her feet. "It cannot be true. . . . No, God would not be so cruel. . . ."

Kyril was talking to two guests, and it was the servant who stopped her from falling.

"Admit the gentleman at once, François," said Janine, recovering her composure with a great effort. "It is an old friend, Kyril," she said, turning to her husband, "an old friend whom I believed to be dead."

"Fortunate young man!" said Kyril, his smile tightening the skin across his cheek-bones. "I wish it were in my power to stir the violet depths of your eyes and to make your lips quiver like that."

"Hush, Kyril! You know that I will never . . . never, do you hear me, give you cause for jealousy. . . ."

"That is nonsense, Janine, for every man who looks at you gives me cause for jealousy . . . and here comes the young man himself. He is handsome . . . yes, and I fear that the sight of you has rekindled a flame. Well, I do not blame him, for there have been times when I wondered that the marble statues in the garden have not climbed down from their pedestals as you pass."

Kyril Mandros greeted the newcomer warmly. "An old friend of Janine's is always welcome here," he said. Then he strolled away, leaving them together. He wondered who was this Paul Latourelle, but it was not his way to show curiosity.

At midnight the private detective posted on the entrance reported to Kyril that only fifty-odd uninvited guests had managed to secure admission, which is to say that guests were some fifty-odd in excess of invitations issued. There had not been time for admission tickets to be forged this year, so there was only one possible explanation—the printer had run off a few extra ones for himself.

It was a symptom of the decline of manners that a flourishing black market existed in invitations to large private house entertainments in the few places where it was lavish enough to be worth while.

In the hotels and night-clubs of the Riviera a couple wanting to dine well and visit a decent night-club could not count on an expenditure less than 40,000 francs—say £40—for their evening's entertainment. If, therefore, they could pick up an invitation to the Villa Janine for 10,000 francs, it was a bargain. Even while Kyril Mandros was turning these unpalatable ideas over in his mind, out on the car-park outside the villa grounds, an assassin, a man with murder in his heart and the means to commit murder in his pocket, was handing over a sheaf of notes to the car-park attendant in exchange for an admission card. There was poetic justice in this, for in selling the assassin the means of entry, the car-park attendant was—although, of course, he did not know it—depriving himself of the most lucrative employment he had ever had in his life.

Of the six hundred and fifty-odd people wandering through the grounds of the Villa Janine that night, drinking vintage champagne or anything else their hearts desired, not more than about sixty or seventy knew their host by sight. Kyril Mandros, therefore, was able to mingle with them incognito. "Who the hell is this fellow Mandros?" Kyril heard a man ask.

"He's a Levantine of kinds," replied someone else. "His father was a Greek and his mother a Georgian, or so I've been told."

"He's a Turkish national today,"

said a woman. "My masseuse told me that."

"Well, whatever he is," said the first voice, "he seems to have plenty of money to burn."

"I wonder how he made it," said another man who had joined the group.

"One doesn't ask questions like that on the Riviera," said the woman with a harsh laugh.

"The story current in Brussels," said a Belgian banker, "is that he made it smuggling securities and valuables out of occupied Europe during the war. Being a Turk, he was a neutral. He did the same thing for the highly placed Nazis . . . which explains, of course, why he was allowed to operate."

"A chap I know," said yet another voice, "says that he used to peddle filthy pictures in the place Pigalle before the war. . . ."

"Have you seen his wife?" said a man.

"Have you seen her emeralds?" countered a woman. "Does anyone know whom *she* was?"

"She's as charming as she is lovely," said an elderly woman. "Her father was an obscure American painter, John Lethbridge. I knew him well. He was quite good . . . but somehow never amounted to anything. He died in 1938, leaving Janine and her mother, who was French, with very little money. The mother hated living in America and wouldn't go there. . . . In 1941 she fell ill and Janine missed the chance of leaving and stayed to look after her. I don't know the details, but Janine was mixed up with the Resistance. . . . People have told me she was very brave. In 1943 she was picked up by the Gestapo. . . ."

"How does Mandros come into the picture?"

"I believe he secured her release . . . bribery, I expect it was."

"My guess," said a young woman viciously, "is that they were both hand-in-glove with the Gestapo. George has done business with Mandros, and says the man would do anything for money . . . and has done the most ghastly things. . . ."

"But even so," said Kyril Mandros softly, "you do not mind drinking his champagne. Permit me to fill your glass."

Seizing a bottle from a passing waiter, he filled the extended glass, looking at each of the little group in turn. Their eyes dropped, refusing to meet his, and with a laugh he walked away from them and was lost in the throng.

"Who was that?" the young woman asked, her voice hoarse with nervousness.

"It wouldn't surprise me a bit," replied a man, "if that was Mandros himself. He answers the description I've heard."

Then supper was announced. The tables had been erected under an artificial sky, whose sun, moon, planets and distant galaxies provided the illumination. Concealed in the centre of a clump of flowering shrubs, an orchestra played light, nostalgic music.

A splendid feast had been provided. Great crystal bowls of caviar;

salmon from Scotland and platters of Atlantic lobsters; cold game pies, smoked hams from Italy, cooked hams from Normandy, simmered in cider; truffles swollen in champagne and baked inside a pastry jacket; whole goose livers and *pâté de foie gras*.

There were rare Rhine wines, Chablis and Montrachet with the fish; clarets and bungundies beyond the purses of all but the very rich. The few who understood wines drank these, but the night was filled with the popping of champagne corks.

One guest created an interlude for laughter by asking during a lull: "Do you think I could have a glass of mineral water?"

Peaches from the foothills of the Italian Alps, strawberries from Scotland; iced melon in slices; iced melons drenched with liqueurs and iced melons stuffed with strawberries, raspberries and peaches.

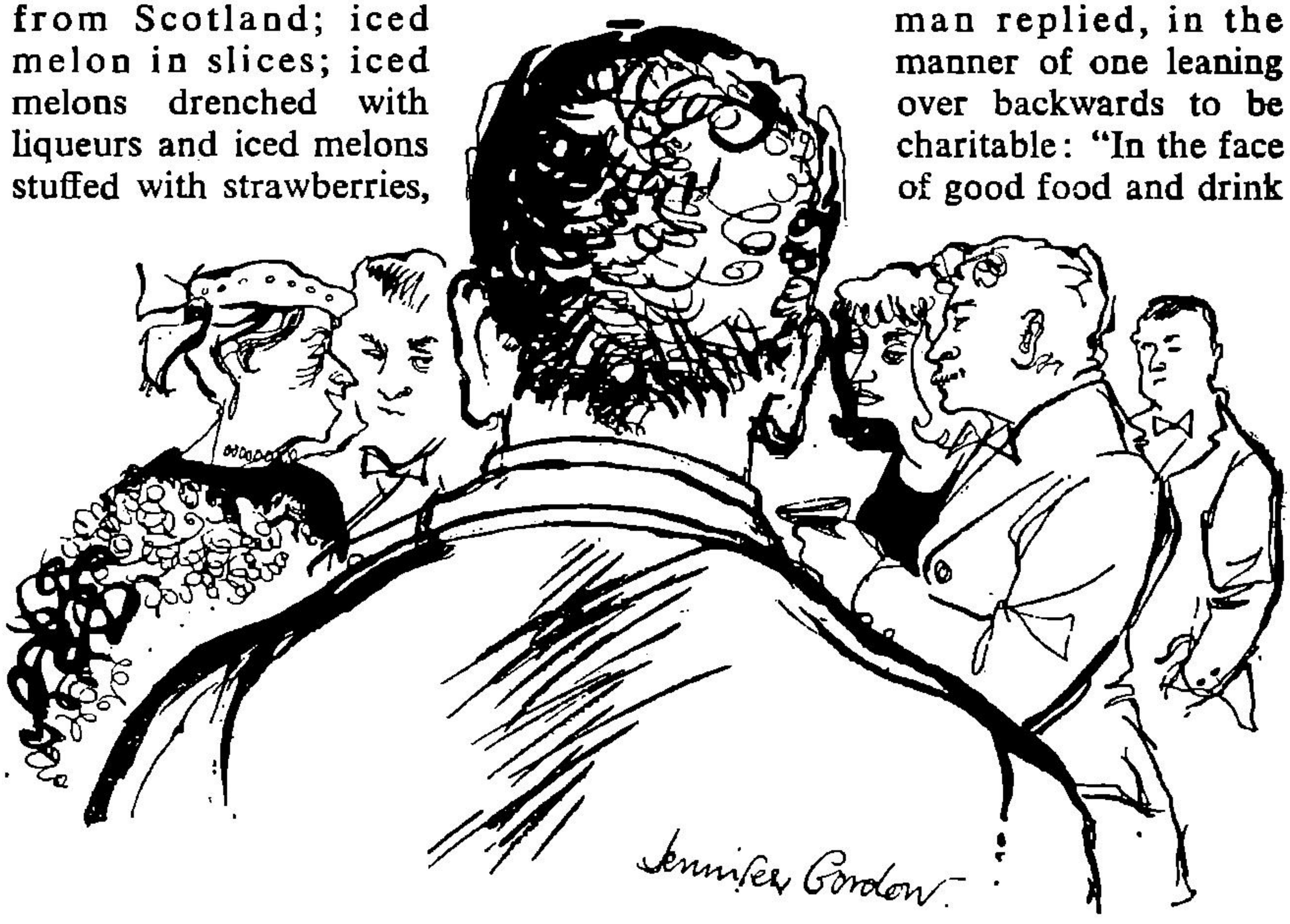
"Make the most of it," Kyril heard a man say to his companion whose appetite was flagging, "it's all with the compliments of Kyril Mandros. What a packet this evening is costing him! I wonder how many gate-crashers there are."

"I don't expect there are any this year . . . they were too cagey about the admission cards. . . ."

"No gate-crashers? Don't make me laugh! How do you suppose Jane and I got here? There's a fellow working a racket out on the car-park . . . as many tickets as you want for five thousand francs apiece . . . and cheap at the price, if you ask me."

At every table someone asked: "I wonder how Mandros made it?"

In Kyril's hearing a man replied, in the manner of one leaning over backwards to be charitable: "In the face of good food and drink



like this, my dear chap, I'm simply not prepared to be censorious. I don't care what he did. . . . In fact, I'd rather not know."

Janine heard snatches like these. She was too tense to eat or drink. She hovered over the scene like some benign fairy, watching to see that the service was smooth and that everyone was happy . . . at least, as happy as rich food, superb wines and lavish entertainment could make them.

"Having a good time, Paul?" she asked, pausing behind Paul Latourelle's chair.

"Wonderful!" he replied, pressing a slip of paper into the hand which rested lightly for a moment on the arm of his chair. Then she moved on. A moment later she caught Kyril's eye across the tables. Each of them secured a glass of wine, and from the distance they toasted each other with a smile.

It was, although neither of them knew it, their farewell. Many times during the remainder of the evening, of course, Kyril saw Janine and Janine saw Kyril, but it was already written that never again would their eyes meet.

In the light of a lantern hanging from a 2,000-year-old olive tree Janine read the note which Paul Latourelle had given to her: "I will wait for you from 3 a.m. in the white marble summer-house on the point. P."

If she went to the tryst, Janine reflected, it would be her first clandestine meeting with a man since she had married Kyril. To go or not to go. Paul, somehow, was different. She owed him some explanation, for if Fate had decreed otherwise she and Paul would have married.

Janine had been to a memorial service for Paul. She had wept for him, and then, believing that she must create a life without him, had done what seemed best. She had never loved any man but Paul, and, failing love, gratitude seemed as good as any reason for marrying. So she had married Kyril.

Allowing the little slip of paper to flutter to the ground. Janine resolved to see Paul. She intended no disloyalty to Kyril, but she owed it to Paul to see him.

Janine found herself thinking sadly of Kyril. . . . Poor Kyril, who loved her so much, who lived for her smiles, and to whom, in gratitude, she would go on giving everything she had to give. . . . Except, of course, love, which was the only thing he wanted from her.

With advancing night the heavy sweetness of the tuberoses hung across the gardens of the Villa Janine. The tuberose contains the spirit of the night, holding its perfume imprisoned until the curtain of darkness falls across the world. In its dead waxen petals, subtly distilled by nature's artful alchemy, is the quintessence of earth's most earthy desires. The story is told in Provence of a bishop, a most saintly and pious man, who went out one night into his garden and uprooted every tuberose he found, for ever afterwards forbidding them to be planted. "My life is dedicated to the things of the spirit," he declared,

"but with that perfume in my nostrils, I am dragged down to earth by intolerably heavy chains."

A hundred or so couples were dancing when Janine rejoined her guests. Then the spotlight was turned upon a husky contralto, who had the gift of singing personally to every man present, carrying in her voice and smile the promise of unutterable delights. A middle-aged Frenchman sang incredibly bawdy songs in three languages, giving way to a sweet-faced girl of about eighteen who sang almost forgotten Provençal ballads in a bell-like voice. Her simplicity hushed the hard-bitten cosmopolitan throng, so that tough-minded men and women paused to remember when they, too, were young and innocent.

Kyril thrust his way through the press, and as he did so brushed against his own assassin, who flinched from him as though believing that his secret purpose had been read. Kyril had seen the little piece of paper flutter from Janine's hand. Who was this Paul Latourelle, whose coming had made her lips quiver so? What had they once been to each other? What would they be to each other if he, Kyril, vanished from the scene?

It was vital to have the answers to these questions. The answers might help him to understand what went on behind the lovely façade which was all he really knew of Janine. Kyril did not mistrust her, but the coming of this young man had for a moment broken down Janine's calm serenity, caused those full red lips to quiver as they had never quivered for him.

"I will wait for you from 3 a.m. in the white marble summer-house on the point. P."

Kyril allowed the little piece of paper to flutter back where he had found it. At 2.30 a.m., while Janine's back was turned, he disappeared into the darkness along the path which led to the white marble summer-house on the point, where the terraced gardens led down to the sea. Kyril loved this summer-house. It was a slender, graceful thing, brought piecemeal from Halicarnassus, where it had once adorned the belvedere of a Greek villa. Hidden in the darkness behind a clump of flowering plumbago, Kyril waited for what the night might bring.

Some twenty minutes passed before Paul Latourelle came down the path and, lighting a cigarette, sat down to wait.

The church clock struck three.

Would Janine come? There was no room for any other thought in the minds of these two men separated by a few feet of distance, but in most other ways by a gulf too wide to bridge.

Then Janine came down the path and Paul went forward eagerly to meet her.

"No, Paul," she said softly, thrusting him aside as he tried to take her in his arms, "it isn't like that . . . now."

So it had been once.

"Then why did you come here, Janine?" Paul asked in a hurt voice.

"Because of what we once were to each other. . . ."

A silence fell, broken only by the bullfrogs on the terraces below, the distant popping of champagne corks and occasional burst of raucous laughter from the other end of the garden.

"When I heard that you had married Kyril Mandros," said Paul at length, "I refused to believe it . . . but I suppose it is true. Kyril Mandros . . . of all men!"

"What happened to you, Paul?"

"I was taken to Germany for forced labour. The Gestapo did not know who I was or they would have shot me. Then in 1945 I escaped to the Russians, who would not release me. . . . I was only released two months ago . . . to learn that you were Madame Kyril Mandros!"

"Paul," said Janine coldly, "I will not stay here another moment if you speak of Kyril with such contempt in your voice. He is my husband and you are his guest."

"If I speak of him contemptuously, so do the rest of his guests. Even you must have heard it this evening . . . his name stinks in the nostrils of decent people."

"He is the kindest human being I have ever known, Paul. From the moment I first met him he has never said or done anything with which I could reproach him. . . ."

"But surely you know how he made . . . and makes his money?"

"I know nothing, less than nothing, about Kyril's business dealings, Paul. They do not concern me. I know by snatches of telephone conversations that he deals in huge sums of money, but that is all. I judge Kyril by the way he treats me. Is there any better, or fairer, way?"

"Ordinarily, I would agree with you, Janine," continued Paul more gently, "but it is he and men of his kidney who, because of their vast black-market speculations, are holding back Europe's recovery. He produces nothing, but he fattens on the misery around him. . . . And if Europe goes Communist, it will be because of Kyril Mandros and his kind. . ."

"Paul, I will not listen to any more about Kyril. . . ."

"Why did you marry him, Janine?"

"He had done so much for me, Paul. Aside from all else, he had saved my life . . . and at the risk of his own. The Gestapo were going to shoot me, but by a mixture of bribes and threats Kyril secured my release."

"In those days, Janine, nobody threatened the Gestapo and lived. If he had influence enough to secure your release, it could only be because he was working with them."

"Believe what you like to believe," said Janine in a dead voice; "but I have told you the truth."

"And then, I suppose, he brought pressure to bear upon you to make you marry him . . . is that it?"

"No, Paul," was the indignant reply, "that is not it. He took me to friends, and it was over a year before I saw him again. Never, never, never, will you understand, did he apply the least pressure. I did not even know he was rich."

This golden wife of mine is pure gold right through.

"Remember, Paul, I believed that you were dead. I had sat beside your mother in the church, and we both wept for you. The first time Kyril asked me to marry him, I refused . . . and the second, the third and many more times. Then I saw the terrible hurt in his eyes and I began to feel differently.

"You were dead, Paul, and I had to go on living somehow. It seemed that all the love I had to give had been given to you . . . and that it was a waste of time to suppose that anyone could take your place in my heart. I knew I could never give Kyril love, but I had a debt to pay. . . . The Chinese believe that a life snatched from death belongs to the one who saves it. You were dead, Paul, remember that all the time . . . and, well, the next time Kyril asked me to marry him, I said I would. . . ."

A strange sound came from the bushes beside the white marble summer-house. "Did you hear that, Paul?" asked Janine, turning abruptly. "It sounded like someone sobbing."

"To me," said Paul, "it sounded like a bullfrog."

"I don't regret marrying Kyril. Will you . . . can you understand that? Try to believe that, Paul, for it is the holy truth."

"I suppose," said Paul in a voice which rasped, "that emerald necklace, this villa and a few other things, helped to make him palatable."

Janine's hand on Paul's cheek sounded like a pistol shot. "If you ever wish to speak to me again, Paul," she said, "you will apologize for that . . . now."

"I'm sorry, Janine," came the contrite reply, "and jealousy doesn't sweeten a man's tongue. . . . But surely you are not telling me that you love him?"

"No, Paul, I do not love him. I have never pretended that I do. Only a woman could understand what I feel for him. . . . Sometimes, when he just puts a hand on my shoulder, I wonder that he cannot see the goose pimples. . . . And yet, I like him so

much, more than I know how to say. He has been so kind and patient with me. I do not like to think of his generosity, because it makes me feel degraded."

"Then divorce him and have done with it!"

"No," said Janine firmly, "never. I am all he has got."

"He has money."

"If I could bring myself to love him, Paul, then I think he would forget money. He would give up snarling at people over the telephone in the middle of the night. . . . But I can't love him, and I've got to go on to the end. I can't take everything and give nothing in return. . . . I'm not made that way. . . .

"I'm ashamed of my disloyalty in talking to you this way, Paul, but I felt I owed you some explanation on account of what we once were to each other. . . .

"Now go away, Paul, and stay away from me. . . . Seeing you will only make it harder."

Without a word Paul Latourelle returned the way he had come. Janine watched him silhouetted by the fairy-lights until he was out of sight, and then gave herself over to weeping.

"Paul, Paul, beloved," she sobbed, "my heart is breaking for you. . . ."

When Janine returned to the illuminated lawns, the guests were beginning to leave. Kyril was nowhere to be seen. The remaining guests were for the most part loud and blatant in drink.

The assassin was among the late guests. He saw Kyril enter the villa, watched and saw him at the lighted window of the library. When, pistol in hand, he entered the room, Kyril had almost finished a letter which lay on the desk in front of him.

"Knowing what I now know, Janine," Kyril Mandros had written, "there is nothing more for me in this world. Knowing how little I mean to you, I reject the gift of life. In a few moments you will be free. I understand why you could not give me your love, but I feel very humble when I think of your loyalty. Adieu."

Kyril glanced at the pistol which lay before him on the desk. Then he pressed a switch which illuminated a full-length portrait of Janine on the far side of the room. It was then that he saw the assassin.

"I am going to kill you, Mandros," said the latter, advancing slowly, pistol in hand. "Only so much evil is permitted any man, and you have done more than your share."

"If you will permit me to sign this letter, my friend," came the cool reply, "I am at your disposal."

The assassin approached cautiously and, taking the pistol from the desk, put it in his pocket. He watched while the other appended a firm signature to the letter.

"You are a brave man, Mandros, even if you are a conscienceless thief. Even now your hand is not trembling."

"My friend," said Kyril, turning to face his murderer and smiling at Janine's portrait, "there is only one thing now which could make my hand tremble."

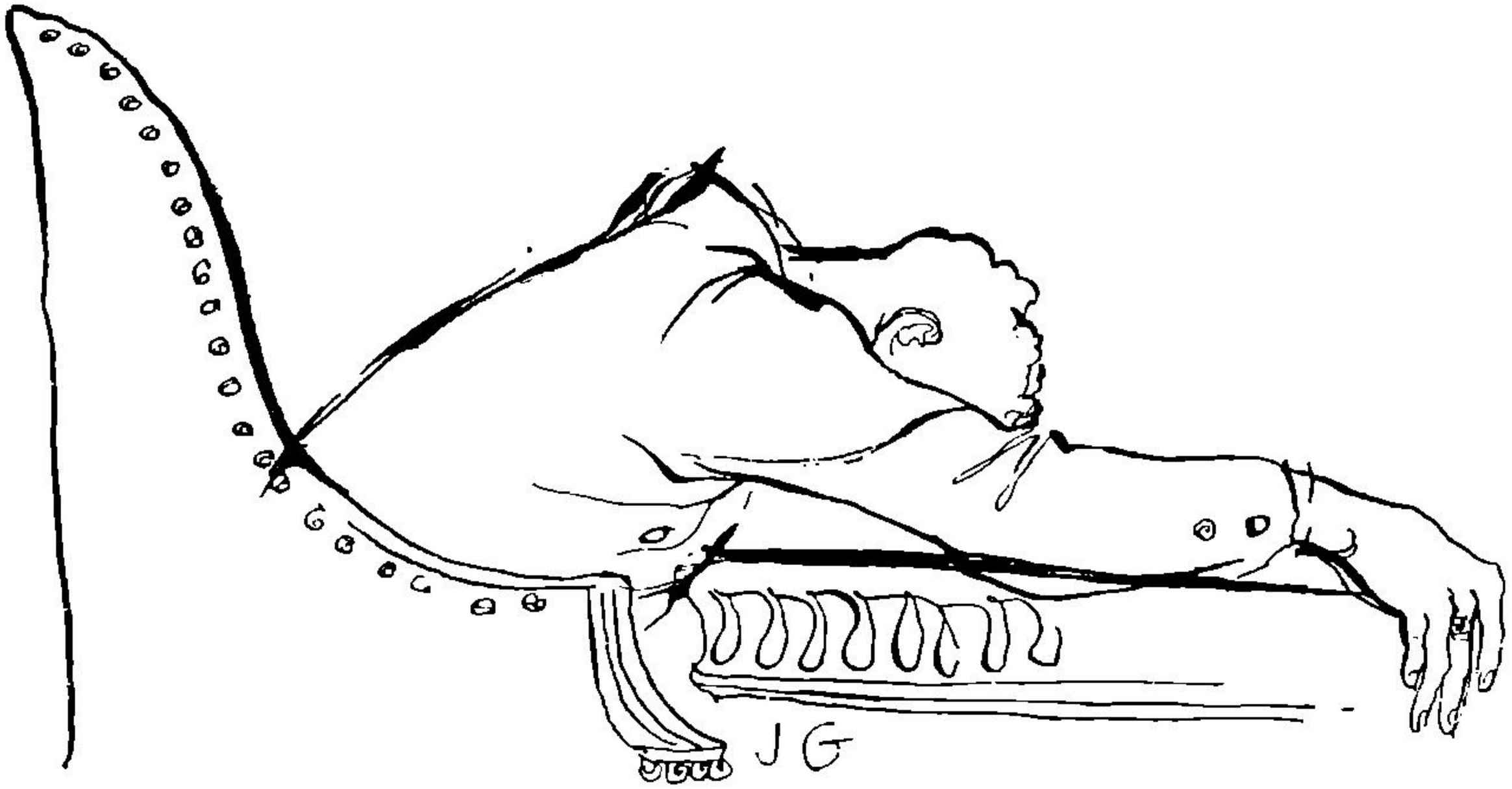
"And what is that?"

"The prospect of going on living. What else?"

"It seems that I am rendering you a service, then."

"Stop chattering and render it," said Kyril. "I am in a hurry."

The answer was a pistol shot, and Kyril Mandros slumped in his chair. The pen he was holding tore the sheet of paper on which he had been writing.



And sadly reflecting,
That a lover forsaken
A new love may get,
But a neck when once broken
Can never be set.

WILLIAM WALSH (1663–1708): *The Despairing Lover.*

For man walketh in a vain shadow, and disquieteth himself in vain: he heapeth up riches, and cannot tell who shall gather them.

THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER: *Psalms xxxix.* 6.

THE DEVIL IN MAYFAIR

LANGSTON DAY

Illustrated by W. E. Jones

Many people do not invite clergymen to their parties because they feel their presence would tend to inhibit the fun. They could be very, very wrong.

BY TWO IN THE morning the Pinkertons' party was shivering on the edge of collapse. It had begun well, perhaps too well, on the wings of a cocktail which Sombart had brought with him in a mysterious green bottle. As he poured it out with a sort of Borgian furtiveness, he explained that it had been brewed from a magical herb plucked at midnight under the light of a seven-day moon.

"Oo-o-o-oh!" cried Dorice, his hostess, hunching up her babyish shoulders, "shall I be bewitched if I drink it?"

Sombart's dead-white face remained unsmiling. "That depends upon whether I mentioned you by name when I performed the incantation," he said, fixing her with his alarming eyes.

"Don't take any notice of him," said Chloe protectively. "I'm sure it's harmless. Cheerio everybody!" She raised her glass and drained it in two gulps.

Her brother, Ralph Pinkerton, who had married Dorice, stood apart and watched these proceedings contemptuously. It was absurd the way Chloe and Dorice goggled at this charlatan of a fellow who talked like a medieval alchemist. Chloe had been quite melodramatic when she had brought him along to the studio a few months before. She said he was a black magician who had learned the secrets of the Kabbala. Dorice seemed to believe this twaddle. Lately she had been rushing off to Chloe's flat at all hours to take part in some mummery of magical rites. Once or twice she had even stayed away all night, and had come back pale and overwrought in the morning.

He sipped his cocktail and made a grimace. It had a crude and fiery taste. But whatever it was it certainly livened up the party. The guests forgot that their host was a pompous Royal Academician. Everybody began to talk and nobody listened. A lady novelist stood on her head, a well-known theatre critic sat on the piano with a deep crash of bass notes and shook with girlish laughter, while a young actor impersonated a bat by hanging head downwards from one of the roof trusses.

When Chloe suggested sitting on the studio floor and playing strip poker Pinkerton's was the only dissentient voice, and he was immediately overruled by his wife. Dorice

giggled incessantly and hardly knew what she was doing. In a few minutes she had barely enough clothing left to meet the demands of modesty. Then, losing again, she lost her nerve and baulked like a frightened child.

"Pay up!" barked Sombart inexorably.

Chloe put her muscular arm round her sister-in-law. "No more," she cried in her deep, man's voice. She exchanged a swift, significant glance with Sombart. But this was lost on Pinkerton, who saw only that she was protecting his wife.

Thereupon the game broke up. Somebody gave a gratuitous series of farmyard imitations, which were more noisy than realistic. The critic tried to recite François Villon and broke down, while an undergraduate with a weak head removed his coat and collar and capered about the floor tearing pieces from his shirt until he was left with only the rim of it hanging elegantly round his neck.

But at last these antics began to wear a little thin. It was imperative to discover some fresh thrill or go home. Rather naturally the party turned to Sombart.

Sombart, standing pale and erect, his wild black hair sharply outlined against the background of a large untouched canvas, at once rose to the emergency.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he announced, "with your permission I propose to perform a magical ceremony which to my knowledge has never before been attempted in London. I propose to raise the Prince of Devils by the fearful Kabbalistic Rite of Lucifuge."

"Good for you!" shouted the undergraduate.

Sombart's eyes flashed. "This is no laughing matter," he snapped. "It is an extremely dangerous experiment, and unless I have our host's express permission, I shall not attempt it."

Everybody looked at Pinkerton whose lip curled slightly as he replied, "I think we might risk it."

"So be it," said Sombart, bowing. "I will proceed. Perhaps some of you will be kind enough to help me carry up the necessary objects which I have in my car outside?"

Several of the guests went out with him, and presently came back carrying what seemed to Ralph a queer assortment of junk.

Sombart stood at the end of the studio

facing his audience. "This stone," he explained, taking a smooth stone from his pocket, "is an ématille. I have carried it about with me for a month, and slept with it under my pillow. It is a necessary part of the rite."

Kneeling down, he drew on the floor with the ématille a large circle with Kabbalistic signs inscribed round the circumference, retracing the faint marks with chalk to make them more clearly visible. Inside the circle he drew a triangle.

Next he tacked down on the floor some strips of skin which he explained had been cut from a virgin kid-goat decapitated on the third day of the moon. At two points of the triangle he placed two crowns of vervain and two lighted candles. Between them, a little towards the third point of the triangle, he set a brazier, which he kindled with blazing coals from the fireplace and fed with charcoal out of a sack.

After warning everyone on no account to utter a word, no matter what might happen, he took his stand just inside the triangle and asked for the lights to be switched off.

For a few moments there was visible only a dull red glow from the brazier. Then Sombart threw some petrol on to it from a bottle, and flames leapt towards the ceiling.

Raising a forked rod he began to mumble an incantation. He threw on a handful of powder and a puff of white smoke billowed upwards, filling the room with the sweet, heavy odour of incense. Again he began to chant:

"I present to thee, O great Adonay, this incense as the purest I can obtain; in like manner I present thee this charcoal prepared from the most ethereal of woods. I offer them, O grand and omnipotent Adonay, Eloim, Ariel and Jehovam, with my whole soul and my whole heart. Vouchsafe, O great Adonay, to receive them as an acceptable holocaust. Amen."

Turning round he whispered, "If any of you have any copper coins in your pockets, drop them on the floor. Keep any silver and gold coins you may have and throw them to the spirit when he appears to prevent him from harming you."

There was a rattle of coins on the floor. Sombart threw some camphor on to the brazier from another bottle and continued:

"Emperor Lucifer, Master and Prince of Rebellious Spirits, I adjure thee to leave thine abode, in whatsoever quarter of the world it may be situated, and come hither to communicate with me. I command and conjure thee to appear without noise and without any evil smell, to respond in a clear and intelligible voice, point by point, to all that I shall ask thee, failing which thou shalt be most surely compelled to obedience by the power of the divine Adonay, Eloim, Ariel, Jehovam, Tagla, Mathon and by the whole hierarchy of superior intelligences who shall constrain thee against thy will. Venité, venité! Submirilittor, Lucifuge, or eternal torment shall overwhelm thee, by the great power of this Blasting Rod. *In subito!*"

He pronounced these words in

tones of rising indignation, as though he were not the man to be kept waiting even by the Emperor Lucifer. And when at the end of the tirade there was no sign of any apparition, he turned round and bellowed: "If the spirits refuse to come I shall smite them by plunging this Blasting Rod into the burning coals. Then you will hear such fearful howls as you have never heard before, nor ever will again."

He paused for a moment expectantly, as if he knew quite well that the Prince of Rebellious Spirits stood within earshot. Raising both hands aloft he shouted at the top of his voice: "I adjure thee, O Spirit, by the power of the Grand Adonay to appear instanter, and by Eloim, by Ariel, by Jehovam, by Aqua, Tagla, Mathon, Oarios, Almoazin, Arios, Membrot, Varios, Pithona, Majodi, Sulphae, G a b o t i, Salamandrae, Taboti, Ginqua, Janna Etitnamus and Zariatnatmix!"

As he uttered the last three names his voice rose to a howl. There followed a dead silence.

Suddenly, like a pebble thrown into a still pool, there came a sound. There was a knock on the studio door.

A palpable shudder passed through the room. Dorice shrieked, and somebody gasped, "Turn on the lights!"

"Silence!" roared Sombart in a terrible voice. "Don't touch that switch."

Again came the knock.

"Stand back from the door," he commanded, somewhat unnecessarily as it happened, for the whole party was shrinking away to the far end of the studio like a flock of frightened sheep.

Sombart raised his rod. "Come in," he cried dramatically.

Slowly the door opened. There was a gasp of horror at the sight of a black figure standing in the doorway.

Then Sombart snapped on the lights and there was another gasp, this time of relief. In the doorway stood a clergyman with a mild, foolish-looking face lit with an expression of mincing piety.

When he spoke his voice and manner of speech exactly matched his appearance. "I—ah—I trust I am not intruding? I chanced to be returning from a late visit, and I heard what I fancied was someone in pain or distress."

This ludicrous interpretation of Sombart's melodramatic transports acted like the trigger of a gun. There was an explosion of laughter which shook the roof.

The little clergyman looked startled. Pinkerton, choking down his laughter, explained, "We're having a party, padre, come in and join us."

"Thank you." He advanced hesitantly. "Thank you very much indeed. My name is Minney. I—ah—have never had the pleasure of attending a party before—except at the Mothers' Union."

His eyes wandered round the room and he looked at the Kabbalistic Circle. "What is this, if I may ask? Is it some kind of round game?"

"Something equally childish," Ralph replied, with a malicious glance at Sombart who was looking extremely sulky.

"I must confess to feeling a little curious about these West End parties," said Mr. Minney. "I have heard they are apt to be somewhat—hilarious forms of entertainment."

"We were just waiting for you to come and help us make it more cheerful," Dorice replied wickedly. "This is a bottle party, you know."

"A bottle party?"

"Yes. Everyone has to bring a bottle of something to drink."

"Oh. Indeed. Well, as it happens I have a vessel of some beverage in my room which I brought back with me from Fiji where I was a missionary. I—ah—I don't know if that would be acceptable?"

"Sounds wonderful," said Chloe, putting an encouraging hand on his shoulder. He smiled nervously, left the room and reappeared a couple of minutes later carrying an earthenware jar with two handles.

"I am told that this liquid is used in their fire-walking ceremonies," he said doubtfully; "but I must confess I have never had the courage to taste any of it myself."

"You must try some now," Chloe told him, drawing the stopper and beginning to pour out. He shook his head and made a small mouth as if shocked.

"Well, bungho everybody." She raised her glass and drank. The others followed her example.

Ralph Pinkerton taking a cautious sip thought it immeasurably preferable to Sombart's crude concoction. True, it was extremely fiery and strong, but with each sip his mouth and throat grew more accustomed to it and the comforting feeling it gave his stomach was uncanny.

By the time he had emptied his glass he was in a state of exhilaration beyond anything he had ever known. The nearest thing to it which he could remember was in his younger days when he was with the R.A.F. His squadron had once got blind drunk on vodka, and had set fire to their mess hut, dancing round the flames like savages.

He was not surprised to see that it was affecting everybody. Chloe's

mannish voice sounded most unpleasant in his ears, and the harsh lines of her face made her look positively raddled. Dorice was capering about making such silly grimaces that he longed to beat her, while Sombart stalking round like a cheap imitation of Mephistopheles struck him as quite beyond the pale. Why did he allow such people in his house, he wondered. In future there would be no more of these ridiculous parties.

Someone put a record on the radiogram and one or two couples began dancing. Somebody else took it off, not approving of it, and immediately the room divided itself into two furiously contending factions. If Mr. Minney had not intervened, there might have been a free fight.

Looking somewhat taken aback by such behaviour, he suggested settling the dispute by fetching a record of some music which he said had been made at the Mission. The rumpus died down and the undergraduate whispered hoarsely to the lady novelist, "What's the betting it's 'Abide with Me' sung by the Fijian converts?"

But the record turned out to be something quite different. Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring" might give some faint idea of its obscene sugestiveness.

For a little while everyone listened in astonishment to the titillating drum-beats and the lewd wood-wind which exploded in the depths of the mind sending up fountains of subliminal mud. Then Sombart grabbed Dorice and began whirling her round in a close embrace. Most of the others followed his example. One of the few exceptions was Pinkerton who, with rising wrath, stood watching Sombart and his wife.

The record ended suddenly. Removing it, Mr. Minney looked around him with a nervous smile as if awaiting the verdict on his humble attempts to provide a little clean fun. There was a confused roar of approval, more animal than human, and Sombart shouted "Encore!"

"No," said Ralph, whose disapproval of Sombart was rapidly turning into furious hatred.

Sombart's eyes flashed. "Why not?"

"This happens to be my house."

Chloe came in between them. "Here, you two, no quarrelling. Come on, somebody, let's have a song. Padre, how about you?"

He smiled primly and shook his head. "Alas, no, I fear I have no voice."

"Can't you sing us a hymn?" asked the young actor, and laughed foolishly.

"As a matter of fact," Mr. Minney admitted, "I am said to possess some slight gift for caricature. If you insist——" He looked at Chloe timidly. There was a chorus of approval and encouragement. Dorice led him to the untouched canvas at the end of the studio and Pinkerton handed him some crayons.

After some hesitation, he began to draw. He drew with unexpected speed and deftness. In a few minutes he stood aside from his completed picture, looking anxiously at the faces of the party to observe its effect.

It was a startling picture. In the foreground frolicked a woolly lamb with a ribbon round its neck, and its foolish little face was the face of Dorice. Just behind her, licking his chops, stood a wolf, a mangy, scrawny wolf with the face of Sombart; and although the wolf's intentions were quite obvious, the sheep-dog in the picture, whose face was Chloe's, stood aside lewdly winking at him. A little apart, seated on a hillock, was Ralph Pinkerton, the shepherd, piping a tune, and so obviously wrapt in self-admiration that he was blind to the imminent fate of his lamb.

No words can describe the appalling potency of the picture, every line of which was pregnant with the most hideous implications. All around him Mr. Minney saw cheeks flushing and faces setting in a variety of ugly emotions. The room began to feel like a powder magazine.

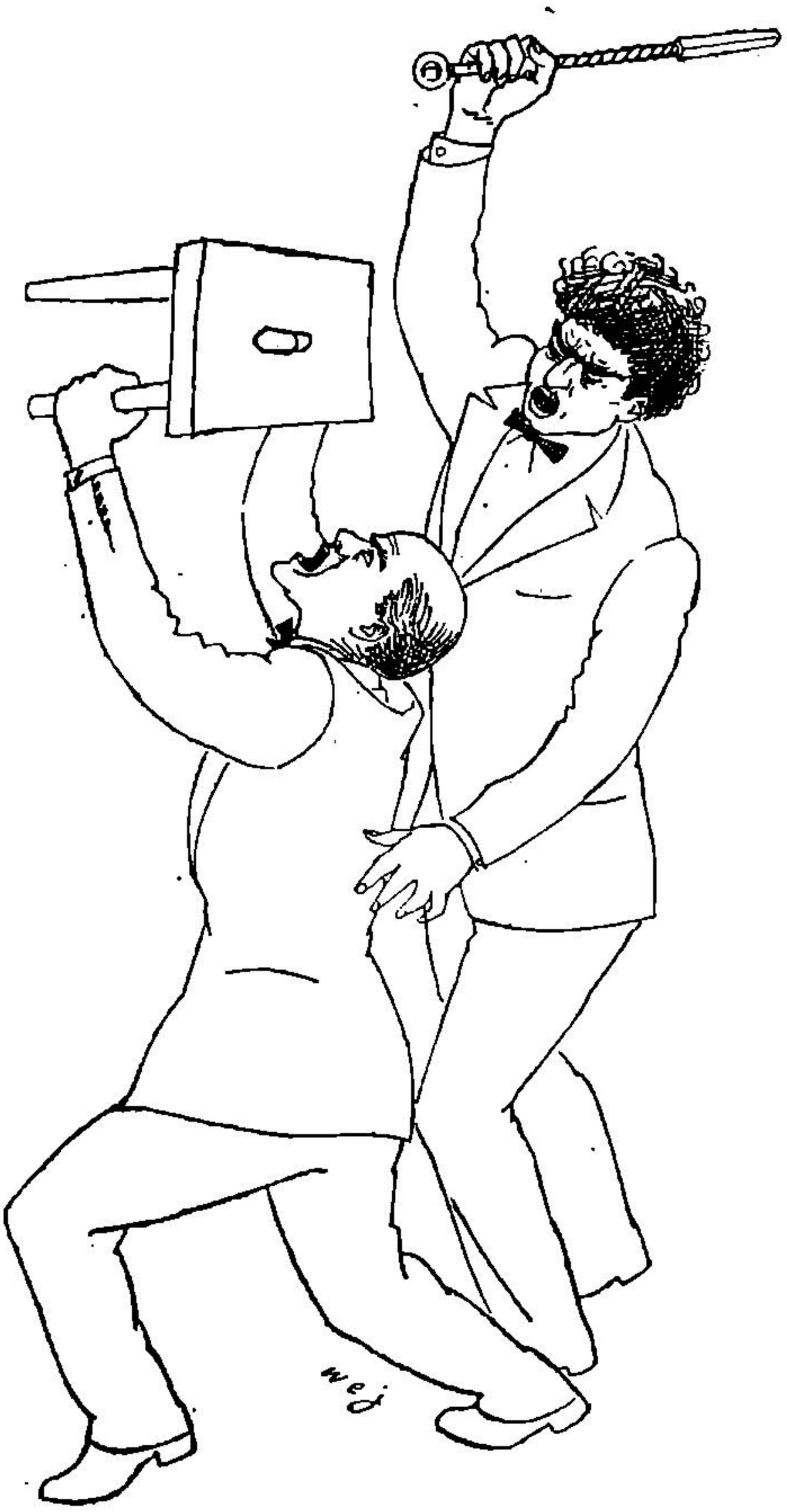
It was Sombart who supplied the spark. He gave a harsh, insulting laugh. At the sound of it Pinkerton felt the blood rushing to his head.

"What are you laughing at?" he demanded angrily.

"You. Ha!, ha! Can't you see? He's got you to a T. Those pipes——"

"If you were not a guest in my house," Ralph began furiously. Then curbing his wrath a little he spat out, "He's got you too. A mangy wolf! I wouldn't waste powder and shot on you."

Sombart's eyes blazed and he took a quick step forward, but Dorice clutched his arm. "Don't, Max. Don't take any notice of him."



"That's right, look after your wolf," sneered Pinkerton. "He'll be safe in the sheep-pen."

At these words Sombart uttered a snarl of rage and, pushing Dorice aside, lunged at Pinkerton so savagely that the artist sprang aside and picked up a heavy stool which had been used by his last sitter.

As he raised it aloft, Chloe stepped in front of him protestingly, but by

this time her brother was beside himself. He wrenched himself free from her restraining hand and made a rush at Sombart, who had snatchd up a poker from the fireplace. Dorice shrieked.

As he ran forward, Sombart sidestepped and brought the poker down with all his force on to the artist's bald head. Pinkerton crumpled up and sank to the floor like a poleaxed bullock.

Everything happened with such appalling suddenness that the others had scarcely realized the danger when they saw their host stretched lifeless on the floor.

It was not until the first sharp shock of horror had passed and the police had been phoned for that anyone paused to consider what had happened to Mr. Minney.

The critic it was who asked this question, and the young actor, pale and coughing, who answered it. He was not the only person who was coughing. The atmosphere of the room had become sharp and acrid, as if someone had been burning sulphur.

"I caught sight of him sneaking out after—after the fight. He turned round in the doorway and—I swear I'm not imagining it—I heard him chuckle."

"Chuckle?"

"Yes. And I noticed another thing. He—he had a cloven foot!"

Incens'd with indignation Satan stood
Unterrifi'd, and like a comet burn'd
That fires the length of Ophiucus huge
In th' arctic sky, and from his horrid hair
Shakes pestilence and war.

JOHN MILTON (1608–1674): *Paradise Lost.*

The Devil's most devilish when respectable.

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING (1806–1861).

HIS SECOND MOST INTERESTING CASE

TERRAVE BURNERN

HE OFFICERS, and the detectives especially, in their professional contacts with Professor Hartmann, had come to consider him an unpleasant man, more given to pointing out their own ignorance of criminal history than to dealing with the case at hand.

"Striking parallel to the 'Sloth and Hatchet' business, eh, officer?"

"Uh, well, no, I don't believe I remember that one——"

"London, S.W.1, officer. 1910. Nasty piece of business it was, too. Oh yes. Yes, a *very* nasty piece of business. Brandy, officer?"

At best they considered him "a funny old bird."

The Police Commissioner, a dense man of highly genteel ambitions, had since early schooldays nursed a youth's-hero image of the Professor, who visited the small college one day and gave an incredibly engaging talk on the art and science of criminology —at a time when the Commissioner was still a student of Business Accounting. Now, the Commissioner, despite intervening years of infrequent contact with the Professor, had further come to identify the great man with all that was desirable in life —culture and comfort, a lively pride and interest in one's own work—and, himself, to aspire vaguely to the world he imagined to be thereof. He regretted most of all the waste of his own education, and, perhaps because of it, he had provided a small criminal and cultural library for his men, just as he insisted, too, that his senior officers consult the Professor as often as possible.

"Get a copy of the book *Hamlet*," he would tell his secretary tersely, after reading a paper of the Professor's, "and a copy of the book *The Brothers Karamazov*. I want these put in the Patricide Section. Wait. Yes, also get a copy of the book *Œdipus*. Tell Burnett and Avakian to make an appointment tomorrow with Professor Hartmann; get his opinion on this Fineman business. Have them report to me immediately after."

At the University, the Professor was generally thought of by his colleagues as a distinguished scholar, a man of wit and sophistication, a gracious and generous host. His students, on the other hand, held, by and large, a simple, unquestioning reverence for him, slightly tempered by fear—though one of the more studious, introverted ones told seriously of a recurrent dream in which the Professor committed heinous crimes for the sake of pure theory; and, it is only fair to add, some few students—perhaps the less successful ones—considered the ageing master to be "an impossible old *devil*."

My reason for seeing Professor Hartmann this particular day, though I had longed to meet him, was in having come across an advertisement announcing his readiness to dispose of a 13th-century arms collection, certain pieces of which interested me at the time.

It was late, dreary afternoon when I reached his manor home, waited at the entrance after ringing the bell, and looked about the spacious grounds.

"John Welch?"

"Yes. You are . . . Professor Hartmann?" Though, in truth, there was no mistaking it: an elderly man of vast assurance, magnificently thin and silver, eyes with a dark, searing depth.

"Yes. Please come in."

In the hall, we exchanged the usual amenities, and, after bestowing my coat and umbrella, we went directly into the Professor's comfortable study. Like the man himself, there was something substantial and yet exquisite about these quarters. Darkly gleaming panels and dullish red-rich morocco bindings were delicately balanced by the scattered ornamentation of Japanese prints, faintly iridescent in the fireside glow, tiny precious-jewelled daggers from the East, and glistening stilettos, thin as a blade of wheat.

"I'm having brandy, Mr. Welch. If you would prefer a cocktail, however. . . ."

"Brandy will be fine, thank you."

We sat in two great leather chairs, half facing each other, before the fire.

"You know the collection, I believe," the Professor began.

"Yes, I had the pleasure of seeing it on several occasions, before . . . before the unfortunate . . . Well, there were certain heaumes——"

"*Cer-tain* heaumes, eh? Ha! *Cer-tain* heaumes and *cer-tain* glaives, I dare say. Oh, I know nothing of the business!"

The Professor knew a great deal, but he was in grand good humour now. "Though perhaps you do know," I countered, with a show of delicate malice, "that a rather curious history now attaches to this collection."

A curious history, indeed. The collection had been the property of the late Dr. Keith, whose nephew, Louis Weber, a graduate student at the University, was studying under the Professor at the time of the old man's strange death. Young Weber was in the guardianship of Dr. Keith and shared his extensive apartments in Westbrook, quite near the University. One afternoon, when the finicky, crotchety old man—for so he was known to be—failed to answer his door—(Young Weber was in his upstairs room, studying. He heard his uncle leave the apartment, and return around four o'clock. When he came downstairs, at about ten minutes past four, wishing to see the Doctor for his allowance, he knocked at the door. There was no answer. He tried the door, found it locked from the inside) —he called the police.

Dr. Keith had appointed his rooms in many instances with items from his collection of antiquities. This door was an ancient solid oak, four inches thick, banded with wrought-iron, and secured inside, in addition to a

modern, double-locking device, by a monumental Bavarian castle-latch. It took the wrecking crew four hours to open it. They found the uncle, fully dressed, lying on his bed, one hand to his brow. On the night-stand by the bed was a half-filled decanter of red wine, and an empty glass, freshly used. The glass, upon subsequent analysis, revealed heavy traces of a cyanide compound, as did an empty, brown bottle in the night-stand drawer. The wine in the decanter, however, was not contaminated.

Young Weber called in the Professor, for he found it difficult to believe that his uncle would commit suicide without leaving a message; and there was none. The Professor was sympathetic, because the youth was a brilliant student, perhaps the most brilliant theorist that had come to him. He examined the room; its one window was a narrow Gothic casement, fitted with heavy cross-bars, solidly set in slab-stone. Impassable. The autopsy showed death by cyanide poisoning, and the examiner's verdict was suicide. There were no dissenting opinions brought forward.

Louis Weber had remained at the University, finishing his Doctorate, and confirming the faculty's esteem for his outstanding ability. Four years later, however, at the instigation of the Professor, he was indicted for the murder of his uncle, and confessed.

"Take more brandy, sir," Professor Hartmann was saying now. "Ha! I believe you find it to your taste!"

It *was* excellent brandy.

"My vice is talk, you see," the Professor went on grandly. "Purity. Talk is pure, relates to nothing. They say I'm a great teacher. No doubt! I'm obsessed with talk. Perhaps you've heard me lecture. Some say I'm the greatest speaker since Coleridge. It may be that I am greater than Coleridge; there are resources I have not yet drawn upon." He paused, sipping his brandy, regarding me over the glass with quizzical askance. Then he wagged a finger in playful accusation. "And I *know* you, sir! You are a crackpot, too, with all your heaumes and halberds. What unspeakable fantasies must breed in that mind of yours! Eh? Ha ha!"

I raised a hand in mock protest, but the Professor gently waved it aside. "*Yes*, I know you! You'd like to hear more of this case, for example; the curious history which attaches here to *cer-tain* skean and *cer-tain* mace! Yes, I warrant!"

"Well, yes. I suppose a collector does enjoy relating these bits of . . . of *hearsay*."

"Ha! Excellent, Mr. Welch! *Excellent!* Hearsay is correct. Talk. Know, sir, that a brilliant young mind—Louis Weber—is now locked away for ever, simply because I could not resist saying *one more sentence*, could not resist rounding out the paragraph, as it were. An abstraction, purely an abstraction! And the old fool, Keith? A pompous ass he was! A heartless man; a loan-shark, actually. 'Thick Keith,' he was called. Absurd figure . . . well, *la justice est fait, quand même*, eh? Ha!"

Despite the bitter edge of irony in the Professor's voice, it was evident that beneath it he felt a deep amuse-

ment for his own fleeting sentimentality, which he even humoured then by turning his gaze wistfully to the fire —though his mouth never quite gave up the slight, indelible curl, the cynic's smile.

"As you suggest," I prompted him seriously, "I should like very much to hear the story. I know you are on record as having once called it your 'most interesting case.'"

"Not *quite*, sir. Let us say, my *second* most interesting case—however, you will remember the basic situation: Old Keith left the apartment every day at three o'clock, to return, quite punctually, at four. Young Weber's last class was out at two, so he was generally at home when the old man departed, and when he returned—as, indeed, he was this day. Now, we'll not go into the psychic syndromes of Louis Weber for the moment, and I will tell you, simply, *what* he did. At about three-thirty, he comes downstairs and puts on a pair of rubber gloves—property of old Keith's, for the old man, before his retirement, had been a physician of sorts. Then, taking an empty pill-bottle from the medicine cabinet, carefully holding it by top and bottom, so as not to disturb the old man's prints there, he scrapes the label away and deposits, from a paper envelope, one of the two cyanide-type tablets it contains, tablets which he had compounded to specification at the school laboratory. He agitates the bottle gently, very gently, so that a few minute particles flake off, leaving traces of the poison there. He now passes through the library and into the adjoining study, where old Keith spent most of his time. Here, on a stand by the daybed, the old man keeps a decanter of red wine and a glass. Weber empties the tablet from the pill-bottle into the glass, which he then fills with wine from the decanter. He allows this mixture to sit undisturbed for a minute or two, stirring it finally with a pencil that lies on the stand next to an account-ledger, taking care again, holding the pencil by its very top, not to interfere with the prints—which are certainly present, since old Keith works with this ledger every night in calculating profit from his latest foreclosure or eviction—not that I wish to sound a moral note at this point, however. Oh no, to each his due, eh, John Welch? Well, the pencil is returned to its place, between the ledger and the decanter; and the empty pill-bottle is put in the drawer of the stand, which Weber opened by the edges. Next, holding the glass of poisonous wine by the rim, he takes it to the kitchen, where he empties it into the sink, returns now to the study and puts the glass back in its original place on the stand, but slightly nearer the edge, a bit closer to the bed, you see. So! One phase of the work is complete, and he retires to the library. Here, he removes his gloves and replaces them in the medical kit—during the transference of the cyanide, he has been quite careful not to touch the tablet, so there is no need in discarding or destroying the gloves. From the sideboard he takes two glasses and another decanter of wine, the same

wine, of course—Beaujolais '39, quite good, actually—and sits down with these at the library table. He fills his glass and drinks; then, he fills it again, so that there remains in the decanter only enough wine for one more glass—he ascertains this by measuring it out into the empty glass, and pouring it back again, wiping the glass clean then with a paper tissue from his pocket. Also from his pocket comes now the envelope, and the second cyanide tablet, which he drops into the decanter. It is five minutes to four. During the remaining time he burns the envelope and the tissue in an ash-tray, which he empties into the fireplace; and he shakes the decanter once or twice.

"At about four his uncle arrives.

" 'Hello there,' says the youngster, looking up from the decanter, tilting it as though just in the process of filling his own glass. He beckons. 'Come in, I have news for you. A momentous decision! I've decided that we ought to extend your guardianship and powers of attorney—for some time.'

" 'Eh? What's this?'

" 'Well, I mean, I'm pretty young —and, frankly, I'm not sure I could manage a lot of money too well. You seem to know about business and that sort of thing, and I was just thinking that if you had a *free hand* —I mean, with the money Dad left me, why you could do something with it—you know, invest it; that way I wouldn't get into anything over my head. What do you think about it?'

" 'I think,' replies the uncle, sitting down heavily, 'that *that* is the most *sensible* thing you've ever said!'

" 'Good,' says young Weber, 'it's certainly a load off my mind. Here, let's drink to it; we'll get the lawyer over tonight.'

"He fills the other glass, and raises his own in a toast. 'Here's to health —and to *wealth*!' and he downs his wine in one quick draught.

"Old Keith, aglow with avaricious delight, follows suit.

" 'Do you really believe that?' the boy asks suddenly, in clear, even tones.

" 'Eh! What's this?'

" 'What I just told you is the very antithesis of my decision! Let me tell you what I have really decided. I have decided to *kill* you.' And having announced this, in quite deliberate, well-measured tones, mind you, he rises from his chair and starts slowly around the table, allowing his face then to gradually take on an aspect of resolute fanaticism, of inflexible madness. '*Kill you*,' he shouts insanely, 'with your own monstrous devices!' And he brandished from his pocket then a pair of Borgian thumbscrews—prize items in the old man's collection.

"The uncle, at first petrified, was shocked into motion then—by the shout if nothing else. He was up from the table, out of the library in a bound, and into the safety of his study, double-locked the door and threw the great bolt home—thanking God, no doubt, that he had kept it in good working order—and then, dropped dead. Eh? But no! Not quite! It wasn't calculated that way, you see, that a man drop dead, just inside the door, breaking something perhaps,

sprawling, a finicky man like that, so imperfectly dead. Oh no, John Welch! Perhaps you'll suggest, however, that a more precise calculation would be *complex*? Yes, indeed. Yes, it might be difficult to exaggerate the complexity of such calculations. And yet—when the knowledge of age, metabolism, cardiac response are to hand, the knowledge of chemistry, of behaviour pattern—there are certain *equations,* sir. Complex, Mr. Welsh? Yes, for there was a telephone in that room, you see.

"Still, what would the old man do? Cross the room, sit down on the bed, his hand an inch from the phone, and try to collect his thoughts: Is the nephew insane? Was it a joke? Shall he phone the police? Will he be made to look a complete fool? Scandal? A blind ego, you see, does not easily perceive a betrayal so complete. Ten seconds pass. Fifteen. Twenty. Half a minute of hesitation at the phone (not that there was any real danger of his using the phone. Naturally, there were others in the apartment—one in the library, in fact, and young Weber had engaged it, had taken it off the hook, as soon as old Keith was in the study) and his head is no longer clear; this strengthens the ambivalence, for he does not suspect poison, he only suspects, now, his own ambivalence. He knows something is wrong, but he can't think! Meanwhile, the nephew, after washing the glass and decanter, and replacing them on the sideboard, knocks at the door. 'It was only a joke,' he says, 'what's the matter, you didn't think I was serious?' Old Keith hardly hears him; he's trying to think, to get things straight! Why did he come here? What was he going to do? He is trying to remember, remember, remember. He lies back on the pillow, he's not feeling well; he must try to collect himself, one hand to his brow. And *there*, he remained."

The Professor's narrative ended as abruptly as it began, and I felt I was waiting—waiting for the one sentence that would round out the paragraph, so to speak.

"You *do* understand," he continued at once, "what had happened here, Mr. Welch? The student had produced the consummate in criminology—the Locked-door Murder. His final examination, one might say. It was a gift, you see, an apple for the teacher. Flattering, of course, because it has no known parallel in the history of crime. Naturally, however, when the time came, I had to remain the *teacher*; I had to grade his paper, so to speak. He understood, of course."

"Of course," I lied.

"Yes, it was almost four years later that we met in Paris. We had dinner together—a delightful little place, the Métro Bar, do you know it?—the boy made a remark, during coffee, the merest, chance remark, quite irrelevant really, but, of course, from that moment on——"

"What was it?" I blurted.

"Ah, *that*," the Professor took it up grandly. "Ha! It's getting a bit late to begin on—on my *most interesting case*, sir! Perhaps after dinner; you *will* stay?"

THE GREY LADY OF GLENGARRION

ALAN STUART

Illustrated by Leslie Domeny

Alan Stuart has been a free-lance journalist for the past twenty years. His first novel, a thriller entitled The Unwilling Agent, *is being published by Ward Lock shortly. Having given up the security of an accountant's life, Mr. Stuart travelled to Canada, America, New Zealand and Australia, to West, to East and South Africa; he settled for a time in Bengal, toured Ceylon and has now returned to London to write.*

This tale of a rapacious haunting, has been included to disturb those of our readers smug enough to see a smirk in every ghostly manifestation. It should afford them many unquiet moments to read of a chase where the phantom hunter is implacable, and the human victim powerless to appease.

IT WAS LATE afternoon when I arrived at the tiny wayside station in Wester Ross after a tiring journey from London. I was not in the best of tempers, as I had certainly expected some sort of conveyance to meet me, and as none had materialized I was faced by a fairly long walk.

August had given place to September, and there was a dying scent in the air as I left the station behind and set off along the road which had been pointed out by the station-master. A good deal of rain had fallen, and the

trees dripped water dismally about my neck; already the leaves were gathering in the ditches and on the verges, although the boughs were by no means bare.

Autumn has always depressed me, and the road along which I was now making my way did little to lighten my thoughts. Downhill it ran for a time, jumped an old, humped-back bridge, and then swung away to the right. Trees were thick and dark about me and, in the fast-dying light, the gloom was awesome. Somewhere away to the left a river was in spate, rushing over rocky ledges, winding in and out so that the sound of its flowing was at times loud and close, at others muted and almost indistinguishable from the rustle of the leaves.

There was no sign of life save when a rabbit started across the road ahead, paused to watch my approach, and then darted back into the bracken. At times the sound of a dipper filled the evening air with light music, but such cheering sounds were few and far between. The whole landscape gave me the shivers, and I was inclined to curse John Grant for his carelessness in not having me picked up. After all, it was eight good miles to Glengarrion.

I had undertaken this tiresome journey at his urgent request and because he was obviously in some sort of trouble. His invitation had been long and rambling, full of obscure quotations from unknown books and, although I consulted a knowledgeable librarian, he couldn't make head nor tail of them. As a matter of fact, I believe he thought me a trifle touched, informed me that the books from which the quotation had been taken were hundreds of years old and unobtainable in any ordinary library. They dealt with out-of-the-way folklore and mythology.

The whole tone of the letter had puzzled me and, as I had little enough to do with my time, I decided to accept the invitation without loss of time. John Grant was a very old friend, and if he was in trouble it was up to me to offer a helping hand. But as I progressed along that dismal road, with night fast advancing and ominous clouds banking in the sky, I half wished myself back in my comfortable digs.

My friendship with Grant dated from away before the war, in which we had served together. Although opposites by nature we had been thrown together a good deal, and the war years sealed our respect for each other. After discharge from the Forces, we had a wild spree in London, and then he returned home with a light heart and thoughts of fishing and shooting. For a time I had been inundated with invitations to join him, but after a time these stopped and I heard no more from him, although I noticed a paragraph in the newspapers about his purchase of Glengarrion House. That would have been soon after the death of his parents. As a matter of fact, it was after this change of address that the invitations had stopped abruptly.

I had almost forgotten about Grant's existence when the letter arrived to set me off on my travels.

Having tramped for a few miles under the trees, my suitcase becoming heavier at every step, I emerged upon open country with hills rising sharply on either side to form Glengarrion. There was a narrow loch on whose waters the moon, now riding among the cloud-banks, shone with a chilly light. I was startled by the sudden rise of a heron from the tall rushes by the water's edge. It gained height and flew off over the loch in the general direction of the house. But I now had little enough time to devote to the scenery.

The road had deteriorated to a rutted track, and the intermittent light of the moon caused me to stumble into potholes and puddles as I trudged along. At last I rounded the head of the loch and the house came in view, momentarily bathed in moonbeams, a massive square with four sturdy turrets piercing the grey-blue skyline. The main mass of the building was indistinct, but from what I could make out it was almost a ruin. It stood on the brink of the loch with the water lapping under the very walls.

At last I stood under the walls of undressed stone, looking up at the narrow slits of windows evenly spaced but uninviting. The door before me was a tremendous affair of two leaves, heavily studded with iron bolts. It was tight shut, but I found a rusted chain with knob attached and pulled on it lustily.

The sound of a harsh bell echoed about inside as though from a distance, and as I stood waiting my feeling of uneasiness increased. The place seemed deserted and exuded an air of decay. As I waited in the darkness near panic seized me, and I was about to hammer on the door with my fists when it opened silently. I was trembling.

Inside, the house was in darkness except for a small circle of yellow light round the figure of a man. He stood with a lantern held aloft so that the beam played on me. He was small and, unless it was a trick of the uncertain light, deformed. His head was an untidy mass of red hair over an abnormally large and domed brow. His features were narrow and almost met in a point at the chin. The sharp nose was crooked, and the mouth, so far as I could make out, was harelipped and cruel. He was clad in a suit of rust-brown.

Silently he stood aside and allowed me to pass inside, and I cannot describe the crawling sensation of horror that assailed me as he passed temporarily out of sight, closing the door fast behind me.

I was in a narrow hall with a wide staircase running up into the darkness ahead, and when I say that I sensed rather than saw the tattered banners drooping from the walls, you may guess the acuteness of my nervous tension. I would willingly have rushed out and down the road and forgotten my visit to this eerie mansion, but the small man had moved round me and was ascending the staircase. I followed close behind the inadequate light.

There was a narrow landing with passages leading off to right and left, and we turned in the latter direction,

my heart beating fast as I tried to account for my uneasiness and wondered what I would find at the end. The passages seemed interminable, running and turning, mounting steps only to descend again. They were mostly so narrow that my outstretched hands could contact both walls. Windows occurred at long intervals, set deep in the stone. The sky must have cleared quite a bit, because shafts of moonlight shone in, blue and strong.

The little man was literally tripping along, the lantern bobbing up and down, and the sound of his asthmatic breathing weirdly sighing against the silence. My footsteps rang out on the flagstones, but he moved with a strange lack of sound, almost as though his feet did not touch the floor. And then, at last, when I had practically given up hope of ever reaching anywhere in this labyrinth, he halted before a door. Without a preliminary knock he threw it open, and I stepped past him into a dimly lit room.

Most of the illumination came from a blazing log fire in an open hearth surrounded by an enormous and elaborately carved fireplace of yellow stone. There was an oil-lamp set carelessly among papers and books littered over a massive refectory table. Seated, or perhaps crouching would convey a better description, in a tall-backed chair by the fire was the man I had come to see.

Certainly a number of features were recognizable, but he was woefully changed. As he rose, I uttered a cry of surprise and dismay.

Grant had been a breezy fellow, hearty to a fault, full of rude energy and a typical outdoor sportsman; now he was thin almost to the very bone, and this thinness was accentuated by the fact that he had not obtained new clothes, and the old tweed suit hung in folds from his bent shoulders. It was stained and worn, and the trousers were glazed and baggy at the knees. The brightness had gone from his blue eyes, leaving grey pools in which lurked the shadow of fear; they stared oddly and underneath were blue pouches of loose skin. The wide brow was deeply furrowed, and a lock of black hair hung unnoticed over one eye. His

cheek-bones were made more prominent by the sunken jawline, and his mouth drooped at the corners. As he stared at me wildly, it twitched in a pitiful manner.

There was no sign of recognition, and for a minute he stood undecided and puzzled. Then understanding swept over him, and a weary smile forced itself over his mouth as he shambled across the floor. The hand grasping mine was clammy and cold, and I could feel every bone.

"Alan!" he exclaimed with relief as though he had expected some other and more dreadful visitor. "It is good to see you again. Come and sit down by the fire." Still holding my hand as though reluctant to let it go, he led me to a deep arm-chair. I dropped my case thankfully, threw off my raincoat and sat down. He returned to his chair, and stared at me silently for a long time. I grew more and more uncomfortable, but at last he spoke, attempting to keep his thoughts on what he was saying but always breaking off to glance vaguely into corners or at the door.

"Yes, indeed, it's good to see you after all these years. I hope I have not troubled you too much, but I knew you'd oblige an old friend." He broke off and peered fixedly at the door, and I followed his glance apprehensively. There was nothing to be seen.

"But you're ill, John. You should be in bed, with a doctor looking after you," I managed to say. For a space he did not seem to understand, and then he grasped my meaning and laughed shrilly.

"Doctor! Yes, yes, of course. I am ill, ill. . . ." He repeated the word until his voice gradually faded to a whisper. I moved uneasily in my chair. The place was getting a grip of me, but I was determined to throw it off at once.

"What on earth's the matter with you," I cried impatiently. "You're sitting there in a trance. Damn it, what's come over you?"

"Aye, Alan, you'll find me changed. That's why I asked you to come. I must get back to my old way of life; I must fight before it's too late, but I need someone normal to help me." I saw clearly that he was speaking the words without conviction, without hope, that he was already defeated, and was only trying to persuade himself that a return to ordinary life was possible.

"What in heaven's name tempted you to bury yourself in a great place like this in the first place?" I asked, and thoughtlessly added, "It can be neither comfortable nor healthy. You must have been out of your mind." He looked at me almost slyly out of the corner of his eye.

"Out of my mind, eh? Yes. That's what it is, Alan. I'm out of my mind."

He rose and started pacing up and down. "But, then, you have not seen Glengarrion in the late spring when the wild flowers are blooming and the water of the loch is soft and blue and the wild swan floats on its surface as on a priceless mirror. You have not seen the hills rising green-blue into the mist and heard the dipper sing down there below the wall." He was speaking quickly, in a low voice, and

the words faded at times until I could scarcely understand.

"No, you have not seen the glen in late spring nor in summer as it was when Rory Macleod persuaded me to buy it for a song. That was the beginning of the end for me, Alan. I descended out of the sunlight, lower and lower, into spiritual darkness until it has blinded me to all else."

I noted with surprise the high-flown speech, far removed from his usual racy talk. There was in the telling of the beauty of Glengarrion something horrid and repellent.

"At first all went on well enough. I had agreed to keep Kennedy—that's the fellow who let you in," Grant continued, and then laughed sharply and the high-pitched sound was repeated from the walls in a terrifying manner. "He's the only servant who would stay within these walls. He cooks and darns and looks after me. He's dumb, of course."

I thought he was relapsing into his usual use of slang terms, but it was not so. He meant the word dumb literally. Suddenly he thrust his shrunken face close to mine and whispered:

"Do you know how old he is? No, of course you don't. He's two hundred years and more!"

I felt the hairs on my neck rise, and a shiver ran through my body. I found that I was sweating and yet was chilled to the bone. Grant resumed his ceaseless pacing. He had forgotten Kennedy.

"It was this room that changed me," he muttered. "I was all right when I first came up here, but the room got hold and won't let go. Look at it, Alan; look well at it."

On the face of it there was nothing wrong. It was not a cheerful room, and the lack of light did not help. Instinctively I knew that I would be afraid to remain in it alone. It must have been situated in one of the turrets; it was almost circular, and the roof was away up out of sight in the darkness. A slit of window high up gave a glimpse of moonlight. The walls were lined with shelves and racks on to which musty folios in tattered leather bindings had been stacked, and what furniture there was dated from the seventeenth century; all except the chair in which I sat.

Suddenly he gripped my shoulder, the bony fingers biting through the cloth.

"Let me show you the secret," he shrilled excitedly, and forced me out of the chair and over to the shelves. He picked up the lamp and ran its light along the wide-spaced rows. I noted the titles at the time, but cannot now recall what they were. I have been doing my best to forget for some time.

Frantically he clawed down volume after volume, some written in Latin, some bound manuscripts, many in a language I did not understand. The dust rose in clouds, but he did not notice.

Then he dragged me back to the table and pointed to a book he had been reading. I picked it up. It was heavy, about the size of a family Bible. On the spine the title was traced in rough letters, "The Glaistig of Glean Garrione House." It was

in manuscript and extremely old. I laid it aside carefully; I knew what a glaistig was all right, that mysterious lady of mythology, and in my mind began to form an image of what was haunting my friend out of his senses.

"After I discovered this room, I made it my den. The books amused me at first. It was only when I discovered that manuscript that the change came about." His eyes were darting away into the corners of the room, as though he expected to see the weird, green-clad figure becoming manifest. I felt stifled, as though there was not enough oxygen in the air.

"But surely you don't believe in this sort of thing?" I asked incredulously. He turned on me fiercely.

"Would you not believe if you had seen her? If you knew she was with you every minute of the day?"

The loneliness of the house, the lack of company and the strange diet of literature had obviously gone to Grant's head. The sooner he was removed from these surroundings, the sooner would he recover from this unfortunate malaise. That he feared the ghost was certain, yet, no matter how I reasoned with him, he would not allow himself to be persuaded that he was free to leave.

"Don't you see, Alan," he asked pleadingly. "I can't get away from her. She'll follow me wherever I go now."

It is hopeless to argue with a semi-demented man, and I gave up the attempt for the time being at least. Kennedy brought in a meal on a tray, and there was a bottle of claret to wash it down. Both were excellent, and my spirits revived; but when the time came to retire for the night all my old misgivings thronged back.

Grant conducted me to my room, through innumerable narrow passages.

"I hope you'll be comfortable," he said unconvincingly, and without another word turned and disappeared down the passage in the direction of his study. I was left with the candle he had used to light me to my room, the brass holder was tall and heavy, carved into a snake design and infinitely old. I set it down on a small table by the bed and commenced a round of exploration.

The apartment was small, the walls hung with faded tapestries from which the design had all but vanished. The bed, a four-poster, faced the door, and this, along with the table and a tall-backed chair, was the entire furnishing. There was an inshot in the wall, covered by a chintz cover, in which to hang clothes. My bag had been brought to the room, reluctantly, by Kennedy, and stood on the bare floor. The memory of the man, with his queer green eyes and fiery hair, sent me quickly to the door to turn the key. There was a stout bolt, and this I also adjusted against prowlers.

Before undressing I turned to the window which looked out over the loch. The moonlight was bright and the scene calm and unruffled. I attempted to open the long casement, but it was quite immovable.

I got ready for bed without enthusiasm, certain that I would not sleep; but the bed was more comfortable than I had supposed and soon I was nodding. The candle guttered sluggishly, the flame weaving to and fro in the draught. I blew sharply, and it was out. Soon I was fast asleep.

It must have been about two o'clock when I woke. What had disturbed me was not at once apparent. There was an empty silence for a few seconds, and then the most frightful din broke out somewhere below. Pots and pans seemed to be thrown about, and there was a sound of voices. I was about to rise and investigate when the noise ceased abruptly. For a time I lay listening, but only the scratching of mice or rats broke the silence.

I must have dozed off again, half sitting up in bed, for the next thing I knew I was wide awake and staring into the darkness by the door. I felt the bedclothes being twitched at the foot of the bed, and I distinctly heard the sound of laughter. It came from the side of the room near the door. I blinked my eyes and stared harder. Gradually pin pricks of goose-flesh crept up my legs, and I actually felt the hair of my head stand erect. There was a figure in the gloom!

The door was closed as before, but the figure was standing looking at me steadily. It was a woman, tall and slim, with golden hair falling to her waist. Her garments were of a filmy,

green material, girdled at the waist. It was her face that sent fear crawling round my stomach. It was slate grey. She seemed to be staring through me, and then she laughed. It was more a giggle, but the features did not change. Slowly she turned and left the room.

I am normally a hard head and believe as much as can be proved, and I didn't intend to be intimidated. I cleared the edge of the bed in a bound and was across the floor in no time, and it was at this point that I began to have doubts. Instead of finding the door unlocked, it refused to open to my tug. The door was still locked and the bolt fast. Nothing human could have passed through the solid oak, and there had been no time to unlock and lock the door again. I passed the remainder of the night, wrapped in a dressing-gown but shivering, seated in the uncomfortable chair. I was firmly resolved to be gone from the house in the morning.

That had been my resolution, and time and again I have wished that I had insisted on carrying it out, but Grant persuaded me otherwise. I stayed on for a week, and it was thus that I was present at the final tragedy.

Strangely enough, the week passed uneventfully. We walked in the hills a good deal in the daytime, and my friend began to look better. His colour was coming back, and the pouches beneath the eyes had all but disappeared. Although the improvement in Grant's condition was still only obvious during the day, I began to hope that he might be persuaded to come away with me when I finally travelled south. But the evenings still found him back in that eerie turret-room, nervous and ill at ease, the strengthening exercise, the sunlight and the good fresh air forgotten. His life was a perpetual see-saw.

For my own part, I had almost succeeded in dismissing the experience of the first night as the fevered imaginings of a nightmare, almost but not quite, for in my mind I knew perfectly well that what had taken place had not been conjured out of an excited brain.

And so we came to the night of the final tragedy. It opened even more promisingly than usual. I persuaded Grant away from his beastly books and manuscripts for a time, and we actually had a most interesting game of chess before supper. We retired soon afterwards.

I had largely recovered from my dread of the bedroom, and was able to sleep in snatches at least. Nevertheless, I had taken to sleeping in my clothes, only removing my shoes and jacket and loosening my collar and tie; and it was thus that I lay down on the big four-poster and was soon asleep.

What caused me to waken I do not know. There was something in the air. I lay gazing at the top of the bed, trying to lull myself back to sleep but unsuccessfully. I glanced at my watch, and as I did so an unearthly scream rang out. It was half-shout, half-scream, but I'll swear it came from no human throat.

In a second I was out of bed and pulling on my shoes. Grant's room

was next to mine, but the walls were too thick for me to hear what he was doing. As I grabbed my jacket I heard his door open, but when I reached the passage he was gone. In the distance I could hear him shouting, and there was a strange, mocking echo after each shout. It came from above. I ran along in the direction of a stair, which I now knew led to one of the

and my whole body trembling. I, too, was shouting, shouting madly to Grant, shouting to have the door opened, but it was shut fast. I could hear John on the other side speaking. When I called his name, the voice stopped for a second, and then the scream came again and yet again. What in God's name was happening beyond the door?

turrets overlooking the loch, Grant's voice leading me on. I plunged upward, round the corkscrew staircase, round and round, unable to see what was taking place above. I reached the top. The door leading to the roof was locked.

As I tugged at the ungainly handle, the same unearthly scream rang out again. I was desperate with fear, the palms of my hands wet with sweat

Giving up the attempt to open the door, I rushed headlong down the stairs, falling and recovering. I reached the long passages and raced down the main staircase to the outer door. It was open.

As I ran from the house, a cold shiver went through my body and something seemed to whisper that I was too late. As I reached the loch-side and rounded the corner of the

house something hurtled through the air and landed at my feet. It was Grant. Instinctively I leaped back from the broken thing that lay half in the dark water. On the face there was a look of terrible suffering and horror. I instinctively glanced upwards.

A grey face was peering over the side of the parapet, and long strands of golden hair flew wild in the wind, curling to and fro like uneasy serpents. I heard the same spine-chilling, giggling noise that I had heard in my bedroom on the first night of my visit. Then, in a flash, the face had disappeared.

When I turned again to the body of my friend, the servant was crouching down beside it; I had not heard him come out of the house. I could not suppress a scream. As he crouched there in the still darkness, I saw a transformation take place. The clothes seemed to fall from his body and his face distorted into a caricature of intense brutality. His body was covered with rough hair, and he rocked and gibbered away in some guttural tongue. His green eyes flashed under low craggy brows. His teeth seemed larger and more prominent, and there was a look of intense hatred in his face.

With that one scream I turned and fled from the place. As I ran, stumbling down the rutted track, I could hear his voice wailing against the wind, and I did not ease up until I came through the long avenue of trees and saw the few cottages and wayside station ahead. Only once had I dared to glance over my shoulder, and the house was shimmering in an unearthly blue light.

Of course the station was locked up for the night, but I was so ill from the combined affects of shock and muscular exertion that I dragged the station-master from his bed and persuaded him to take me in for the remainder of the night. Still I was not free from fear, I kept moving to the window, certain that I would see that dreadful grey face peering in on me. It was not until the following day, after the train had put many miles between me and Glengarrion, that I was able to relax my tortured muscles and sleep.

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of some one gently rapping.

EDGAR ALLAN POE (1809–1849).

THE SAINT

LESLIE VAUGHAN

Illustrated by E. J. Pagran

This being a Mystery Magazine, we thought it was about time for an investigation into the mystery of holiness. The endless struggle between good and evil here takes a most ironic turn which is certainly not permitted in whatever Queensberry-type rules apply to that battle, nor we hope is it typical.

"YOU CAN'T GO on burning the candle at both ends indefinitely," the doctor told me. "Go away somewhere quiet for a few months, and see if nature will restore your system. Drugs are of no avail in a case like yours."

His words frightened me. I was only thirty-five, and there should be years of good living before me yet. It wouldn't hurt me to take his advice and lie low for a few months . . . for more than health reasons.

It was one of those peculiar coincidences that, just at that time, my uncle should die. He left no will and, as his only surviving relative, I inherited his property, a cottage with the curious name of Paradise Place 1. He had died in poverty and there were no monetary benefits.

Paradise Place 1 was in Wierdon, a hamlet in Northumberland, and I thought it would be as good a place as any for my enforced rest-cure. Business arrangements over, I packed a few clothes and put my money in a belt I always wear. I like my money handy and in cash. There was fourteen hundred pounds of it. Plenty for the time being, though I knew I should have to be figuring out ways and means of increasing it pretty soon.

Wierdon must be the last place of its kind in England. Isolated, wild and primitive in the extreme. After a ten-hour journey from the south, I arrived by bus at a neighbouring hamlet, Westonville, still five miles from my destination. The bus went no farther, and there wasn't such a thing as a car in the place. After some parley and the sight of a pound note, one of the local farmers agreed to take me on to Wierdon. For transport he had an old horse and a dirty cart, the latter obviously used for less salutary purposes.

It was one of those cold, grey afternoons in early March, damp and with a shrivelling wind. I crouched down on some straw in the odorous cart, trying to keep warm and cursing myself for ever coming to such a God-forsaken hole. It took us a good hour to get there. Wierdon consisted of an irregular row of cottages, one ram-

shackle store and a communal well, all bundled together in the curve of a hill. We continued onwards until the lane gave to a mere track. Woods, grim and sombre, rose on one side, and on the other the ground sloped downwards to a river sliding sullenly under an overhanging tangle of trees.

Turning a corner, we drew up suddenly in a sort of cul-de-sac on the very fringe of what appeared to be an impenetrable forest.

"'Ere y'are," announced the farmer. He jumped down and dragged out my suitcase.

The sight of my property gave me a shock. Squat, ungainly and tumbledown, semi-detached from a similar cottage in rather better condition. Paradise Place . . . whoever named it could not have had much idea of heaven. I hesitated, loath to be left, and deciding then and there that I could never stay. I would have a look round and then make arrangements to sell . . . if I could find a buyer!

"It's nigh on darkness," said the farmer impatiently.

I paid him, and watched with reluctance as he backed the cart and disappeared round the corner. Then I opened the broken gate and took possession. Paradise Place 2, separated only by a low fence, had a trim path and neatly laid out garden, signifying a tidy owner. I wondered who my neighbour was, for I felt cold and hungry and uncomfortably alone.

The interior of the cottage was not reassuring. There were two rooms, one up and one down, and a small scullery, all furnished with the barest necessities and thick with dust. The

back garden was a wilderness, and contained only a lurching wooden privy no bigger than a sentry-box. I watched, for a moment, an oversize spider spinning with infinite patience and industry, its fragile, quivering web across the black and cavernous hole of the splintered wooden seat.

It was growing dark, and back in the cottage I realized with another shock that there was, of course, no electricity. I found an old lamp but no paraffin, and there wasn't a candle to be seen. Then the thought of food began to worry me, for I had only a bottle of whisky and a few sandwiches. I wondered again who lived next door, and whether he or she would sell me some food or, better still, cook me a proper meal.

As I opened the front door to go and find out, a ray of light from a hurricane lamp met me, throwing into vivid prominence the face of the man holding it. I started back in surprise, for I had not heard him approach the cottage, and his appearance was unusual to say the least. I stand six feet, but he was a full head taller, and the pallor of his face, coupled with the largest and darkest eyes I have ever seen, gave me a momentary shock.

"I saw you in the back garden," he remarked. "Are you Mr. Reynell?" His voice was deep and quiet.

"Yes," I said.

"I live next door," he told me. "I thought you would be coming along some time, and intended to clean up and prepare for you, but I have been detained. One of our neighbours has been very ill, and I've been staying with him. He passed away at three o'clock this afternoon." He crossed himself. "*Requiescat in pace,*" he murmured.

"Well . . . it's very good of you, Mr. . . . er . . ." I began.

"I am known as the Saint," he said simply.

"Oh . . . well . . . thank you," I answered; "but I'm not staying. I'd never have come in the first place if I'd known what it was like here. I shall leave first thing in the morning. Paradise Place. . . . Good God!"

A faint smile stole over his fine curved lips.

"I admit it does not look at its best just now," he said, "but this is not a bad place to live in. There is splendid air. By dint of hard work we can grow enough to eat. And there is . . . solitude. . . ."

"Air, hard work and solitude are not my cup of tea," I told him dryly.

"No?" The piercing eyes looked shrewdly into mine. "Perhaps not. But come and stay the night with me. Your place is not fit to sleep in as it is. Let me offer you my hospitality."

I was glad to go with him, for I wanted to know something about my uncle.

The floor of his room was covered with a green rush matting and it was all scupulously clean. The fire was laid and, as he put a match to the kindling, it crackled pleasantly and flared up. He lit two large lamps and an incense burner, then motioned me to a seat.

"Rest yourself while I prepare supper."

My attention was immediately attracted to a large painting occupying almost the entire wall on one side of the room. With outstretched arms, a life-size Christ stood poised by the edge of a wood. Dark, burning eyes in a compelling face held an extraordinary attraction. I looked back at my host. He might have served as a model for the picture. I watched him, not without envy, as he moved unhurriedly and with unconscious grace about his cooking. He was dressed like a monk, in a long brown robe of some coarse cloth with a red girdle encircling his waist. His dark, curly hair fell to his shoulders, and he had a short, neatly trimmed beard. He was strikingly, outstandingly, impossibly good looking. The heavy hobnailed boots he wore struck an incongruous note,

though I guessed they held feet as exquisitely proportioned and shaped as the tanned, busy hands now occupied in laying a cloth on a small table by the window.

The smell of cooking mingled with that of incense, and soon supper was ready. A mess of mixed vegetables topped with grated cheese. Not the type of fare to which I was used, but I was hungry and set to with relish on the abundant plateful he set before me.

"Had you originally intended to come and reside here?" he asked.

I don't talk easily and am too hard-boiled to be bowled over by mere charm. But this man must have had a super brand of it. I found myself confiding all sorts of things to him, chiefly about my health. One does not admit to living by one's wits to a saint.

"What can you tell me about my uncle?" I inquired later on. "I'd never met him, though I knew of his existence. I had an idea he was well-to-do though."

The Saint shook his head. "He was here when I came ten years ago. An absolute recluse. . . ."

"What did he do for money?" I asked.

"Necessities are few out here," answered the Saint. "I grow an abundance of vegetables, and he was welcome to all he could eat. Flour and other odds and ends he procured from the store. His clothes were always in rags, but not, I think, from any lack of money. I believe he had some small capital he lived on. After his death we, that is the doctor and I, found forty-seven pounds hidden away in the lining of his jacket. The money, and also such personal possessions as he had, are in that tin trunk in the corner there. They are at your disposal, my son."

Supper over, I went through the trunk. The money was in grimy notes and loose silver. There was nothing else beyond his clothes, some unimportant papers and a dirty leather wallet. The clothes were literally threadbare—a bundle of useless, grubby rags. I flung them aside in disgust.

"A miser, eh?"

"I think it would be more correct to say he had that tendency," replied the Saint. "Indeed, it was all I could do to coax him to eat sometimes."

"Have you incurred any expenses with regard to him?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No. I merely did what I could. My only regret is that I couldn't instil into him some love of life, some ambition, some drive to do good. . . ."

"Do you find an outlet for those aspirations here in Wierdon?" I asked ironically.

"Oh yes!" His answer was unhesitating. "Much of my time is spent in contemplation and prayer, but there are seventy-six souls in and about the hamlet. I feel I am of use to them."

He made up a bed on the settee for me, then asked if I would care to join him in prayer. I refused curtly enough. "Prayer's not much in my line," I told him.

He nodded as though he had expected a refusal. "Then I will leave you," he said. He lit a candle and

went up the steep, narrow stairs to the room above.

Left alone, I sat by the still glowing fire and smoked. There was no radio not a newspaper or periodical of any sort about. And except for the low moan of the wind outside and the monotonous chirruping of a cricket, all was silent. It wasn't ten o'clock when I settled myself down on the settee. I had made up my mind I was going to follow the doctor's advice and live quietly for a while. But not as quietly as this. And not in Paradise Place. Not on your life. . . .

So much for my decision.

During breakfast the following morning, I took a bad turn. First a fit of giddiness and then spasms of pain that seemed to tear me apart. I was reduced to groaning and rolling about the floor in agony.

I vaguely remember the Saint lifting me on to the settee, and afterwards helping me upstairs and into his own bed. I believe I was very ill, and I know he tended me with all the care and skill of a trained nurse. I was up there for a month, and when at last I was able to get up, my colour was better, my head clear and my breath clean.

"I don't know whether it's the rest or your excellent broths or what," I said, "but I never felt so good in years. I know I can't pay you for the care and attention you've given me, but I can at least square up a fair amount for my keep."

He looked at me calmly from out of his large, dark eyes.

"My son," he said, "you are overconcerned with this matter of money. Let there be no more talk of it. I never ask nor expect money for what I do for people."

"Then how do you manage to live?" I asked bluntly.

He laughed suddenly and unexpectedly, and the deep music of it prompted me to wonder again how it was that one man could have so much more than his share of charm.

"Don't imagine that I scorn money," he said. "I know what it can do. I have sufficient though, and derive one of my greatest pleasures in using it for the benefit of those less fortunate."

He bent down and drew on his heavy boots. "I have some visits to make," he told me. "Why don't you go out and sit in the sun for a while? It will do you good. I'll put out a chair for you."

How the scene had changed in that one short month. The sun was shining and the air mild and warm. The woods no longer looked dark and sinister, for each tree was dressing itself proudly in the fresh glory of spring foliage. The tiny lawn was velvety, and daffodils had sprung up in the surrounding beds. Round at the back was a vegetable garden and a large patch of mixed herbs. Looking down on them reminded me of tobacco. The Saint had not allowed me a single cigarette since I had become ill, warning me solemnly that I must cleanse my system thoroughly if I hoped to regain my former good health.

But I was better now and my own master again. I went back into the house, and took a couple of packets

from my suitcase up in the bedroom, sitting down on my bed to enjoy one, for I was still irritatingly weak in the legs. Later, when I got up to go out again. I threw the stub into the fireplace; then, remembering the Saint's passion for cleanliness and order, went to retrieve it. It had slipped behind a plank on which a plant was resting. Removing this, I noticed the floor of the hearth consisted of one large, loose paving-stone. Impelled by some idle curiosity, I lifted it. Underneath was a cardboard box. After a moment's hesitation, I took it out and opened it.

I don't know how long I sat there on the floor gazing with incredulous wonder at the contents. It was stuffed with bank-notes. Fivers, one-pound and ten-shilling notes. Knowing the Saint would be away for some time I counted them. Just over eleven thousand pounds. A small fortune. . . . Carefully I replaced everything back just as it was, and went out into the garden again to think.

The Saint rose at dawn, spent long hours in meditation and prayer, worked hard in his garden, and went out regularly tending the sick and the needy. Yet he was a rich man. . . . Why was he here? I sat and puzzled about it until I fell asleep.

When I awoke, the familiar smell of cooking vegetables and cheese drifted out of the cottage. I went inside, and the Saint greeted me with his usual grave courtesy, asking how I felt.

"I see you've been smoking," he said. "I must introduce you to some herbal tobacco. It will be less injurious to your system."

He handed me over a parcel as we sat down to our meal.

"I've bought you some good, strong boots," he remarked. "Those shoes of yours are not fit for wet weather in these parts."

"I'm not staying," I replied.

"No?" He looked up. "I thought perhaps the sunshine would induce you to change your mind. A few weeks here would do you the world of good. You've been very ill, Mr. Reynell, and though there is a great improvement now, you must take care for a while."

"How much were the boots?" I asked.

"Two guineas. I noted your size, and asked Mr. Donley at the store here to procure me a pair."

I handed him over two pounds and a florin. He looked at them doubtfully.

"You give me the impression you are not without money," he said, "but I have learnt that impressions are often deceptive. Can you afford to pay for them?"

I nodded. "Sure," I said.

"You will stay for a while then, Mr. Reynell?"

I nodded again. I was seeing that cardboard box and the irresistible lure of its crinkly contents.

With the Saint's help, my cottage soon became spick-and-span. He was a good neighbour, introducing me to people, arranging with a farmer to supply me with milk and eggs, and with another man to deliver my water daily. He brought me over endless supplies of vegetables, taught me to cook, coaxed me to watch my diet and take sufficient exercise, exhorted

me not to smoke too much and to keep away from alcohol. He did all this tactfully, almost unobtrusively, and with such kindness that I soon found myself taking his advice and falling in with his suggestions with a readiness that surprised me. I think the interest he showed in my health and welfare tickled my vanity.

I managed to get a newspaper, but it was always a day old. No one had a wireless, and the nearest post office was five miles away in Westonville. The little community lived an isolated, clannish life, without the ordinary amenities of civilization. Yet they seemed content enough. The pivot of their existence was the Saint. He was doctor, lawyer, adviser to everyone, and his efforts to raise the standard of living in Wierdon were indefatigable. If anyone ever spoke to me, it was always about the Saint. What he did, what he said, his powers of healing, his omnipotence. No one, it seemed, embarked on any move nor even made up his mind about anything without first consulting the Saint. He was, to the inhabitants of Wierdon, a living God, moving and working his minor miracles among them. His word was absolute law, their devotion to him whole-hearted and unquestioning.

The summer was unusually warm, and for a few weeks I enjoyed a comparatively comfortable and lazy life, riding about on a bicycle the Saint had advised me to get, basking in the sun, bathing in the river, and rejoicing in the health and strength flowing back into my system. But I knew it wouldn't last. The simple life was not for me. The city's bright lights, the excitement of a gamble, rich food and wine and feminine company were all beginning to call in no uncertain terms.

I would have to make up my mind.

Even rogues have their code. They don't rob those they respect, and I respected the Saint. He had been extraordinarily good to me. Not that there was anything personal in it. He would have done the same for anyone. But it gave me an uncomfortable feeling every time I thought of the eleven thousand pounds. That was why I let the days slip by without coming to grips with the idea that floated so pleasantly in the back of my mind. Eleven thousand . . . and all in small currency. It would keep me on "Easy Street" for a long time. I could travel, revel in luxury. . . .

We had a wet spell in the middle of July, and indoors Paradise Place was unbearably dull. After three days I went down to the store, more to relieve my boredom than anything else. Mr. Donley was unusually expansive. He had just returned from Westonville, and had a registered letter for the Saint.

"It'll be a cheque like as not," he informed me. "One or two rich 'uns come from time to time, just to see Saint and get 'is blessing, you know. 'E's savin' to build us a church 'ere. Saint, 'e says to me t'other day 'e says. . . . 'It won't be long now, Mr. Donley,' 'e says. 'I've nearly enough now. . . . So we'll be 'avin' a church, and maybe water on tap as well pretty soon. . . .' " He meandered on.

It was then I made my decision. I

would leave Paradise Place and take the bulk of the eleven thousand with me. The people of Wierdon could wait a while longer for their church and water from the tap. As for the Saint . . . he would never want. He was too industrious for one thing. And for another his people would never let him. I quietened my qualms and made my plans. They were about the simplest I had ever needed.

At the beginning of every month the Saint went away for two or three days. His destination was a mystery. He did not volunteer the information, and he was not a man to whom one asked personal questions. I tried to pump one of the inhabitants about it once, but he only shook his head vaguely. What the Saint did was never questioned. They knew he would return, and that was all that mattered. He was due to leave again in another week, for the third time since I had come to Paradise Place. It might be my last chance. During his absence I would simply take the money and disappear.

It was the night before the Saint's departure. We had been for a walk by the river which ran through the forest. It was a habit into which the Saint had coaxed me. "Our evening constitutional," he called it. It was a sombre river, with dark, slow-moving waters for about half a mile. Then it quickened perceptibly until it fell, in a heavy flood, over a twenty-foot weir. Down below was a mass of stones and boulders, and from there the river became a noisy torrent, rushing away into yet more distant woods.

During our walk, the Saint had not talked at all. It had been a blistering day and, speaking for myself, every ounce of energy had seeped away with my ever-flowing perspiration. I marvelled at my companion. As against my light jacket, shorts and light canvas shoes, he wore, as usual, his heavy, full-length robe and stout boots. Yet apart from a faint glow on his magnolia-like skin, he did not appear to be affected by the heat at all.

We returned home and, at his request, I stayed with him for supper. Afterwards he packed up a few necessities, a pair of socks, his prayer-book and some food into a neat bundle, ready for the morrow, when he would rise with the sun and walk to Westonville for the morning bus.

I sat and smoked, looking from the Saint to the Christ on the wall and

back again. Once more I began to sweat. Surely it was a dastardly crime I was contemplating. He was so absolutely unsuspecting. He never locked a door, he trusted everyone. . . .

I had never known an evening so close. The air lay like a suffocating blanket on top of us. Twilight deepened into dusk, and still I sat there watching the Saint as he walked about putting everything in order. His movements were a poem as he dusted his few possessions. As he arranged a bowl of wild flowers before his picture, his lips twitched slightly as though in prayer.

I felt the perspiration pouring down my face, my back and my legs. An eerie sense of uneasiness seized and possessed me utterly. "Emotions should always be analysed," the Saint had once told me. Just then I was trying to analyse mine. Was this my conscience or what?

A large moth flew in and settled on the rim of a ruby jar filled with oil. It did not move when the Saint lit a waxed taper floating on the top, nor when he picked the jar up and placed it in its usual place before the painting. Then he went over and closed the door. I was still watching the moth. It hovered there, its wings fluttering gently, its eyes seeming to grow bigger as it gloated over the quiet flame.

Suddenly I lurched forward, knocked almost out of the chair by the force of a terrible blow on the side of my head. The moth's eyes seemed to expand until they filled the room . . . the light flickered. . . . As I strove to regain my balance, the second blow fell, curiously soft yet equally stunning. A rubber cosh. . . . Who? What? Then came oblivion.

When I came to, I was ice-cold . . . choking. Sense and senses returned in a rush. Two things struck me simultaneously. My money-belt, where I keep my cash and which I always wear, had gone—and I was in the river.

The inexorable pull of the waters was sweeping me along, and I could hear the dull roar of the weir. Then a torrent of red-hot fear and fury sent me lashing out towards the bank. I don't think I could ever have made it if I hadn't been swept headlong into a rotting tree that had fallen into the river yet still partly adhered to the bank with a few of its tenacious roots. I clung there, gasping and retching, and fighting the force of the current which threatened, every second, to wrench me from my hold and suck me under and onwards. Bit by bit I struggled towards the bank, clambered up and lay there on the grass verge, spent, windless and trying desperately to collect my wits.

The Saint had tried to murder me. . . .

Deliberately and cold-bloodedly he had knocked me out, then thrown me into the river, where he knew that, within a matter of moments, I should be swept over the weir and dashed to pieces on the boulders below. The Saint had done this to me. The Saint. . . .

I got to my feet and strode through the woods, seething and reckless, until I reached Paradise Place. There caution tapped me unmistakably on the

shoulder, and I crept up the garden path to the window. The maroon-coloured curtains were drawn, but there was a chink at the side which gave me a fair view into the room.

The Saint was sitting by the table. Even then, the beauty of his profile struck me afresh. He was counting out money and placing rubber bands around wads of notes. I could see the cardboard box on the table, and also another similar one filled to capacity. My money-belt was there, too. At the sight of it, fury surged into me again, and I threw open the door and stalked in.

It would be satisfying to report that the Saint started up in guilty surprise. But he didn't. Not by a flicker of his curling lashes did he give himself away, but sat there motionless, looking at me, his eyes dark and fathomless as ever.

"You have more stamina than I reckoned on, Mr. Reynell," he said at last. "Was it the thought of this"—he tapped the notes—"that gave you the strength to return here like an avenging angel?"

"I know about your visit to my bedroom hiding-place, of course," he went on, "but you didn't know I had a second lot, did you?"

I snatched up my belt. The pocket was empty.

"Fourteen hundred pounds odd," said the Saint. "You'd have got eleven thousand if you'd moved first."

"Theft is theft," I burst out in a passion, "but I wouldn't have left you in want, let alone harmed you. Yet you, with all these thousands, would have killed me. Killed me for a paltry fourteen hundred. You won't look like a Saint when I've finished with you . . . when you're on trial for assault, robbery and attempted murder. . . ."

He folded his arms. "And who," he asked with disarming simplicity, "is going to believe you?"

His coolness, his beauty, his uncanny likeness to the picture on the wall, the remorseless logic of his question, all broke through my attempt to register a righteous, dignified wrath. I stormed and raved, cursing him for a cold-blooded hypocrite, calling him every filthy name I could think of, my vocabulary enlarged and coloured by the pain in my throbbing head, by the loss of the money I had already spent

in my imagination, by the shock of his callous attempt on my life, by the fact that I had been outwitted, and by the shattering, tormenting discovery of the feet of clay beneath that humble brown robe.

I continued to curse him until my spleen overflowed physically as well as mentally. The remains of the turbid river water I had swallowed rushed up, and I vomited all over the spotless, green matting. I sensed rather than saw the Saint's fastidious shrinking from the disgusting sight I must have presented. I stopped then broken and helpless. He sat there, complete master of himself while I had lost every vestige of control. I turned and went out like a whipped dog. He came after me and pushed my belt into my hand.

"You'll need a little money to keep you going for a few weeks," he said coolly. "I've left you a hundred pounds."

How I yearned to throw it into his face. Instead I grabbed it. Money is my weakness . . . a magnet . . . the shock-proof cushion between myself and discomfort. I buckled it round my waist and, taking my cycle, rode out into the night.

It had occurred to me since then that in those last few minutes at Paradise Place the Saint could easily have killed me. Exhausted physically and shaken with fury as I was, I would have been easy meat. Why didn't he finish off the job? Where does he get his money from? Have there been other victims? Was my uncle one of them? Where does the Saint go on his monthly absences from Wierdon? Is he a fanatic or a dangerous lunatic?

My hands are tied. For various reasons I don't want to call the attention of Scotland Yard on to myself, but, even if I hadn't this point to consider, what could I do? No one would believe a word against the Saint. His life and deeds are his defence. He would probably refuse to talk, for he never speaks against his fellow-men. I can picture him on trial . . . quiet . . . humble . . . his wonderful face serene . . . his thoughts obviously on higher things. And an unending stress of witnesses, passionately testifying to his holiness, his absolute incapability of violence. It is *I* who would end up in Broadmoor . . . if I wasn't lynched first.

No. I can do nothing officially. But I lie awake scheming and planning. For some day I shall return to Paradise Place. There will be no quarter given. Nor asked . . . if I have measured the Saint aright.

And one of us will finish up that night in hell.

THE OUBLIETTE

ANDRÉ VILLERS

A translation from the French, by P. W. Inwood

THE OLD MAN with grey hair who carried the flambeau descended the first three stairs. With his closed fist, but not roughly, one of the halberdiers pushed the shoulder of the Chevalier de Favorelli, who then started down the staircase, followed by his guards.

The man with the torch went slowly. A bunch of heavy keys hanging from his girdle tintinnabulated softly at his every movement. The staircase, roughly hewn in the solid rock, had no handrail. The men descended in Indian file, steadying themselves by a hand against the wall, with the exception of the old one who was their guide. The descent took some time. The rock wall, at its upper levels dry and rufous in colour, now became glossy with moisture, and Favorelli had no difficulty in realizing that they were now below the level of the moat surrounding the château. The steps became slippery, making the progress of the little band even slower than before.

The flambeau flared and crackled. Its resin gave off a not unpleasing aromatic odour, and from time to time a brighter gleam was reflected in thousands of scintillations from the minute crystals embedded in the humid stone. Nobody spoke.

At last the bearer of the keys stopped and raised his torch on high so that the flame licked the vault above him, then he advanced into a passage of strangely resonant echoes.

The Chevalier remained for an instant motionless at the foot of the lowest stair. Once again the halberdier who was following him urged him on with his closed fist.

The guide detached his bunch of keys from his girdle.

"It is here, Monsieur le Chevalier," he said, halting before a massive door decorated with arabesques of rusted iron. He turned the key in the lock, pushed the door and stepped aside.

"Enter," he said. His voice was feeble and cracked with age, but the echoing passage amplified it to a tone of authority it did not in reality possess.

The torch illuminated uncertainly a small part of the chamber, which appeared to the prisoner to extend into a vast darkness.

"How long have I to remain here?" he demanded of the old man.

"Enter, Monsieur le Chevalier," repeated the turnkey and for the moment made no further reply, but waited until the young man had penetrated the gloom of the chamber before answering his question.

"No condemned person ever comes out of these vaults, Monsieur. The only mercy the Duke has granted to you, on account of your name and

rank, is that you are not to be imprisoned in an ordinary oubliette." He cackled at some obscure joke of his own.

"Is it you that will bring me my victuals?" Favorelli put the further question.

With an effort the man pulled the door towards him.

"Nobody brings food to the condemned," he said.

The Chevalier observed in the vivid light of the flambeau the wrinkled face of the jailer, framed in grizzled locks, assume an expression of astonishment at his question.

The door closed with a muffled noise. Left in darkness, the young man heard the grating of the key as it was turned twice in the lock, then the steps of the little band retreating along the passage. Finally, silence—absolute silence. . . .

For several minutes the condemned man remained quite still. The horror of his predicament was presented to him with the utmost clarity, and any idea of a possibility of escaping his fate he was forced to dismiss from his mind. The Duke would show him no mercy. In this country he had no relative, no friend, who could intervene on his behalf. In eight days, or fifteen at the utmost, the old man with the flambeau would return, and drag his corpse to some sinister well, and his last word would have been said.

Nevertheless, Favorelli decided to explore his surroundings.

The turnkey had said that this was not an ordinary oubliette. In man, even at his most desperate, the light of hope is never entirely extinguished. He stretched out his arms before him and walked straight ahead towards the door. He knew that it was firmly immovable, and so wasted no time on it. Passing along the wall, groping with both hands, he started to make a tour of his prison. He encountered an angle, then a second, then a third, but two feet past this his hands met empty space; there was a recess or embrasure in the masonry, and he began to examine it as carefully as he could in the complete darkness. After he had cautiously advanced two paces, he became aware of a feeble glimmer of light directly above him. It seemed to come from an aperture scarcely larger than the area of a playing-card. It took him some time to realize that he was standing in the fireplace below a chimney, and that the rectangle of light was at least a hundred, if not a hundred and fifty, feet above his head.

The presence of a chimney in a place of this kind was extremely unusual, and no plausible explanation suggested itself to him. He could not know that his prison was an ancient torture-chamber. On the hearthstone, not perhaps so very long ago, the official tormentor had stood, heating his irons. . . .

The Chevalier continued his blind progress, promising himself to return later to the chimney. He had by now almost completed the circuit of his dungeon, and his hands encountered the jamb of the door when his head collided with an unexpected obstacle.

It was a long iron spike, solidly fixed between two of the stones of the wall, doubtless for the purpose of hanging the instruments of torture.

Favorelli retraced his steps towards the the chimney. The shaft that led to the light of day was about three feet by nearly two feet wide. At first glance it seemed to him not out of the question to climb it. Bracing himself against the walls, his back against one side and his knees supported by the opposite, it would be possible to make slow, painful progress towards the distant aperture. Seated in the fireplace among the cold, damp cinders, he permitted himself a smile. It would be truly droll, he thought, if my talents as a climber, that have brought me to this pass, should be the means of getting me out of it.

Once again, in thought, he climbed the high wall of the château, clinging like a cat to the asperities of the stonework, until he reached the window of the Duke's daughter's chamber. He knocked three times lightly on the leaded pane. The light was out and the window open. He had not warned the girl of his audacious plan, but, nevertheless, she seemed to be awaiting him. Perhaps she had guessed, from the glint in his eyes, that he would venture this folly. . . .

He had descended again before the dawn, by the aid of a rope he had taken the precaution to coil round his waist. He came back every night, climbing now by the rope which the girl let down, the other end being made fast to the foot of a heavy coffer.

The night before, he had unwisely delayed his departure too long. A servant, whose duties took him to the pantry in the early morning, had raised the alarm. . . .

Once again the Chevalier raised his eyes to the minute rectangle of light above him, and came to the definite conclusion that the ascent was beyond human powers.

If only I could rest on the way, he thought. An idea burst upon him—the iron spike! If he succeeded in wrenching it out of the wall, he might be able to use it in the narrow chimney. Inserted in the interstices of the stonework, it would provide a precious support that would enable him, from time to time, to relieve the strain of the braced posture between the walls, and relax the muscles of his back and legs when threatened by fatal cramp.

It took him nearly an hour of effort to loosen the iron spike and wrench it from the crevice in which it had been firmly lodged. He passed it through his belt, having first tied it to his neck by means of a strip of material torn from his shirt-sleeves. The loss of this tool in the course of his climb could only result in disaster and death.

Favorelli began his ascent. He had abandoned his shoes. He was agreeably surprised to find that he mounted the narrow passage with less difficulty than he had at first estimated. By the end of an hour he had climbed forty feet. His back was painfully sore, his knees scarified to bleeding point, forcing him to rest. Feeling in the

joints between the large stone blocks, he found a crevice large enough to receive the iron spike, on which he managed to sit. For the first time since the start of his climb he raised his head to look at the luminous aperture and observed with satisfaction that he had made considerable progress towards it. What would he do, once having arrived at the top? He did not know and did not very much care; he trusted as usual to his luck and audacity. If he managed to escape from the château, he would try to reach the Republic of Venice and put himself under the protection of the Doge.

The image of the girl for whose favours he found himself in these straits passed again before his eyes, and he knew that his chagrin at the impossibility of ever returning to her would be short lived. And she, he asked himself, does she really love me? He did not believe it, and his masculine vanity was scarcely wounded at the thought. She is like me, he mused. She loves love, and that alone. . . .

He resumed his climb, but now his progress was much slower. The back of his shirt was torn to shreds, and his bare skin against the wall suffered grievously. It was fortunate that the wall was covered with a thick layer of greasy soot, but every sharp arris and projecting surface flayed his back mercilessly. He calculated that he would need to take his spells of rest well before he reached the limit of his endurance, otherwise he would be incapable of hoisting himself on to his seat on the iron spike.

After he had rested for the third time, Favorelli reached a height of sixty feet, and there made a lucky discovery. Groping with his left hand for the support of the side wall, he encountered a void—a passage opening in the masonry. He raised himself painfully to its level, his heart filled with hope. But the passage was no more than a niche, with hardly any depth, and closed at its farther end by a thick iron plate. He realized that it was at the back of another fireplace, and guessed that he was now as high as the first floor of the château. This alcove offered no useful exit. Even if he had been able to force open the iron fire-back, he could not take a dozen steps in the rooms without being seen by somebody.

He decided to use the ledge for his spell of rest, and so he thrust his iron spike into a crevice between two blocks of stone. On this precarious perch he knelt while he grasped the sill of the orifice. This effort brought home to him the terrible state of exhaustion he had reached. He was tortured by thirst, and all the nerves of his body seemed to be tingling with agony. With his chin resting on the ledge of masonry, he looked avidly towards the sky, but the rectangle of light had disappeared. The Chevalier knew that night had come. Beneath him, above him, yawned a chasm of impenetrable obscurity.

At that moment a vivid light illuminated his haggard face. The fire-back had been raised, and he saw before him a silhouette that he had no

difficulty in recognizing—that of a blonde young woman kneeling in front of the hearth. Her outer garment, a robe of heavy brocade trimmed with ermine, fell slightly open to reveal her slender neck and the tender uprising of her breasts.

Behind her, lit by the candles of an immense silver chandelier, appeared a scene that Favorelli knew at once—it was the chamber in which he had spent so many nights in amorous dalliance.

He put out his hands to get a better hold by means of the grooved framework that surrounded the closed position of the iron plate.

"It is I," he gasped. "Aid me. I can go no farther."

"I heard the noise," said the girl, "and I knew that it could be no one but thee."

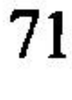
She looked at his face, blackened with soot, streaked with the blood that oozed from a wound in his forehead; the face of the man she had perhaps loved, who had arisen in this manner from the shadows of the void.

The Chevalier saw the cold eyes, indifferently regarding him for a few seconds more. Then the girl's hands, supporting the raised fire-back, let go their hold. The heavy plate fell back into place, crushing the condemned man's fingers. He lost his grip and attempted vainly to clutch the edge of the stonework. His body fell on to the iron spike, and thence began its headlong drop into the shaft where darkness had regained possession. . . .

The girl remained on her knees before the fireplace, the candlelight playing softly on her fine flaxen hair. She was perfectly still, with her eyes fixed vacantly on the iron plate ornamented with symmetrical designs in relief.

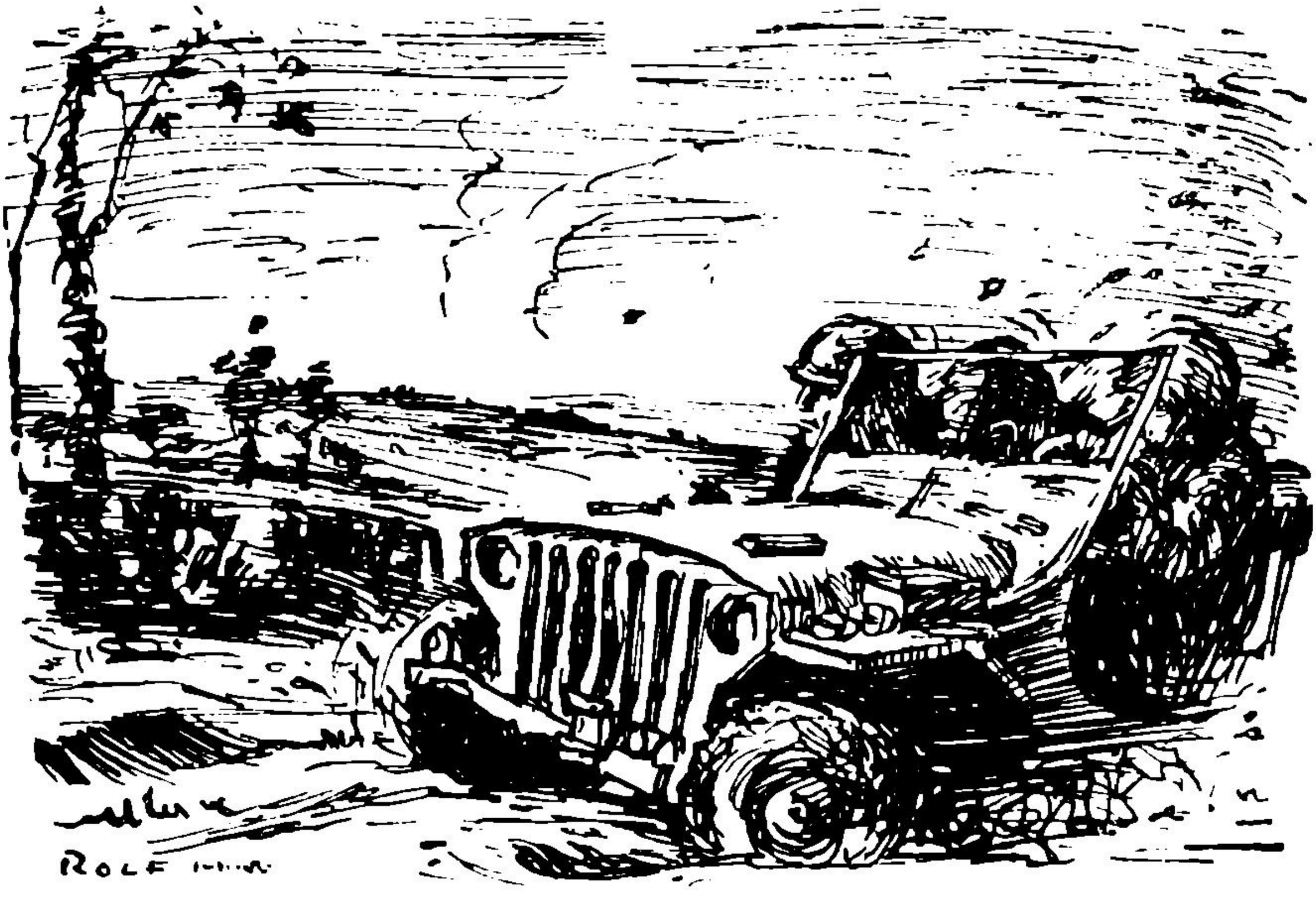
She would soon forget. . . . In due time her father, the Duke, would pardon his repentant daughter, and then a new, and pure, life would open before her. . . .

Her hands came together and her lips murmured a prayer—the last—for the man who had gone to his death.



There is an inconstancy proceeding from the levity or weakness of the mind, which makes it give in to everyone's opinions: and there is another inconstancy, more excusable, which arises from satiety.

LA ROCHEFOUCAULD (1868): *Maxims.*



SHE NEVER LETS YOU GO

STUART PALMER

Illustrated by Rolf Harris

IN THE SPRING the sun sets late in Normandy, with a long twilight. From the battered jeep, which had paused momentarily on the crest of a hill thick with apple-blossoms, three men in dusty olive drab looked down on the village of Saint Ambrose des Ouragans. Its spires and towers, sagging roofs and great willow-trees with their long shadows, gave an impression of unreality, like an illustration for a book of fanciful children's stories or a set dressed and lighted for a costume moving-picture.

Lieutenant Barron, Quartermaster Corps, A.U.S., scowled again at the map in his hand. The corporal at the wheel, whose attempt at finding a short-cut to the main road and the new advance supply depot at Giton had brought them into this cul-de-sac, had been driving for more than twenty-four hours and was half asleep. The private beside him had been nipping out of a pint bottle in his pocket and was half drunk.

Rubbing his red-rimmed eyes, Barron hesitated. His orders were to go on, but he had certain private doubts as to how readily the two enlisted men would comply. Besides, according to the map the road ended here, and they had just covered thirty miles of winding, unpaved highway without sign of human habitation.

"Okay, snap out of it," he barked. "Drive on down into the town. If there's an inn here, we'll hole up for the night. No use wandering all over hellanall in the dark. Besides, some of these roads may not be cleared of mines."

The jeep leaped forward before he had finished, and Barron realized that he hadn't needed to give the men so much explanation. They wanted to stop even more than he did; they wanted to stop here and now.

From the placid serenity of the central square it was evident that war had by-passed Saint Ambrose des Ouragans. There were no ugly bomb craters, no pitiful gaps in the rows of the houses like missing teeth in a smiling mouth, no piled rubble in the alleys. If in advance or retreat the German tide had touched here, it had left no mark. Rooks wheeled and cried overhead, and somewhere a church bell rang out the Angelus as it had rung for five hundred years.

Nor, it appeared, had any other American troops passed this way, for all of a sudden the townspeople began to crowd excitedly into doorways and windows, waving and cheering. Some of them were openly sobbing. Here and there a tricolour or an American flag, neatly stitched together out of rags, was fluttering.

There was an inn, with a creaking wooden sign the legend of which had long since been obliterated by the weather. "Drop me here," Barron ordered. "You men can find billets for yourselves somewhere. Report back at—at eight three zero hours."

The corporal said, "Okay, Lieutenant," without turning his head. His tone was almost, but not quite, unpleasant enough to draw a bawling out. Barron was used to that. Anyway, he wasn't worrying about discipline at this point. The realization had just come over him that he was sitting in what he called "the Catbird Seat." The town and its people were his.

It was the set-up that lieutenants dreamed about. For more than a month, like many other noncombatant soldiers in the Services of Supply, Barron had been following far in the wake of the swift spearheads of Patton, the mailed fists of Patch and Hodges. It had, in the main, been dull. He hadn't managed to wangle any time in Paris at all, and in the smaller cities on his route he had found the people friendly but a little wary, the mademoiselles already somewhat disillusioned and wised-up from contact with the combat troops.

No beautiful girls—or homely ones either, for that matter—had rushed into the street to kiss him. None of them had seemed particularly anxious to trade their affections for cigarettes or candy from the PX, as they were supposed to be doing for the front-line forces.

But here was virgin territory. The little man with the vast moustaches who was hastily tying a red sash about his middle must be the mayor or the burgomaster or whatever they called it. He was approaching, arms outstretched. A fair-sized crowd had gathered by the time Barron dropped down out of the jeep with his musette bag in his hand.

Lieutenant Barron found himself seized and kissed soundly upon both cheeks. Then the mayor made a speech, during which Barron stood at attention although he could not understand more than a few words of the impassioned harangue.

He snapped a casual salute when the speech was over. "Thanks," he said. "Vive la France and vive the République and vive everybody. Now where's the wine—the vang, savvy?"

They must have understood that, for he was ushered with great ceremony into the taproom of the tavern, and seated in a big armchair at the head of a black oak table. The place smelled redolently of cheese and cobwebs and spice and apples, and was warmed by a great fire of logs at the other end of the room.

City fathers and local dignitaries surrounded him, taking turns in shaking his hand. A very fat man in a white apron, who appeared to be the host, excused himself for some time, and then triumphantly returned holding aloft two bottles of champagne. The wine was not chilled, but Barron drank it warm. The mayor and other bigwigs drank, too. Some of them felt compelled to make speeches, one or two breaking down in the middle and having to blow their noses or wipe their eyes on big coloured cotton handkerchiefs.

In a little while there was dinner, served by a plump, pretty girl with straw-yellow hair and soft, far-away eyes. She was the first happy-looking, serene girl that he had seen in all France, and she never left off singing a little song under her breath. She set smoking veal and a brown loaf and vegetables and crisp green salad before him. Barron ate wolfishly, for he had had nothing all that day but C-ration. Besides, there were flavours and aromas in this meal that he had never met before.

Back in Kansas it had been meat and potatoes and gravy, cooked any old way and dumped on the plates. Maybe, he admitted to himself, there was something in all the talk about French cookery.

He ate alone, not knowing or caring that there had been set before him all the meat in the village. He drank the local cider with his meal, finding it an improvement over the warm champagne, and washed it all down with brandy. "Keep the brandy coming," he ordered lavishly. After all, he had two thousand dollars American and almost three hundred and eighty thousand francs in the breast-pocket of his overseas jacket, the spoils of certain complicated business ventures involving the loss in transit of some truck loads of gasoline and canned ham and cigarettes. But his money was not legal tender in Saint Ambrose des Ouragans. The bottles kept coming, and his hosts drank with him, laughed

with him, tried to sing with him, and even attempted to speak in English with him, with hilarious results.

The blonde girl, still softly singing her little song about "La caille, la tourterelle et ma joli perdrix . . ." came to clear away the table. Barron caught her bare arm as she bent over beside him, drawing her closer. "Ooh la la, chérie!" he whispered, with a broad wink.

She smiled vaguely, but her eyes were on the dishes in her hand. When she had pulled her arm away and was back in the kitchen, there was a moment of silence at the table. The innkeeper said something which Barron, with his smattering of schoolboy French, could not understand. The man made a gesture, nodding towards the kitchen. He seemed to be explaining something, a note of apology in his manner. But at that moment one of the Frenchmen produced an accordion, and soon Barron was trying to teach him "I Wish All the Wacs Were Wittle White Wabbits" and "Roll Me Over."

They were well into the fourth bottle of brandy when the professor arrived to join them. He was a brown little gnome of a man, without a hair on his head, and he had evidently come in a hurry, for his coat was half-buttoned and his cravat askew. But he spoke English, of a queer pedantic sort. It developed that he had been ill in bed, but had been summoned as the only person in the town capable of correctly expressing their gratitude and their welcome to the brave *soldat Americaine*. He seemed to share the local predilection for speech-making, but Barron cut him short as soon as he could.

"Thanks," he said. "Sit down, professor, and wet your whistle."

The professor accepted a small glass of brandy, and sniffed at it. "Go ahead and drink," Barron insisted. "You don't need to smell it, it's okay."

The professor swallowed quickly. Barron refilled the glass. "Quite a little town you've got here," he said.

The professor bowed gravely, agreeing that Saint Ambrose des Ouragans was a very unusual town, very rich with tradition, very unspoiled by modern things. Once, in happier times than this, students of medieval architecture and folklore had come here to study, to sketch and to photograph. "Ah, my young friend, you should have seen our city before the fire of 1899! The church was standing then, and the *gallerie*, and the Tomb!"

The lieutenant said that he didn't care for architecture and had no interest in tombs. He was, however, vitally interested in something else. Lowering his voice, although no person at the table could have understood a word of his broad Mid-Western accent, he explained what he meant.

The professor raised his eyebrows, but he seemed tolerant and not in the least shocked. Before the war, perhaps, he explained apologetically, something might have offered itself. But the night life of Saint Ambrose des Ouragans was sadly lacking. "This is not Paris," he admitted. "Such pleasures are only a memory.

In Saint Ambrose des Ouragans there are few young men. The blood runs thin."

Barron poured himself another tumbler of brandy. Anxious to make conversation, the professor dropped back into his hobby. "There happens to be a most interesting legend here, based upon the old tomb of which I just spoke. It has been the subject of articles in the highest scientific journals, and a member of the French Academy has done research. It seems that the inhabitant of the tomb, which was built outside the churchyard for reasons which you will understand later, is a lady.

"A lady who does not sleep, you understand? She is said to walk at night in the churchyard, even since the church burned. She has been heard wailing softly in the night when there has been a death in the town—but always at the death of a pure and innocent young girl, or so the legend goes."

Charles Barron was hardly listening. He looked up quickly as the blonde girl came in to collect the empty bottles. "Listen, baby," he greeted her as she approached, "what time you get off duty, huh? Voulez-vous . . ."

She passed by before he could try any more of his French on her, still softly singing. Barron turned to the professor. "Say, what's the matter with toots, is she bashful? I don't seem to be making any time."

The professor smiled, and then hesitated, as if he wanted to be sure of choosing the right words. "As a stranger here," he began, "you could not be expected to know." Here he stopped to frown across the table at the innkeeper, who was for some reason very red in the face. "You see, Lieutenant, that is Albertine. She is —different. Sometimes, monsieur, for His own purposes Le Bon Dieu takes away the memory, when memories are too much to bear. That poor innocent lay for two days beneath the wreckage of her father's farmhouse, the rest of her family dead beside her. It was a jettisoned bomb from one of our Allied planes—a most unfortunate accident. Now"—he shrugged—"she never stops singing, but it is only one song."

"Oh," Barron said. "I get it. Sorry. Go on with what you were saying."

"Of course. I was telling you our local legend of the Revenant, the woman who walks in the night. As the story goes, she killed herself more than three hundred years ago, from shame at being betrayed by her lover. According to the story, she walks at night seeking him through the streets and lanes where they were wont to go together."

"A beautiful spook, huh?"

"Pardon, monsieur. I know of no one who is supposed to have looked upon her face. But for myself, I should not like to do so. For her method of committing suicide was to fling herself into a vat of lye, which was, I believe, being prepared for the manufacture of soap. At that time Saint Ambrose des Ouragans was noted for its fine soap, rivalling Castille itself. . . ."

"And the poor old girl wanders

around looking for a sweetie, does she?"

"That is the legend. It is also said that if a man will go at midnight in the dark of the moon to the ruins of the tomb, and will say aloud 'I am waiting,' he will hear the creaking of a rusty lock and the sound of a door opening. . . ."

Barron was watching the kitchen door. Now and then he fancied that he caught a glimpse of a pretty face topped with shining yellow hair. "Anybody ever try it?" he asked, because obviously the professor expected him to.

"Not in my time. My grandfather used to claim that many years ago there was a Breton sailor, a drunken atheist, who made a wager here in the inn, and who went alone to the tomb. He was found dying with a broken back, and the only words he said were: 'She never lets you go.'" The professor took a sip of his brandy. "But my grandfather loved to stretch a story. He could remember the Revolution, and the tumbrils in the streets. . . ."

The professor's voice went on and on, but Charles Barron was half asleep now. The brandy was dying in him, and he had had enough of this sort of welcome, enough of food and drink and the beaming, wrinkled faces of the old men. After awhile the last bottle of brandy was emptied, and the welcoming committee, a bit unsteady on its feet, shook his hand

again ceremoniously and departed.

The landlord was waiting, and led the way up the stairs to a great square bedroom at the rear of the building, its wide windows looking out upon a paved courtyard with a line of fresh willow-trees beyond. There was a vast bed against the wall, big enough to sleep a squad of men, thick with feather-beds and covered with a heavy ornate canopy.

Albertine, the blonde girl, was warming the sheets with a long-handled instrument which held burning coals. Charles Barron stood for a moment in the doorway, watching her. Suddenly he knew what to do. He smiled a happy smile, and sent the landlord down for another bottle. Then he hitched up his pants, drew a deep breath and walked catlike across the room. He caught Albertine before she could move, taking her wrist and pulling her to him.

"There are better ways of warming a bed than that," he said in English, making his meaning clear. Then he kissed her on the mouth. There was only resistance enough to make it interesting. But at least she was aware of him now.

She was a French girl, wasn't she? Barron had heard all about them, from the members of the American Legion who had been over here in the first war. Everybody knew about the French girls and the French postcards and everything French. . . .

They always played hard to get, trying to find out how much they could get out of you. This one played dumb, but Barron wasn't fooled. She tried to pull away, but that didn't get her anywhere.

"Ah, non, monsieur. . . ."

"Forget that stuff." Liquor loosened Barron's tongue, and words and whole phrases of her language came back to him. He could remember enough to make her understand. He told her that he was to be town-major here, representing American Military Government. She savvied A.M.G., no? Well, she had better come back to this room in one hour —after everyone else had turned in and the place was quiet for the night. If she didn't . . .

Somehow the mixture of text-book French, of guide-book phrases and slang was clear to her, for she flamed crimson. Barron only let her go when he heard the heavy tread of the landlord with the fresh bottle.

"Remember!" he warned her. "One hour!"

Then she was gone. Charles Barron took the bottle, and then noisily locked the door after the departing landlord. He craftily waited a few minutes, and then unlocked it again. The wine and cider and brandy he had drunk hadn't touched him at all. He took another drink, a long one, and put the bottle down very gently on the table.

He was a liberator, a conqueror, and he was a man and a half. No, he was two men. What is more, he'd have a story to tell when he got home, a story that would set the boys at the poolroom back on their heels.

The candle was burning low, so he hastily climbed out of his dusty uniform and crept into the vast bed in

darkness. He sank so low and so blissfully into its embrace that he forced himself to sit up at once. According to the glowing dial of his watch it was twenty-past eleven. He must keep awake for an hour. Make it an hour and fifteen minutes, to give Albertine a chance. After that . . .

But she'd come. She had better come! If she didn't . . . He lay there for a while, a slow rage burning inside him at the thought. His thoughts turned to the heavy Army .45 automatic on the chest-of-drawers. He had never fired it. Probably he never would get a chance to fire it, until the day when he had to turn it in on leaving the service. But it represented something—the force, the power, that he could wield, here in this town. He was in command here. These were his people, to do his bidding. He could make their lives miserable—at least he could throw a good scare into them. Better be careful not to let the enlisted men get anything more on him, though, he amended cautiously.

It was all hazy and out of focus in his mind, but he knew that he would find some way to pay off anybody who baulked him. Especially Albertine. If she didn't think he meant every word of it . . .

He was getting sleepy in spite of himself. He got up, smoked a cigarette, and took a deep drink from the bottle of brandy. Then he went to the window, breathed deeply of the spring-scented air, and felt better. That was more like it. Half an hour had gone by.

The sky was velvet black, pricked with cold white stars. As he watched, one of them blazed across the heavens. Years ago he would have made a wish on a falling star.

He'd already made his wish, and now he was waiting. Waiting. . . . That reminded him of the professor's silly ghost story about the Revenant, the ghost who walked on dark nights and who would rise from her tomb if a man came there and whispered the right words. "I am waiting" . . . in French that would be "Je suis prépare. . . ."

He was still waiting, and not for a ghost neither. Albertine had better come tiptoeing up that stair before the hour was up or she would wish she had. He went back to bed, suddenly chilled, and drew the great downy cover over his shoulders.

When he looked at his watch again it was almost twelve-thirty. He must have dozed. The slow violent rage of the alcoholic welled up from the depths within him, a brute-like, smashing rage. . . .

Then he stopped breathing to listen. There was a faint creaking of hinges, and a draught of cooler air. He waited, shaking a little with anticipation. And then, in the pitchy darkness, there was the light tread of bare feet on the wooden floor, coming straight towards the bed. . . .

It was very early when Charles Barron started to awake. Far away a rooster crowed. He lay there for a few moments, hesitating to open his eyes for fear that he might have the hangover of all hangovers. He'd drunk a lot of stuff last night, cider and brandy and champagne. Slowly

the memory of where he was and of all that had happened last night came back to him. What an evening, what a town, what a night!

Outside in the courtyard he could hear a soft girlish voice singing as the milk-pails rattled. It was Albertine, of course, the blonde little mademoiselle about her morning chores. He could even hear the words she was singing— ". . . et ma joli colombe que chante jour et nuit. . . ."

Lying there in the great canopied bed, Charles Barron, still half asleep, smiled a tender, reminiscent smile at the sound of Albertine's voice and at the memory of Albertine's mouth.

Then he came a little wider awake, awake enough to realize that he must still be asleep, must still be dreaming. Because if Albertine was about her chores in the courtyard of the inn, she could hardly be still beside him with her arm beneath his shoulder and her hair against his cheek.

It was no dream. Charles Barron opened his eyes and turned mechanically, with a dreadful compulsion, to look into the face of what had lain with him that night.

Her lips were red, *her* looks were free,
Her locks were yellow as gold:
Her skin was white as leprosy,
The Night-mare LIFE-IN-DEATH was she,
Who thicks man's blood with cold.

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE (1772–1834): *The Ancient Mariner.*

THE FATAL GLASS

BRENDA ROCKETT

Illustrated by Peter Goswell

INSPECTOR BLAKE KNOCKED on the door of the star dressing-room at the Fountain Theatre. He was not feeling very optimistic. He disliked questioning stage people. They always seemed to regard any drama that took place offstage as being of less importance than those which took place on.

Bessie Tucker opened the door at his knock. She was a plump, pleasant woman in her fifties; she smoked a cigarette in a long holder. She was a theatre dresser and looked it.

"Inspector Blake?" she inquired. "Oh, do come in, Inspector. This is Miss Oliver's dressing-room. I'll fetch everyone in to you in here."

"I shan't want to see everyone, Mrs.—er——?"

"Tucker, sir—but everyone calls me Bessie."

"Well—may I?"

"Certainly. No one ever calls me anything else. That is," she added, "nothing respectable."

Inspector Blake sat down on what was clearly the most comfortable of the only two chairs the room boasted.

"Well, Bessie," he said, "for a start, I want you to tell me everything you know."

Bessie laughed. It was rather a naughty laugh. "Huh, that'd fill a book," she said. "Often thought of writing one, but I'd only be had up for libel if I said all I'd like to about some of 'em, and if you can't say what you like, what's the use of writing a book."

The Inspector was forced to stem

the tide of Bessie's conversation.

"Quite so, Bessie," he said, "but what do you know about this case?"

"About the murder, sir?"

"She isn't dead, Bessie," Blake corrected, "please remember that."

"Oh yes, of course. She isn't dead —not yet."

"You think she's unlikely to recover?"

"Deathly pale she looked when they took her away," said Bessie by way of reply. "Deathly pale," she reiterated.

"You can't always go by that," the Inspector assured her. He took out his cigarette-case. Bessie's cigarette-holder was still dangling from her lips. No need to ask if she minded if he smoked. Probably without the scent of tobacco in the atmosphere she would inquire what was causing the funny smell. Tobacco and grease-paint, they were two smells to which Bessie was accustomed. He had heard that actresses used pan-cake make-up these days, but from the array of tubes on the dressing-room table it appeared that Miss Oliver still clung to the old-fashioned method of making herself beautiful.

"Poor little thing," said Bessie, recalling the deathly pale one. "What a thing to happen on her first night playing for Miss Oliver."

"Yes, I've got all that part of the story. What's her name? Judy Morgan—she's Miss Oliver's understudy, isn't she?—and this is the first night Miss Oliver has been off."

"Yes, sir, fit as a fiddle is my Jenny Oliver, but the best of us have accidents. Walked into a glass door she did, and cut her face. They've taken her to hospital, and her husband says her face will heal. It had better. Her face is her fortune, eh, Inspector?"

Inspector Blake, who had not been musing on Miss Oliver's physical attraction, replied absently, "Er—oh, yes. . . . Very nice-looking girl—very nice-looking. . . . So that's what put Judy Morgan on tonight?"

"Yes. I reckon if she'd had to wait for illness, young Judy would never have got her chance."

"Her chance to be poisoned," said the Inspector grimly.

"Who could have done it, sir? Oh, who could have done a thing like that?"

Inspector Blake glanced across at the woman as she leaned against the dressing-table. "I think you can help me there, Bessie," he said.

"Me? Now, look here, none of that. I'd nothing to do with it, so there."

"No, of course not, but you can help me towards discovering who had. Won't you sit down? You don't look comfortable leaning against that dressing-table."

"I'd rather stand, sir, if you don't mind. We get used to it, I suppose. In this job you're on your feet so much it doesn't seem right to be on your seat, if you get me."

The Inspector coughed. He also blushed. He was not surprised. He had expected this case to be different from the last one, which was the case of the Church Organ Fund robbery down at Tumbleton.

"Yes; well, Bessie, let's get down to facts. First I have to establish who

had access to the glass from which Judy drank, and secondly—perhaps on a parallel with it—whether the poison was really meant for Judy—or for Miss Oliver."

Bessie relinquished her hold on the dressing-table and stood upright.

"Jenny Oliver!" she exclaimed. "Oh no, sir, not for her!"

"Why not? Do you think there's more motive for anyone killing the understudy—rather than the star?"

Bessie relaxed a little. "It isn't that, sir," she said. "I don't know much about her, apart from dressing her tonight, but no one would want to kill Jenny. Why, they worship her—all of them. She's an angel. Never a word against her from anyone."

"In my experience, Bessie," the Inspector observed, "the more a woman is admired by the many, the more intensely is she disliked by the jealous few."

"Oh, but you couldn't be jealous of Jo, sir—we called her Jo—J.O., see? No one could be jealous of her. She disarmed them, you might say."

"Ummm." The Inspector was unconvinced. "Well," he said, dismissing the subject of Jenny's virtues, "who has access to this stuff they drink?"

"The stage-manager," said Bessie promptly, "and Freda, of course."

"Who is Freda?"

A dark-haired slim girl in cherry slacks and a black sweater, who happened to be passing the slightly open door, stopped as she heard her name. She put her curly head round the door.

"I'm Freda," she said. "Somebody want me?"

"Oh, Freda," said Bessie. "This is Inspector Blake. Freda's our A.S.M., sir."

Blake was no ignoramus, and he was glad of it.

"Ah, the assistant stage manager, yes," he said airily. "What's your name?"

"Freda Chandler, sir."

The Inspector liked the look of her. She seemed a capable girl, not easily flustered; but then in her job that was necessary.

"You deal with the properties, Miss Chandler?"

"Those that Jack doesn't see to, yes," she replied. "Jack Storm's the stage-manager," she explained.

"Who handles the drinks?"

"Both of us, sir. I usually set them while Jack's on the curtain, but he strikes them because I'm on in Act Three—just for two lines, you know."

"So that either of you could tamper with the glasses at any time when they are not actually on the stage—but you are responsible for the actual setting?"

"That's right," Freda replied. "But I don't know a thing about this, even if it turns out that I haven't an alibi to my name."

"Quite so," said the Inspector. "Don't be alarmed. I'm not accusing you of anything. It's simply that I have to get at the facts. If anyone planned to kill Judy Morgan, they would have had to tamper with the stuff after you heard of Miss Oliver's accident. What time was that, Bessie?"

Bessie considered. "Well, it was about three p.m. when Mr. Darwell rang me—that's Jenny's husband—but, of course, the others wouldn't have known about it until they got here tonight."

"When you told them?"

"Either me or Mr. Darwell—or the management. *They* had to know in good time, of course, to let Judy know she'd be playing."

"What time do they all get here?"

"Oh, six—six-fifteenish," said Bessie.

"I see—but if whoever it was had already planned to kill Jenny Oliver ——"

His sentence was cut short by an exclamation from the calm Miss Chandler which rather surprised him.

"Jenny Oliver!" she said, and he noticed that she glanced at Bessie. It was a glance that seemed to say, "Can he really think that?"

He concluded his sentence—"they might not have been able to undo what they had done without attracting attention. It's easy to put stuff in; hard to take it out."

"Unless they 'accidentally' broke the glass," suggested Bessie. "That would be easy enough."

"It wouldn't," said Freda. "Not those glasses. You'd have to hurl it down like fury to break it. They were selected for their toughness."

"So I'm right? It would be hard to undo the business once it had been done?" queried the Inspector.

"Yes, I suppose it would. You couldn't be sure you wouldn't be seen. But what I can't understand is—why should anyone want to kill Jenny?"

"You like Miss Oliver?" asked the Inspector.

"Like her!" said Freda, with an enthusiasm remarkable in such a level-headed girl. "I'd lay down and die for her!"

"Nevertheless," the Inspector insisted, "someone could have resented her. If they did, they prepared for her death before six p.m.—before they had been told by Bessie or anyone else that Miss Oliver would be off. If Judy Morgan was the intended victim, the poison was put in much later—not long before the curtain rose, in fact. Any time up to the moment she actually drank it. Who was on stage with her?"

"In that scene, only the two men and the maid," said Freda, "and only Charles when the toast is actually drunk."

"Does the maid touch the drinks?"

"She goes near them, yes. She can touch them—or she needn't."

"And the men?" inquired the Inspector.

"Paul, that's the 'other man' in the play, and Charles Darwell, the lead—Jenny's real-life husband," Judy broke off to explain—"they both drink; Paul, before the part Judy collapsed in, and Charles actually with her."

"Are all those drinks poured from the same bottle?" asked Blake.

"Darwell's is—yes."

"Then the poison was obviously not in the bottle, but in the glass," Blake deduced, but he gave himself no medals for doing so.

"Yes, I suppose so," said Freda, not unduly impressed so far with his

powers of detection. "Charles and Judy drink a toast—to celebrate his success in business," she explained.

Blake cast his mind back to the set-up as he had seen it when he made his first brief inspection.

"Judy's glass was not empty," he recalled. "Should it have been, if all was well?"

"Oh no," said Freda, seeing his point, "she doesn't finish it. The dialogue says so. Charles says. 'Come on. Drink up,' and she says, 'I don't like it.' "

"I'm not surprised," said Blake grimly. "Why didn't she like it—in the play, I mean?"

"Because," Freda began—then she saw a chance to do a bit of acting and like a true pro she took it—"well, I'll quote you Charles's line," she said. "He says, 'You funny little thing, you're not sophisticated, are you? You were just putting on an act at the Ritz.' " Her voice, which she had deepened for Charles, rose to its normal pitch as she said, "That was when Judy collapsed."

"I see." The Inspector fingered his chin ponderously. "You think it unlikely that anyone should wish to kill Miss Oliver?" he said again.

Freda said gently, "We all love her."

"And you don't love Miss Morgan?" asked Blake, deliberately misinterpreting her meaning. "There is a reason for her to be killed?"

Freda paled a little. "Oh no," she said. "Not that I know of—but Jenny's extra special. Judy's all right—apart from the b—— awful performance she gave tonight before she did collapse."

"Oh," said the Inspector, "she wasn't much good?"

Freda grimaced. "Frightful!" she said, "and she knew it. She said to me in the first interval, 'I'm all over the place, Freda, I've fluffed a dozen lines and moves already.' "

"Oh, so she hadn't studied her part too closely?" said Blake.

"Couldn't have done—but you don't kill a girl for that."

"Hardly, I should think. What was the attitude of the other three—the men and the girl playing the maid—to Miss Morgan?"

"Well, the men were quite indifferent as far as I know," said Freda. "Pam was a bit cheesed off."

"The one playing the maid?"

"Yes."

Bessie looked up from a pile of flimsy garments she was folding neatly and said, "Oh, she's always cheesed off about something."

Freda smiled at Bessie in a manner which indicated to Blake, who was watching them more closely than either of them would have imagined, that the two were good friends.

"Well, it was tough on her," said Freda sympathetically. "You see," she explained to the Inspector, "up to last week Pam was general understudy, and then Anne who was playing the maid was taken ill and Pam went into her part. Judy came in as Jenny's understudy—Jenny walks into a door and Judy walks into the part. If Pam had thought there was a chance of Jenny being

off, she'd never have plumped for the maid."

"If that poison was meant for Miss Oliver," the Inspector reminded her, "this Pam has had a lucky break."

"But I tell you no one could hate Jenny," Freda insisted. "You only have to meet her to know that."

"Pam liked her too, did she?"

"Oh yes, and she liked Judy," Freda assured him, anxious that he should not be given the wrong impression. "She resented her a bit over this part, but it didn't go deep."

Blake surveyed the set-up that he now had in his mind's eye. "Then in your opinion," he said, "nobody hated anybody."

"Not as far as I know," said Freda.

"What is the attitude of the two men towards Miss Oliver?" queried Blake. The girl, Freda, didn't seem the emotional type. Her judgment of character should be reliable.

She answered him directly. "Well, Charles is her husband," she said. "I think they are quite happy." She turned to the dresser, and said, "Bess, you know more about that than I. You work for them."

"Oh, you're Miss Oliver's personal maid, are you?" said Blake, taking a new interest in Bessie. "I mean, you work in her home as well?"

"That's right," said Bessie. "That is, I go in every morning to clean up a bit. It's a small flat—all mod. cons. —so there isn't much to do."

"And you weren't there when Miss Oliver had her accident?"

"No, I'd left by then. I told you, Mr. Darwell rang me up to tell me."

"Oh yes. He was there, then?"

"Not when I left, sir. He must have got in between one and two, I imagine."

"Quite so," said the Inspector. "They are a happy couple, you say?"

"As far as I know," said Bessie, looking troubled. She couldn't see what the Inspector was driving at, but she didn't like answering questions about the people she worked for.

"Freda," said Blake kindly, "would you fetch Mr. Darwell to me, please?"

Freda turned immediately to go.

"Oh, and the other man—Forrester, I think his name is," said Blake as she went. "I gather he likes Miss Oliver, too?" He saw no reason why Forrester should be the one exception.

"I think so," said Freda. "He never says much about anything."

"Oh, strong, silent man, eh?"

"Very," said Freda.

"All right, Freda, run along and fetch them."

Freda chuckled as she went. "Fancy me *fetching* Mr. Charles Darwell," she said. "Did you ever!"

"Why did she say that?" asked Blake, turning to Bessie. "Is he difficult?"

"Not really," Bessie replied. "No more than most men—but he is a star and she only 'walks on.' He's rather imposing."

"But he is happy with his wife?"

"I think so," said Bessie, thinking the question was becoming monotonous. "Oh, they have their quarrels, you know. He's a bit too fond of the

bottle and a bit hot-tempered." Bessie wondered if she should have said that; her tongue was inclined to run away with her, and there were a lot worse men than Charles Darwell. "So is she when she's really angry," she added in all fairness; "but that isn't often. They're an average couple I'd say," she summed up; "at any rate, in the theatre where everyone lives on their nerves."

Blake felt that she had something there. "Tell me," he went on, "have you witnessed any of these quarrels?"

"Oh no," said Bessie. "He's not often there when I go in."

"So you really have very little opportunity for discovering how happy —or otherwise—they are together?"

Bessie considered this. "I only know she adores him, sir," she said eventually. "She always tells me if they have a row, and she's always miserable about it. He could do murder, and she'd stand by him, she's that fond of him."

Blake looked grim. "I don't think murder is quite the word to use at present," he said. "We hope it won't be so serious a charge."

Bessie was alarmed at this misinterpretation of her words. "I—I didn't mean——" she began.

The Inspector laughed. "I know you didn't, Bessie," he said kindly.

At that moment there was a gentle knock on the door, which Freda had closed behind her. "Come in," called Blake, expecting that it was Freda returning with the two men. It was a small brown-haired girl of about eighteen who entered. Blake could tell immediately that she was a far more nervous type than Freda, and that the events of the evening had left her badly shaken.

"Who are you?" he asked in an avuncular tone, attempting to put her at her ease.

"I'm Pam Stevens," she replied. "I play the maid. Freda just told me you were here. I wondered if I could help you."

Blake, thinking he might be on to something, asked, "In what way?"

She replied vaguely, "In any way."

"You might," he said, although clearly she had no vital information to impart. It seemed cruel to startle a nervous girl, but a direct approach often brought results, so he said briefly, "Tell me—why did you resent Judy Morgan?"

She blushed. "Only because of that part . . ." she began, and then, wondering if perhaps she had been unwise to admit so much, she stammered, "I—I didn't resent her. I didn't really. Only I could have played the part so much better," she added, the actress in her gaining supremacy, "and if only Anne Laney hadn't been ill, I shouldn't have taken the maid and I should be playing for Jenny Judy was so awful. Poor Charles was looking everywhere for her. She kept popping up all over the place, and all her lines were back to front. I don't think she gave anyone the right cue all evening. She should have known the part better than that, Inspector," Pam concluded, a pleading note in her voice. "It's a gorgeous part." Then, nervously, she said, "But don't get the idea I hated her, because it isn't

true. I grumble a hell of a lot, but I don't mean much."

"We're all a bit like that," the Inspector consoled her.

Freda knocked on the door, but she entered without waiting for his "Come in." She was a very matter-of-fact girl, but even she was starry-eyed about Miss Jenny Oliver. Behind her were two men: one tall, dark and handsome like the conventional matinée idol, rather superior in countenance. He, Blake deduced, was the imposing Mr. Darwell. The other man—Paul Forrester presumably—was smaller, with brown hair and eyes and a gentle expression. He did not appear to be a happy man, but he did not look capable of cruelty.

"Mr. Darwell and Mr. Forrester, Inspector," said the ever-practical Freda.

"Oh, good evening, gentlemen," said the Inspector, aware as he spoke to Charles Darwell that he was addressing someone who, in his own estimation as well as that of his loving public, was someone worthy of respect. "This," thought Blake, "is a famous man"; and he was surprised that he felt impressed.

"Won't you sit down?" he invited, and then, remembering the dearth of chairs, he added. "Some of you."

"I will," said Freda, sitting in the chair the Inspector had that minute vacated, "my feet are killing me."

"Pam?" said Darwell, indicating the other chair, having observed that Bessie was lodged quite comfortably on the edge of the dressing-table. As Pam hesitated, considering his superiority, he assured her, "I prefer to stand."

Blake detected a rather pompous note in his voice, which was completely lacking in Forrester's as he said, "Yes, so do I."

Pam, accepting the chair, said, "We women have more sense."

"Now, Mr. Darwell," the Inspector began, "you are Miss Oliver's husband?"

"Yes, I am."

"And as far as you know, there is no one in this theatre who would wish to kill her?"

The not-unexpected reaction to this question was that both men exclaimed in unison, "Kill Jenny!" as though that were the most unheard of thing in the world.

"I'm working on a theory that the poison was put into the glass before anyone knew that Miss Oliver couldn't play."

"But why should anyone want to kill Jenny?" said her husband. "She hadn't an enemy in the world."

Before Blake could reply Pam interrupted with, "Are you sure the poison wasn't in the bottle?"

Blake smiled. He had already explained this in her absence, but he repeated for her benefit his obvious deduction. "Mr. Darwell drank from the same bottle. Unless he poured his own drink first and then tampered with the bottle, it couldn't have been affected."

Darwell resented this suggestion. "Now look here, Inspector," he began importantly.

"All right, all right," the Inspector

said pacifically, "I think we can assume it was in the glass."

Freda, who had been pondering the point for some time, now put into words the thing that puzzled her. "Can poison be put into a glass," she asked, "and not be visible?"

"Barely visible," the Inspector replied. "Tell me, Miss Chandler, how closely do you inspect the glasses before setting them?"

She replied, as he expected, "Not at all. It's all a case of 'there, there and there! Right. All set. Take her up, Jack.' "

"Ah yes—Jack. I'd forgotten him."

"Do you want to see him, Inspector?" asked Freda, about to rise and fetch the stage-manager at the Inspector's command.

"Not just now, thank you," said Blake, touched at her helpfulness. "Perhaps later. How closely do you look at your glass before drinking, Mr. Darwell?"

"I'm hardly aware of it," the actor replied. "Especially tonight. I was too busy trying to pick up the one or two cues Judy condescended to give me."

Condemnation of Judy's performance becoming as monotonous as appraisal of Jenny Oliver's personal charm, Blake overlooked this comment. "If you found traces of powder or liquid in the bottom of a glass, what would you think?"

Darwell shrugged. "If I noticed," he said, "I should probably think that the property glass had been broken and a dirty glass from one of the dressing-rooms substituted at the last minute."

"You wouldn't think it strange?"

"I wouldn't have time to. On stage everything but the play ceases to matter, and, as I say, tonight with Judy was an endurance test."

"No one seems to have had a high opinion of this unfortunate girl," Blake observed, "yet no one wanted to kill her."

" 'Do all men kill the thing they do not love'?" said Pam lightly. "Shakespeare," she added for the Inspector's enlightenment. Then, suddenly serious, she said, in a hushed voice, "Oh, Inspector, will she die?"

"I'm waiting for a call from the hospital when there's news either way," Blake replied. "I asked the

stage-door-keeper to have it put through to this room. Also anything from the laboratory. They are analysing both bottle and glass, just in case." He forestalled Darwell's protest, "All right, Darwell, we know it couldn't possibly have been the bottle, but we have to put it to the test."

Darwell subsided.

"I suppose we are all suspects," said Freda.

"Yes, Miss Chandler," Blake replied, "and suspicion fell heavily on you, at first."

Freda, not alarmed but a little surprised, asked, "Why on me?"

"Because you set the glasses. If the poison was put into the glass offstage, the only person to have done it would be the one responsible for setting them. When I thought the poison was intended for Miss Oliver, I naturally suspected you."

"You mean, you thought I wanted to kill Jenny!" said Freda incredulously.

"I don't think so now. I don't think the poison was meant for Jenny at all."

"But who wanted to kill Judy?" said Forrester, who had been silent for some time. "That is what you have to find out now, isn't it, Inspector?"

"There's a lot to find out," Blake replied. "From what I saw of the stage-set before I came in here, the glasses were set, with the bottle between them, on the centre table. So the murderer—or should I say the would-be murderer — could easily have put the poison into the correct glass. Only Freda could have put the poisoned glass into the correct place."

"But I didn't," Freda insisted. "I adored Jenny and I liked Judy."

"I'm not accusing you, Freda," Blake reassured her.

"But you do mean someone in this room," said Bessie in a voice that caused the nervous Pamela Stevens to shudder involuntarily.

"That was clear from the start," said Blake. "All we can hope is that Judy Morgan will survive."

"Poor little Judy," said Freda. "We all said rotten things about her because she wasn't Jenny."

"Everyone seems to have a passion for Miss Oliver," said Blake. "That's strange," he went on, for a reason best known to himself, "because someone once told me she was an absolute tartar."

There was reaction to this remark from everyone, and the silent Forrester exclaimed, "What! But how could anyone say that about that perfect angel of a woman!"

Blake smiled.

"They wouldn't have said it in my hearing," said Darwell, and to Blake's surprise Paul Forrester immediately turned on him and said, "What would you have done, Darwell? Struck him in the face?"

To Blake's even greater surprise Charles Darwell turned pale. He did not reply.

Bessie, who paid little heed to this clash between the two men, said very gently to the Inspector, "People can be very wrong about famous stars, you know, sir. Sometimes the impression they give is far from the truth."

"Yes," said Blake, seeing her point

in more ways than the one she intended. "I wonder——" he began, and then broke off, turning to Pam. "You've always wanted to play Miss Oliver's part in this show, haven't you? I'm going to give you that chance. I want you four—Freda, you can read the maid's part—to re-enact that scene up to the point where Judy collapsed. I have a theory."

"A theory?" said Pam. "You mean —who did it?"

"Perhaps."

"I don't need to read the maid's part," said Freda. "She has about three lines in that scene, hasn't she, Pam?"

"That's right," said Pam, still looking apprehensively at the Inspector. How could he look so impassive if he knew the murderer's identity?

"Right," said the Inspector, taking his stand beside Bessie at the dressing-table. "Bessie and I are the audience. Everything, mind. Every line, every move, every gesture. If anyone cuts anything you will all know. We can't use the bottle and glasses because they've been taken away. Are there any others?"

"There's bound to be some in your room, Darwell," said Paul Forrester, still with the acid note in his voice.

"I'll fetch them," said Freda, and promptly went to do so.

"Is this a game?" demanded Charles Darwell.

Blake, who was not sure if he liked Darwell and certainly resented him for making him feel small; replied briefly, "You might call it that."

"I can't see that it's necessary," said Forrester.

"I'm going to enjoy it," said Bessie. "But why don't you go and do it proper on the stage?"

"Because," Blake replied. "I don't want to leave this telephone."

Pam, who had been glancing through a playscript lying on the dressing-table, now closed it with the air of one who is sure she is word-perfect and said, "My chance at last! I hope my only chance. I want to see Judy Morgan back here tomorrow."

"Don't we all," said Forrester, his eyes straying to the telephone as though hoping and dreading to hear it ring.

"I wonder why he's so anxious about her?" thought Blake. But he had no time to ponder the question, for Freda returned with the bottle and glasses on a tray.

Blake drew forward a small table, and put it in the corresponding position to the small table on the stage.

"Right, Freda. Set them, will you?" he said. Turning to Pam, he told her, "I think you will probably play tomorrow, Pam. Judy will need a day or two to recover from the shock—even if she recovers from the poison, which isn't certain."

Freda, having set the bottle with a glass on either side—said, "Ready, Inspector. Of course there are some more glasses and bottles on the big table at the back, but they don't come into the picture, do they?"

"No," said the Inspector. "Only this little trayful here."

They all looked at the innocent collection of glassware with a sense of horror. The Inspector snapped them

out of it. "All right," he said. "Bessie and I are the audience. The door on your left is where your door is and the wall on your right represents the other exit to—what is it?"

"The drawing-room," said Freda.

"Right. Carry on."

"Any resemblance to tonight's performance," said Darwell, "will be entirely coincidental."

"Then what is the use!" asked Forrester impatiently, as he took his position preparatory to playing out the fateful scene.

It appeared that Paul Forrester was discovered "on" in this scene, and it was the maid, Sally, now played by Freda, who discovered him. Paul was playing the part of Frank Mortimor, the "other man" of the piece. Blake watched him like a hawk as he went through his duologue with the maid. She left him. He went to the centre table and took a cigarette. He lit the cigarette, and then, with his back to Blake and the "audience," bent over the tray holding the bottle and glasses, commenting on the fact that they looked as if someone was celebrating something.

Pam prepared for her entrance as Helen Crossland. Very well she did it, too. She gave everything to the light, inconsequential dialogue with Forrester which followed. Blake made a mental note of the fact that Pam Stevens was a very promising little actress, incapable of giving a bad performance even at a time like this. However, he was not looking for a promising actress, but for a promising murderer—or murderess. Blake disliked that possibility. He concentrated on the action of the play. Pam asked Forrester to have a drink. He took one, from the imaginary array on the imaginary table at the back. The duologue went on. Forrester, or Frank Mortimor, made his exit. Freda, or Sally, returned and had a short duologue with the heroine. Then Darwell came on. Very tall and strong and dominant he looked as he strode on to the scene. The small room seemed to hamper him. It could not confine Charles Darwell's star-quality within its four walls.

The conversation between Henry Crossland and his wife Helen was very amusing. Blake found himself enjoying their performances, and returned very suddenly to his duty when Henry said something about a drink. He went to the drinks table and prepared the drinks. Blake could not see the glasses as he did so. The audience was not at that point interested in Darwell. There was a naughty, triumphant expression on the face of his stage-wife which drew their attention. It almost drew Blake's, but it was his job to watch Darwell now. As Darwell replaced the bottle on the tray, Pam went up to him and took her glass from the tray. The glasses clinked and the conversation went on. Darwell drank his champagne, but Pam, as the unsophisticated Helen, only sipped hers. As she did so the telephone rang. Everyone stopped and stared at it. Blake calmly lifted the receiver.

"Hello? Hello—yes. Yes, speaking. . . ." They watched him in tense silence. "Oh, I see. Thank you. Thank you for letting me know. Good-bye."

He replaced the receiver and said, "Go on."

They looked at him uneasily. Forrester said, "But—what did they say?"

"Is she going to live?" asked Pam nervously.

"Finish the scene," was all that Blake would say. "I'll tell you later."

Reluctantly they resumed their dialogue. It transpired that Helen was not the woman-of-the-world she had led her newly married husband to believe, and she had no taste for champagne.

"You funny little thing," said Darwell. "You aren't sophisticated a bit, are you? You were just putting on an act at the Ritz."

They stopped.

"That's where Judy collapsed," said Darwell.

Blake nodded. "That's as far as she got?"

"Yes."

"Did she say anything? Or did she lose consciousness at once?"

"She said something about, 'It must have been that awful stuff' and passed out," Darwell replied.

"But how is she?" Forrester demanded again.

Aware that he was torturing them, Blake could not yet be merciful. "One thing more," he said. "What should come next?"

Pam replied, "She goes to fetch Frank from the drawing-room."

"Except," said Darwell, with heavy sarcasm, "that Judy would probably have fetched him from the kitchen if she had run true to form."

"All right," said Blake, "that's all."

"Is she all right, Inspector?" Pam asked again.

"I'll say this," said Blake, weighing his words. "If it was meant for Judy Morgan to die tonight, then she will die—if not, she'll live."

Surprisingly, Forrester said, "Thank God!"

"But that is true of us all, Forrester," said Blake. Then, more kindly, he explained, "That call wasn't from the hospital, it was from the laboratory. The poison was in the glass; sufficient to kill if she had drunk it all—only everyone knew that she wouldn't drink it all. It was in the script that she wouldn't. It is highly unlikely that Judy Morgan will die of the amount she took."

"But if everyone knew——" began Pam at a loss. "I don't understand," she concluded lamely.

Blake did not attempt to make her understand. Instead he turned to Charles Darwell.

"If anyone had called your wife a tartar, Darwell," he said, "would you have struck him in the face as Forrester suggested? Or is that a privilege you reserve only for women—for your wife in particular?"

"What?" The exclamation came from Bessie. She could not believe that she had heard aright; but the Inspector was carrying on. "You did strike her in a drunken temper, didn't you, Darwell? With a glass in your hand, too." He turned to Paul Forrester and said, "He did, didn't he, Forrester? He struck 'that perfect angel of a woman'?"

Forrester, realizing that the Inspec-

tor knew, said with a burning hatred, "Blast him to hell for it!"

Blake went on. "It was more than you could bear for the woman you loved, wasn't it?" The detective felt sorry for the sensitive man to whom he addressed those words. He saw the set line of Forrester's lips, and knew how great was the effort to keep that apparent control.

"Oh, I know how much you loved her," he said. "Everyone else told me how wonderful she was. You didn't —until I suggested the opposite. No one ever told me she was a tartar. I was only trying to find out what was what."

Forrester spoke in a voice rough with emotion. "Yes, I love her—and she loves me in her way. She turns to me when Darwell's drunken tempers make her unhappy. Once she showed me a bruise on her wrist where he had pressed hard on it deliberately to hurt her; another time a cigarette burn. I never believed that glass door story for a moment—but Darwell won't tell me what hospital she's in."

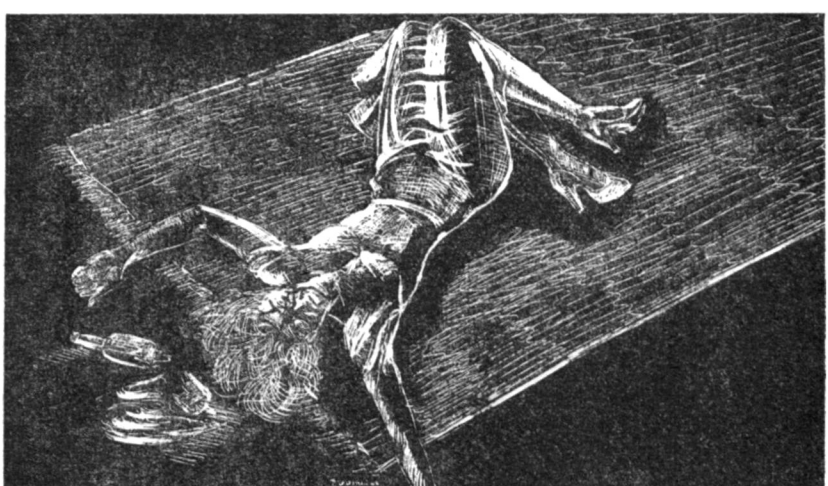
Bessie, speaking out of her bewilderment, said, "He wouldn't tell me either. Said there was no need for me to go ringing up, fussing about her."

"God, how I hate you, Darwell," said Forrester in a voice all the more impressive for its calm and softness of tone.

"But I don't see," said Freda, surprised for once out of the confidence she always showed, "how this affects Judy."

"By heaven I do!" Darwell exclaimed. "I knew you hated me, Forrester, but this . . .!" Overcome, he sank on to a chair and buried his head in his hands. He could not believe that what had just been revealed to him was true.

"I still don't see," said Freda.



"Neither do I," said Pam.

"Don't you? Will you resume the positions you had just now, Pam . . . and you, Darwell, if you feel able to."

Darwell looked up. "What? Oh, oh yes." Automatically he took up his position corresponding to Pam's.

"Right," said Blake. "Now say that bit about the Ritz."

" 'You were just putting on an act at the Ritz, weren't you?' " said Darwell.

"Carry on, Pam."

Pam hesitated. "What's the next line?" she asked herself. "Oh yes—'Good heavens, I put Frank into the drawing-room. I'll fetch him.' " She went towards the wall and the imaginary drawing-room door. She paused and looked at Blake.

"Could Judy have done that to-night, Darwell?" asked Blake.

"Not without going down left of the table," Darwell replied. "She was on the wrong side."

"Try it that way, Pam."

Pam, not quite seeing the Inspector's point, complied with his instruction. She took up her position on the other side of Darwell, and lifted up her glass. As she did so a cold chill of realization ran up and down her spine.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, as she stared at the other glass, Darwell's glass.

"Yes," said Blake. "It was tough luck on little Judy Morgan that she fluffed a dozen lines and moves, but what a break for you, Darwell. Forrester slipped quite a good dose of poison into that glass when he had that business with the cigarette. It would have killed you if you had drunk the lot. Mercifully Judy didn't have to—or she'd be dead all right."

"I didn't dream Judy would get it," Forrester burst out. "I swear I didn't. I didn't know she was all over the place. I'd only had that one short scene with her. She was all right in that. She didn't have to move much. I'm sorry about Judy—but not about you, Darwell. You're a filthy swine. I wish I had done for you. You deserve to die!"

The telephone broke into the terrible barrier of hatred between the two men. Blake lifted the receiver.

"Yes," he said. "Who is it? This is Inspector Blake speaking. . . ." There was a long, unbearable silence, and then he said, "What! Oh no! . . . She can't be! . . . Dead!"

Forrester said, "Oh, God!" and the others were stricken with horror.

Only Darwell turned and, with his lip curling, said, "*You* deserve to die, Forrester, and now you will, won't you?"

"Yes," said Blake to the man at the other end of the wire. "I'll see to it." Slowly he replaced the receiver, and turned to the group of people who were now his audience, hushed into an awful silence.

"You weren't so wrong, Forrester, after all," he said. "That was the caretaker of your flats, Darwell. You were too much of a coward to send for an ambulance, weren't you? They've just found your wife—dead—from severe throat and facial injuries—and shock. . . . I'm afraid I shall have to hold you—on a charge of murder."

MYSELF WHEN YOUNG

PETER PARDIGON

This is the story of a man whose wife was stolen away by a house. Not, as you may guess from its inclusion here, a house of charm and tranquillity, but a malignant dwelling exercising a febrile favouritism over its occupants—rejecting most, but selecting a very few for corruption and eventual tragedy.

JEAN FELL IN LOVE with Marnings the first moment we saw the place. Perhaps that was partly because we were so very much in love with each other that we viewed everything through rather a rosy haze, and certainly we could not have been introduced to the house under more favourable conditions.

It was one of those perfect June afternoons more common in fiction than in fact; the sun blazed down from one sea of blue on to another, yet there was just enough breeze to save us from the airlessness which can accompany great heat. As our car negotiated the drive gates, we caught sight of the roses through the trees and smelt the enticingly lovely scent of syringas. Although we were so near the sandy beach, the vegetation everywhere seemed luxuriant, almost rampant. Then we rounded a curve and came upon Marnings full-face, as it were.

Jean sighed deeply.

"What a glorious old place," she said. "It's the house of my dreams. Do you suppose it's got dry-rot, darling, or some other such horror? There must be something to explain its extraordinary cheapness."

I remember I told her the house had been surveyed, and there was nothing whatever radically wrong with it. I had gathered from the Estate Agents that the owner, a Miss Margery, was something of an eccentric and had been proving a very difficult client. She apparently insisted on showing the house herself to all prospective purchasers, and had so far turned down every offer made as she had not considered any of the people "right." I didn't tell Jean all this, as I could see how full of hope she was, and I personally felt that Miss Margery was likely to be discovered as a sentimental old spinster, easily touched by the sight of a pair of young lovers wanting to set up their first home together in her house, so that she would prefer us to any of the others who had looked over the place.

In accordance with the owner's wishes, we had come unaccompanied by anyone from the Estate Agents, and were to meet her at the house at half-past three. However, we had deliberately arrived half an hour early, so that we should have time to make some investigations of our own before she appeared, and we spent this

time to good advantage, examining as carefully as we could the outside of the house itself, the various sheds and buildings at the back and, of course, the exquisite garden, still wonderfully beautiful in spite of some months' neglect.

We could not actually see the sea from any point in the garden, though we knew that some of the rooms had a view of it; but we could hear it, calm as it was that afternoon, and Jean declared she could smell it.

I didn't know about that. The scent of the flowers was so strong and so delicious that I couldn't be sure I could detect any other smell; yet there was something which faintly troubled my rather fastidious nose. I didn't think it was the sea, though; that is a smell I enjoy.

By the time we heard Miss Margery's car coming up the drive, our minds were pretty well made up. Jean loved the place, heart and soul, and my only wish was to give her whatever she wanted. It still seemed incredible to me that anyone so young and lovely should be prepared to sacrifice herself and marry a semi-crock like myself, nearly twice her age; but there it was. She showed every sign of being as devoted to me as I was to her, and there was, at any rate, one advantage in being so much older than she was: I had had time to get on in the world and amass, if not a fortune, at least enough money to be able to buy her the house she wanted and let her equip it as she wished.

Even on that enchanted and happy afternoon, my enthusiasm for the house never quite equalled Jean's. I couldn't tell you now, I couldn't have told you then, what was my objection. As I have said, I am a fastidious person, very sensitive to atmosphere, and there was something about Marnings not quite to my taste, but, whatever it was, it was of no importance whatsoever compared with my wish to please my beloved.

Miss Margery came alone, driving a small, not very new Morris. She was not at all as I had imagined her, except that she was no longer young, what old-fashioned books used to describe as "of uncertain age." There was nothing sentimental or aunt-like about her. She seemed, rather, the epitome of all those wicked housekeepers who had sent a chill down my spine in the years of my childhood's reading. She was gaunt, black-haired, black-eyed, black-clad. Jean told me afterwards she had found her cast of features disagreeable; I think I should have chosen the stronger word, sinister.

However, she greeted us normally and pleasantly enough, though her habit of emitting a shrill, hysterical laugh every few moments was disconcerting, to say the least of it, and she soon led us off on a tour of the house. The rooms were large, light and well-proportioned; their arrangement was much less inconvenient than is often the case in such old houses, even those belonging to the superb period of domestic architecture which had produced Marnings, and Jean, no business woman, was ill-advisedly making no attempt to conceal her rapturous and possessive

feeling for the place. We should never be able to beat Miss Margery's price down any lower, I thought, unless we simulated a lack of interest in the deal, and that Jean was by this time incapable of doing. She was evidently, as we say in our slipshod English fashion, mad on it.

I did, eventually, get down to discussing terms, and surprisingly found Miss Margery as accommodating as I had originally imagined she might be. It appeared she wanted us to have the house and was prepared to come down a further five hundred pounds, if necessary, to bring it within our means. I did not tell her that I could have afforded it had it been twice the price she asked, but accepted her reduced offer gravely and we agreed to put the purchase into the hands of our respective lawyers without further ado.

As we said good-bye, it entered my head to ask the stock question, never missed by those who buy houses of respectable antiquity, "I suppose it hasn't got a ghost?"

Even as I spoke I knew positively, not with any feeling of apprehension or alarm, but simply factually, as I know that the world is round, why Miss Margery's price for the house was so low. I think it was at that moment, too, that the significance of the slight smell I had always been aware of was revealed to me. My almost imperceptible distrust of the house crystallized sharply in a moment of cool recognition.

Miss Margery laughed back at me with the abandon of a maniac.

"As a matter of fact, it has," she replied, though in the tone of voice which suggested that no one except a child or an idiot would take such a thing seriously. "And, moreover, it's quite a unique ghost. I've never seen it, of course, but I've met several friends of cousins of servants who've been employed here in the past—you know the sort of thing?—who have all had detailed accounts of it—*my* ghost, mark you, and I know nothing about it—and who all agree, while differing about details, that there is no other ghost like it, nor ever has been."

Jean's face was as radiant as ever.

"That makes it just *perfect*," she gloated. "But is it a man or a woman ghost, Miss Margery? And is it sad —a murdered ghost, perhaps?—or looking for something, or what? One would like to know its history, so that if one saw it one would be able to reassure it, if that were what it needed."

"I'm afraid I can't answer those questions," said Miss Margery, shaking with laughter. "I am not at all a fanciful or superstitious woman myself, and I emphatically do not believe in ghosts or take any interest in them. If I have ever heard any story attached to the ghost of Marnings, I do not remember it. The one fact which remains with me is that no other ghost is like it, though in what way it is so remarkable I have no recollection."

We forgot about the ghost again. After our farewells to Miss Margery were over, we stayed behind to make some notes on what required to be done to the house before we moved

in. Jean was lost in dreams of colour schemes and extra bathrooms, and I was content to sun myself, leaning against the deep window embrasure with eyes half closed against the brightness.

Certainly there was an inviting warmth everywhere this afternoon, I mused. I had heard that houses, especially old houses, liked to select their occupants or reject those they did not want. This one, like its present owner, seemed to have selected us. Suddenly I felt a faint chill, the first warning of unease.

"Invite" and "select" were not words I cared for in this context. They suggested that we were not free agents in our choice and purchase of our first home; that it was not we who had determined to have the house, but the house which had decided upon us. But that was too ridiculous!

I suddenly felt that the temperature must have dropped, although the sun still shone gaily, and I'm not strong enough for sudden changes of that sort. I was doubtless chilled, and was more than ready for my tea. It was time to leave, with the thought that, in all probability next time we came to Marnings the house would be ours.

The purchase went through without any difficulty, and Jean embarked upon an excessively busy few weeks, directing the rebuilding and redecorating activities and searching for the furniture she needed. We necessarily saw much less of each other at this time than in the early days of our engagement. She travelled constantly between the house and the London shops, and I, in anticipation of the time when I should be away on my rather prolonged honeymoon, devoted myself to my work. This partial separation appeared to worry Jean far less than it did me. We were both, of course, extremely fully occupied and we both enjoyed the delightful anticipation of the time when Marnings would be our home and we should be together permanently, but, nevertheless, it was borne in on me that the deprivation and sense of loss we inevitably experienced at this time had far more painful effects upon me than upon my fiancée.

On one occasion when we did snatch a meeting, I remembered to ask Jean if she had seen, or heard from the builder's men, anything about our ghost.

"Certainly not seen," she replied. "I did ask the men about it, and I fancied they didn't want to answer. I expect they were afraid their tales would make me nervous. Little do they understand how greatly I enjoy the thought that the house is haunted."

We went on to discuss some details of decoration, and Jean told me how overwhelmingly her passion for Marnings was increasing as the workmen hurried to fulfil her wishes.

"In an extraordinary way," she continued, "the place seems to have taken possession of me rather than the other way round. I have never felt so much at home anywhere. And the weirdest part of it is that, although you are generally miles away

while I am there, I am conscious of you and your love all the time, as if you were in another room. Sometimes this feeling is so strong that I imagine that you are standing beside me, and turn to make some remark to you or ask you a question."

"And when you get no response," I said teasingly, "perhaps you remember that your unfortunate fiancé is far away and hard at work, earning the money to pay for all these schemes which are giving you so much pleasure."

I expected her to make some affectionate gesture at this hint of self-pity on my part, to indicate the love and gratitude I knew she felt towards me. To my surprise she remained without movement or speech for a moment, and then she said something very quietly which would have greatly puzzled me had I not been, at that moment, so anxious to make the most of our short time together that I pushed it from my mind.

"But I always do get a response, you know. I always do get a response."

By the time the house was ready for us and our wedding-day was fixed, summer had given place to autumn and winter was in sight. We spent our honeymoon in Majorca, and forgot, in the halcyon delights of that sun-baked island, what the November skies of home could be like, so that the shock of our arrival back in England to what seemed to us bitter and dismal weather was decidedly unpleasant.

"Never mind, darling," my young wife consoled me. "Once we get to Marnings, we shan't mind what is happening outside. We'll stoke up our fires and draw the curtains, and shut our happiness in and everything else out."

She was reluctant to spend even the night of our arrival in London, so anxious was she to reach our new home, but I persuaded her against a long, cold and exhausting night in the train following immediately upon a day in the plane, and so it was not until late the next afternoon that we arrived at our journey's end.

If I had believed in omens—and I had been prepared to accept the perfection of the June afternoon on which we had first seen Marnings as a good augury for our future there—then I should not have known how to interpret favourably the appalling weather which greeted us. Now a thick, cold, oppressive sea-mist blotted out visibility completely; so heavy was it, as we at last got out of the hired car which had crawled up with us from the station, that I found myself putting out an arm to protect my face, as if from a wet and flapping sheet. The sea moaned dismally, like a wild creature in pain which yet muffles its cries to avoid detection. The cold seemed intense after the Mediterranean sunshine. Worst of all, now that there were no flowers, the unpleasant smell I had always been faintly aware of was much more noticeable, quite inescapable, in fact.

However, a hot bath, a splendid tea and roaring fires soon had their soothing effect. The three maids Jean

had installed before we went abroad were evidently thoroughly efficient, and the improvements she had made in the house ensured the maximum of comfort. After all, the winter couldn't last for ever, and I had everything to make me happy. My beloved young wife was obviously ecstatically pleased to be mistress of this particular house, and if I had a vague and groundless dislike for it—already, I think, dislike was not too strong a word to use—then I must learn to overcome it, or at least conceal it, without further delay.

We were very happy indeed for the first few weeks at Marnings. I did not then find the long drive to the town where I worked unduly trying, though I dreaded the blinding sea fogs which so often blanketed the coast. It was my joy to see my dear young wife so blissfully content and to know that I was the provider of her delight.

As long as my pride continued to prompt me that Jean owed all her happiness to me, I, too, was happy. But gradually my disillusionment began.

At first there was nothing tangible; I felt myself a prey to fanciful imaginings. My feelings that the house had expressed a preference, as it were, for us over other potential purchasers returned, but this time with a difference. There was no doubt that Jean and Marnings were *en rapport*, but I was not so comfortably certain about myself. Could it be that while Jean had been selected, I was one of the rejected? Ridiculous, I constantly told myself, as I had the first time the idea had occurred to me; but I could not be rid of my notion.

Reasonably or unreasonably, I felt that I was becoming increasingly unimportant to Jean. She no longer fussed over me on my arrival, inquired about my work, brought me my sherry to the fireside. Often she was upstairs when I got back, and did not bother to come down or seek me out till we met at dinner. All her conversation was about the house; new plans she had for its beautification or scraps of gossip she had heard about its past. Yet she still glowed with a radiance which gave the lie to the possibility of anything seriously wrong with her life, and certainly to be losing interest in her husband after only a few months of marriage would be a serious matter. All must be well, I argued, when I saw her rapt face.

Yet my discontent grew. One night, without premeditation, it found an unexpected outlet in words.

"Good heavens!" I suddenly exclaimed. "I can't stand this smell much longer. It's nauseating."

Jean looked at me in complete amazement.

"Smell!" she echoed stupidly. "What smell? I can't smell anything."

It was my turn to be astonished.

"Do you really mean you don't notice the disgusting smell in this house?" I demanded. "It struck me the first time we were ever here, and it is growing more unbearable every day."

Jean was obviously shaken by the violence of my outburst.

"But what sort of smell?" she

asked. "I don't remember your ever having mentioned it before. Is it drains or mice or what?"

I had never before tried to analyse the exact nature of the odour I found so offensive, but now, to my own surprise, I heard my voice answering.

"It's death, corruption," I said in horror.

"Darling!" Jean began to laugh. "You've been reading too many thrillers. I'm quite sure there are no bodies under the floorboards, not even rats or mice. It's your imagination, really it is. There is a delicious smell of roast chicken, though, at this moment. Come in to dinner and forget about it."

And for the time, a little upset by my own lack of control but entirely unconvinced, I let the matter drop.

In spite of all my efforts, the distance between us widened. It was not that angry words ever passed between us; indeed, we exchanged few words of any kind. It was simply that my feeling of being frozen out increased. At first I had fancifully attributed to Marnings the rôle of my rejector; now Jean and the house seemed in league to repel me, not by unkindness, not by action of any sort, but by completely ignoring me as if I were not there.

The greater my unhappiness became, the more serene and content appeared to me the expression on my wife's face. She was the picture of youthful, untroubled joy.

Stung at last, by my desire to ruffle her calm, to inflict hurt for hurt, to avenge myself against something I did not understand, my invisible enemy, I roughly and without any preliminary introduction of the subject, demanded a separate bedroom. My nights were torture enough by this time, tossing wakefully beside her, peacefully slumbering.

She looked at me with her beautiful lustrous eyes, gave me her smile of ineffable kindness, agreed, with ready willingness but with no curiosity, to my request, and continued to pore over her book on 18th-century furnishings with as much absorption as she had shown before I had spoken.

It was at that moment, I believe, that the only possible explanation of her extraordinary manner flashed upon me. Blockhead that I was, not to have seen it before! Ridiculous, conceited, complacent fool! Why does a beautiful young woman radiate happiness all day long? What causes that look of contented fulfilment which substitutes an extra, deeper loveliness for the slightly pathetic charm of inexperience?

Another man! Another man! Another man! The words hammered on my ears, though I did not speak them aloud. Gone in a second were all my foolish fantasies of Marnings as the source of Jean's satisfaction. I now knew the truth. In that instant, I dedicated myself to discovering my rival and exacting my revenge.

Cunningly I hoped that my request for a room of my own might lead to a speedier unmasking of Jean's lover. If, as well as having all day in which to disport themselves, they were also to believe they would be undisturbed

at night, who could estimate what recklessness their mutual passion might not provoke in them? At all events, they would not, in the future, find me easy to elude.

Strangely enough, a sort of calm enveloped me once I had come to my decision. I felt no more tension, no more bewilderment and frustration. Jean and I no longer spoke at all, though I think neither of us showed outwardly the least change of manner. What the servants concluded about us, I have no idea, but Jean's blissful happiness and my single-minded intensity of resolve cannot, I suppose, entirely have escaped them.

At this time the characteristic smell of Marnings became quite intolerable to me. I was never free from it, carrying it in my nostrils even to my office, and I felt that I could actually not survive, physically, if I had to breathe in its poison much longer. That was another reason for pressing on urgently with my purposed revenge.

I had not long to wait. Only two nights later I had gone to bed very early and fallen asleep at once, without any of my usual difficulty, to be awakened painfully from deep slumber by what sounded like a laugh in my ear, a most disagreeable, false sound which brought immediately before my eyes, in the darkness, the vision of a face I had only once scrutinized and that months ago, the sinister, repellent face of Miss Margery. Again I heard her laugh, unmistakable in its wildness, its insincerity and lack of all humour.

"My God!" I thought as, still confused from sleep, I tumbled from my bed. "What on earth has that damnable woman to do with it all? Why is she in my house at night? Is she aiding and abetting my wife in her infidelity?"

The laughter receded. Miss Margery was going down the passage, and I followed. As I left my own room I heard the door of my wife's close softly, and at the same time such a wave of filthy, nauseating stench assailed my senses that I reeled as if under attack by poison-gas.

Was Miss Margery somehow responsible for this smell, I wondered dazedly? Could it be part of some diabolic attempt to drive me from the house? What should I find when I opened my wife's door?

A feeling of sheer, unadulterated terror gripped me. My blood literally ran cold, freezing, along my veins, though the sweat was dropping in beads from my face. I struggled to breathe in the contaminated air and forced my trembling legs to bear me upright. Treachery, evil, unbelievable wickedness, surrounded me, weighed me down, but I struggled on, gasping and retching.

Jean's door was not locked and I threw it open. Horror swelled within me to the point of suffocation. While all senses, save one, conveyed to me the presence of something ghastly beyond belief, the very slime of moral and spiritual abandonment, I actually saw before me a truly charming scene. My wife's room was enchantingly decorated and furnished,

with her customary perfection of taste. The curtains were drawn to exclude the blanket of fog, white, as I knew, against the windows outside, and the pretty, pink-shaded lights were all lit. In the grate a fire glowed invitingly. But it was the large double bed, with its exquisite linen and draperies, upon which my eyes became riveted. In it, and looking ravishingly lovely, lay my wife, reading, and beside her lay another figure, a man, as I saw at once, though my eyes were so misted that nothing was clear.

I stumbled, in a pitiful condition, into the room, almost succumbing to the poison in my lungs. Neither figure stirred.

"Can it have come to this?" I tried to cry, though I knew no sound emerged from my cracked and gasping lips. "Do I mean absolutely nothing to you now, that you can lie there, unmoved, in your shame?"

I had somehow reached the bed and, battling with all my strength against the forces of evil I sensed arrayed against me, choking me, freezing me, draining me of all strength, I pulled back the sheet which covered my rival's face and saw—Oh God! Can I ever forget that moment, waking or sleeping, as long as my life shall last?—with the maniacal laugh of Miss Margery still ringing in my ears and the overpowering stench of corruption weakening my senses, I saw lying beside my beloved young wife—MYSELF!

Myself, my younger self; not the useless old crock I had become, totally unsuited to espouse a healthy young woman, but that handsome, gay youth whose promise had once been so great and whose ghost in me Jean must have divined.

GHOST! Everything was clicking into place. Even as I seized up the heavy poker from the grate and brought it crashing down upon the face of myself as I once had been, that unlined, attractive, humorous face which looked up at me now with a whimsical smile, I understood Miss Margery's insane partiality for us, her forcing of Marnings upon us rather than on anyone else, her reluctance to tell us the nature of the ghost which haunted the house, the ghost of the owner's hopeful youth, that bitterest rival of all.

Blow after blow I struck with my whole force, panting and desperate, and my face still smiled up at me as before, untroubled and amused.

It was quite a long time before I realized that the end of my long poker reached across to the opposite pillows, and that my little wife was lying in a pool of blood, her lovely, shapely head smashed for ever, her eyes staring sightlessly towards me.

A WALK BY MOONLIGHT

C. D. HERIOT

Illustrated by W. J. Yeats

Not all the Shadowy Powers are inimical. Their good intentions, however, may sometimes be terrifying and even seem the epitome of evil. . . .

IN HER FATHER'S house, frowned on by the hills to whose menace guardian elms flung angular gestures of defiance, Lamia was born one midsummer night before the last war. Her father called her Lamia either from a pedantic sense of humour (she was a wriggling little worm, he said) or a preconception of the unusual names fashionable among youthful adults in the nineteen-thirties. Until the age of 12 she lived in a happy pastoral dream, safe in her mother's protective aura. The years of battle flowed over her unconscious head. Almost before she missed him, her father returned with a limp and some ribbons, and took up his life exactly where he had left it. Then, for seven extended rounds of summer and winter, when time loitered carelessly so that a life could be lived in an August afternoon, and even the short winter days were busy with incident as if drawn by some medieval Fleming, he showed Lamia the country and taught her to love and revere it. He taught her the value of life, and in her mind the dark and the light sides of nature made exciting patterns whose meaning she felt almost able to guess. She learned not to be afraid of any animal from a beetle to a cow; to ride; to swim so that water became a friend; to acknowledge the owl as the good housekeeper he is, and even to accept bats and little vermin as natural, disinterested sharers of her own universe instead of liaisons between the known and the unknown.

Through these physical contacts, spiritual bonds were woven. Her sympathy with trees and animals clarified her insight. Her childish fantasies of gnomes and fairies became overlaid with a deeper significance, whose expression she recognized with delight in the stories told to her by her father from the classical mythologies. She peopled the fells with tutelar deities, and paid them homage in return for their protection. Once she had been moved to dance by the edge of a sullen pool of water far up among the hills—knowing that she was not alone; and once, under the elms she liked to call her sacred grove, she had been seized by an ecstatic terror that sent her flying into the house with a momentary but vivid impression of a face peering down through the sun-chequered leaves. But these experiences were rare. She was a normal child. Lamia at 12 was a

brown-eyed, brown-skinned, brown-haired girl, tall but delicately made, countrified without any suggestion of the defiant, stocky shyness that mars so many English middle-class adolescents. She was shy, but she did not stamp and shout to conceal it; and her knowledge of the habits of animals was not emphasized on unsuitable occasions.

As if his labours were now complete, her father died exactly one month after her twelfth birthday. His wife followed him the succeeding year, and Lamia went to live first at a boarding-school and then with an aunt in London.

Her aunt (a sister of her mother's) felt sorry for Lamia, not only because she was an orphan, but because the poor child had never had any fun, as she put it, cooped up in the country. And so when her niece had finally left school, she took her in hand and whirled her on a dizzy round of private views, dinners, theatres, suppers, night-clubs, parties and other amusements, until she believed Lamia had acquired enough impetus to continue moving and have fun by herself. Her intentions were kindly, and Lamia was too ignorant and too young to do anything more than follow the lead given her and—it must be admitted—enjoy these new excitements.

Unfortunately, her aunt's three seasons of whirling had the effect of sending Lamia off at a tangent. Straight as an arrow, she sped to Bloomsbury and became intelligent. She had no experience, very little education and a personality unremarkable in these surroundings. Celebrities and notorieties alike ignored her therefore, but Lamia was eager and humble, and was glad to shun the depths and paddle in the frothy shallows. Here she was snubbed and bullied, then alternately raised and humiliated, until she was ripe for discipleship.

She chose for her leader Marc Thankle, the landscape painter, who then enjoyed a considerable vogue. He was a young man of wide general knowledge and some pretensions to culture. He understood Greek, which was rare in his circle, and his studio was thronged by young men and women who absorbed his theories about Art, Philosophy and Social Behaviour. He was pale and blond, with little, intense blue eyes behind barley-sugar spectacles. He did not wear a beard. Lamia fell in love with him, of course, but she was too timid to do anything about it, and contented herself with peeping admiringly at him from the outskirts of his audience.

He paid very little attention to her at first, but when he nodded to her in Charing Cross Road she was thrilled, and when he spoke to her in the Museum Reading Room she was dumb with nervous excitement.

Her brownness and her health and her shyness made her stand out against the pale clamour of the others. He was attracted, and his present *maîtresse en titre* soon recognized the symptoms of neglect. He was very gentle with Lamia. He took her to the Film Society, to the more esoteric of the Sunday theatres, and

fed her at all the right places. They were never alone, but he managed his disquisitions so that they sounded like personal messages. He talked a great deal about his painting, of his endeavours to express in two dimensions the Spiritual Animation of

she was on the right track but that she must clear her mind of poetry and symbolism.

Simplification was the order of the day, and he spoke at length upon such topics as the Rational Approach to Vision, Psychic Design and his

Landscape. Everything had a soul, he said (he preferred to call it a Psyche), which could be recognized by those with the proper angle of approach. Lamia unwisely tried to simplify the conversation by helpful references to oreads and dryads. Marc smiled, and said in a tired voice that

own theory of Geological Causality as apart from Theism in Nature, until poor Lamia felt her intelligence was being simplified away to nothing.

But she still loved him, and when he informed her one afternoon that the time had come for his annual retreat into the country (it was Cum-

berland this year—Lamia's home country) in order to paint and meditate, she was filled with despair. He was actually going to live near her own valley, but at the moment that meant nothing to Lamia. For three months the beloved voice would be dumb. There would be no more studio parties, no conversations, no fun. There would be no more cultural expeditions to theatres, cinemas or private views—it would be insupportable! Something of her dismay became visible. Marc took her by the shoulders, looked at her very earnestly for a long time, and then kissed her. After that she was in a state to agree to anything—almost.

Would she come away with him? It was a terrible temptation, but she refused. He pretended to be hurt and angry—and that was more than she could bear. She compromised. She would stay in the village, and they would meet. He agreed, grudgingly, and they parted—he with a secret smile; she to pack in an exalted frenzy.

She told her aunt that she was spending a few weeks in Cumberland in order to finish her first novel. Her aunt said little, because Lamia was of age and had a small income left her by her parents; but she must have thought a lot. Two days later an invitation came from an old friend of Lamia's mother, who now lived in the house where Lamia had been born. It was only three miles distant from the rendezvous. She had heard, wrote the friend, that dear Lamia was getting on nicely with her stories. Would she not like to spend a little time in the country at her old home? She could work quietly, and take no part in the communal life of the household unless she wished; she could come and go as she pleased; and the fresh air and quiet would undoubtedly do her a lot of good and be a nice change after the noise of London.

There was no reference to the aunt, but Lamia immediately saw through the little stratagem. After a first feeling of indignation, she bowed to the inevitable. The village where she had originally intended to stay was too near her former home for safety. Lamia accepted the invitation with a private resolution to take her hostess at her word and be independent. She would come and go as she pleased, and, after all, a three-mile walk was nothing if it meant seeing Marc.

In the train she felt a pang as she gazed at the revolving fields. It was like meeting a neglected friend. The country had been so long absent from her thoughts—she who loved and understood it. As she drove over the fells to the house, she felt that the countryside reproached her. It had waited all this time, and its reception was a little uncertain, as if it had difficulty in recognizing her after her long absence in the city. But as she walked that evening under the elms in the garden to the stone wall that prevented it from sliding on to the road and down into the valley, she felt reassured. She was made welcome at last. She was back among friends.

Her hostess was kind and unobtrusive. Lamia had two rooms on

the ground-floor at the eastern end of the house. They had been her father's library and study, though all traces of his occupation had long since vanished. The rooms were now quite impersonal, and she felt no affect. There were windows from which she could emerge without disturbing the rest of the household. She was given all considerations due to a writer requiring solitude. Nobody seemed to mind if she went out at night to climb the fells or follow the rustling stream up towards its parent tarn.

And as day succeeded day she found so much to do recapturing the spirit of the valley, so many places to visit, remembered now with the sadness that mists all happiness if it be distant enough, that she had no thoughts for Marc. Once, from a hill-top, she heard a bell chime from his village; and instead of the heart-leap she expected to feel on being reminded of her lover, a pang almost of fear contracted her nerves. She turned her head abruptly and began to retrace her steps. Tomorrow she would go over and see him. Poor Marc! He must be wondering where she was and why she had not visited him.

His letter, forwarded from her London address, arrived next morning. She took it out to read in the garden under the trees, her "sacred grove." She felt that they were friendly, that they were on her side —but she could not have said against what. The letter was querulous. Why had she not kept to her arrangement? Why had she not written? He could not work, he wrote, and he became angry as he described his visit to the inn and his discovery that she had not even booked her room!

There was an underlying pleading in the letter—so different from Marc's usual commanding attitude—that revived Lamia's feeling for him. She would walk over to the village that very night. How surprised he would be, and with what delight he would greet her arrival!

The moon glimmered redly through a low bank of cloud on the horizon as she stepped out of her window and across the dew-wet grass to the wall. The road was grey in the half-light, and flowed like water in a gentle curve to the valley. Low down, a vague blackness indicated the wood through which it passed before sweeping up over the lower slope of the landfold that separated Lamia's valley from the one where Marc was living.

Among the trees it was almost entirely dark, and Lamia, who never before had felt afraid at night in the country, glanced dubiously to left and right. The firs and pines made a lumpy blackness. Far ahead, where the trunks thinned, a glimmer of light showed. She began to wish that she had not come. Marc suddenly seemed very far away. There was a whole mountain between them, and he appeared to her mind as a tiny figure. His image wavered and bent as if cut out of flimsy paper. She tried to remember details of his face, but it became a blank on which, shifting, characterless features appeared and melted. His voice in her memory became thin and reedy. Marc dwindled

to a hieroglyph, with a dot for a head and thin ridiculous lines for body and limbs.

She walked on, her footsteps making more noise than usual. There was no wind, and not even a field-mouse disturbed the tense quietness. Just as she approached the outskirts of the wood where the road gathered for the uphill effort, she saw a man leaning over the wall beside a tree on the left of the road, a little in advance. His head was turned towards her, as if he was watching her. She could not distinguish his features, but he seemed to be supported on one elbow with the other arm stretched out in a curiously awkward gesture, like a motorist undecided whether to wave on a following vehicle. He stood quite still.

Her sudden sight of him made Lamia change step and grip her stick more tightly. She walked forward firmly. It was probably a keeper or a shepherd, or a young man waiting for his girl. A momentary vision of Marc waiting for her did not add to her peace of mind.

As she came nearer, his expression came into focus. He was older than she imagined. A protruding brow made his eyes seem cavernous. The nose was long and fleshy, and the mouth twisted in a wrinkled face with a smile that offended Lamia. The old satyr—lounging beside country roads and ogling at all the women who passed! She no longer felt afraid. For one thing, he seemed too decrepit to be dangerous and, besides, there was something rather funny about him. He was like a caricature or a Rackham drawing of an enchanted tree. And when she came abreast of him she found that he *was* a tree. She had mistaken the deformed bole of an elm for a man. It was ridiculous! She almost blushed at the relief that swept over her.

As she climbed to the brow of the hill her thoughts went ahead, to Marc waiting impatiently to hear from her. He could not know that she was on her way, that a ribbon of road only a few miles long was even now being shortened step by step. She knew the cottage where he was staying. He would be alone in the little front room, with its windows blinded by layers of curtains and plants. The light from the lamp would cast shadows of lace and leaves on the blind through which, perhaps, she might see his head, larger than life, move like an animal in a tropical forest. She would stand between the tight privet hedges that lined the path to the little front porch. He would come to the door himself, after she

had knocked the second time, because the old woman who looked after him was so deaf. The beam from the yellow light in the hall would shine on her face. He would cry "Lamia!" in the voice she knew, and she would smile and move forward out of the dark into his arms. She would see his face close to hers—but she could not see his face in her thoughts. Only a disquieting blank hung over the image of herself; a white disc with dots for eyes and a letter-box slit below.

She stood at the top of the downward slope. The stone walls were like the sides of a chute down which she might hurtle. At the far corner, where the road turned sharply in its jagged course to the valley, was a tree. The walls converged towards it. It marked the point to which she must walk obliquely downhill before her path tacked away to the left. There was something inevitable about that tree. It was there, right in front of her, visible for nearly a quarter of a mile, *waiting for her.*

Lamia smiled at the thought that two trees in one evening should await her coming; but as she approached her steps slackened. There *was* someone this time under the tree. A man leaning back against the wall with his hands in his pockets. An old man, with a curious double-peaked hat on his head. She saw his beard shine silver in the moonlight, but his eyes were hidden in the deep shadow of his protruding brow. The nose was long and fleshy and the mouth was twisted in a fixed smile. Lamia walked straight up to him where he stood in the shadow of the leaves. A verge of perhaps four feet of turf separated the wall from the road. She stood still and returned his gaze.

"What do you want?' she cried, and her voice was hoarse and breathless.

A thin breeze moved the branches. The moon shadows shifted. The beard of the old man split and vanished. His smile curled to his ears, and his head divided into an arrangement of twigs. Only his body remained motionless, transformed into the twisted trunk of an elm.

Lamia ran forward. In anger and fear, she clasped the damp wood, wrenching off fragments of bark and small branches. For a minute it was as if she fought with the tree, defying its power, beating against its strength. This immovable pillar was the body of a watchman, an interfering guardian, over-zealous. Weak and shaken, she leaned against it at length and gathered up her spilled control. The green, earthy smell was soothing; the leaves were cool, and the trunk itself had accommodating curves, so that for an instant she had the feeling of being in the arms of someone calm, rational and protective. A *crise* like this was very silly, she told herself. She must remember that she was going to surprise Marc. She must be at her very best. It would never do for him to see her dishevelled with green-stained fingers, pale and exhausted—after fighting a tree!

The peace of the night flowed into her, unclenching her nerves and cooling her parched emotion like a draught. She went on down the hill, turning her head from time to time

—but the tree remained a tree.

The valley was as black with foliage as the other, but the moving water of a stream that drained it made a companionable noise, and in a little while the village lights shone out tomato-coloured from the black-and-silver houses.

A yellow sign, one cottage, two together, the cycle shop with its solitary petrol-pump, the stores, the public-house (an oasis of noise), a row of council cottages facing three almshouses, and a genteel villa; two more cottages; the village was passed. Silent darkness and moonlight again and a quarter of a mile or less to Marc.

The road turned sharply to the right down a little ravine, so that the village was suddenly extinguished and she was quite alone with rocks and moonlight. Lamia felt as if she had been journeying for half the night. Impossible to imagine that an hour ago she had stood at her bedroom window gazing at the stars before stepping out on to the wet grass. Her shoes were muddy, with grass and moss adhering to them. Marc was near. Just round the next corner she would see the hedge that embraced the long, narrow orchard with its overhanging branches clipped close by cattle; after the orchard the gable chimney, like a minatory finger black against the grey. It seemed as if it was Marc who was moving towards her, not she to him. Already she felt his personality. It was perceptible, like a tenuous mist lying low under the trees in this enfolded valley. The whitewashed cottage appeared to her like a little Rockingham pastille-burner out of whose windows and chimney oozed in lazy smoke-strands the feeling that was Marc. The cottage was brightly coloured and tiny, and Marc was tiny, too—a brittle ornament with a wisp of vapour coming out of it, pungent and, as it were, perfuming all her life. Had she not, indeed, been drugged by his domineering manhood? Her pride had been soothed into purring complacency by this strength subservient to her. Marc wanted her; he must love her, since he unbent and condescended to plead.

Lamia rounded the corner. There was the orchard and behind it the chimney. There was the thick fuchsia-hedge in front, with the yellow privet that bordered the path to the door through the shallow front gar-

den. The window was alight as she had anticipated, its lowered blind patterned all over with leaves and lace that seemed to imitate the leaves and branches of the trees outside.

In the very act of opening the gate, Lamia stood still. Blind, paralysing terror washed all her courage to the ground in one agonizing wave. Leaning over the right-hand hedge was the elm-man. With branchy arms outspread, he bent so that she would have to crouch low to pass him. His gnarled face shone damply in the moonlight. She saw his eyes fixed eagerly upon her, she recognized the fleshy down-curved nose, the beard, the knotted brows—but the mouth no longer smiled. It was set in an angry grimace. It threatened.

For a second that stretched and widened so that time and reality wavered and swam, she was conscious of the still figure barring her path, the white house with its orange window, and heard distinct in the silence a woman's laugh of luxurious pleasure and Marcs answering tones, deep and caressing.

Then Lamia screamed—and heard the sound rise thinly like a rabbit's, while house and tree and garden jerked upwards, blending together like drapery.

Marc picked her up. Over his shoulder, in the doorway, she saw the woman who had laughed. She was young and blowsy, and she leaned upon the doorway panting with fear, her hair clotted about her thick shoulders. She was from the village, obviously.

Lamia stopped talking. She knew that she had been going on for a long time, but she did not know what she had been saying. She heard Marc's voice: "But there is *no* tree"; and turned her head from his white face to the empty garden and back to gaze up at his face again. His little eyes looked even smaller without his glasses, and there was something about his mouth that reminded her of a letter-box and made her continue laughing until the doctor came in his car to take her home.

In bed with hot bottles and bromides, she called to the doctor as he was leaving the room. There was something on the floor near the dressing-table. She could see it from where she lay.

"It's only a bit of twig—an elm leaf," he said as he picked it up. "It must have fallen out of your clothes."

Lamia did not reply. She sighed and closed her eyes. It was all over now, and she felt calm and happy. The doctor had been kind, she realized, but somewhere in her mind was a feeling of especial gratitude. She was not sure to whom it was due.

I see men, as it were trees, walking—

ST. MARK viii. 24.

MISTRESS OF DEATH

PHILIP SPRING

A DRINK, A KISS—AND THEN THE LONG FAREWELL. . . .

They say that poison is a woman's favourite murder weapon. It was more than this with the Marquise de Brinvilliers, who out-Borgiaed the Borgias by using it to gain a humorous as well as a homicidal effect.

LONG BEFORE THE crime novelist hit on the idea of making his murderer "the most unlikely person," life had already provided the prototype. The formula was horrible in the extreme. Innocent blue eyes in which lurked cruelty as sharp as death, birth and beauty wearing the poisoner's glass mask, a woman's tender kisses to make sweeter and more exciting the agonies she administered. The greatest of imaginations, toying with a king to be killed and a woman "top-full of direst cruelty" to inspire the deed, never conceived one so malignant as that dainty blonde tigress, the Marquise de Brinvilliers.

One scene alone from her life is shocking by contrast with a comparable scene from a later age. Down the dim aisles of a hospital at Scutari, surrounded by the twisted and shattered bodies of the dying, paces a lady with a lamp, her heart moved by pity and charity. In the Hôtel Dieu of Paris in the 17th century, stealing softly from bed to bed, ignoring the stench, a lovely young woman soothes the maimed and diseased with coloured confections or glasses of cordial. "Drink," she says with enigmatic smile. The patient blesses her and drinks. She watches greedily till the yellowed eyeballs turn up, till the fingers claw at nothing, and the last frightful spasm ends in death. . . . She will, of course, be welcome tomorrow. Her name is a byword in the *quartier* for mercy and good works.

Her story begins and ends in Paris. But whereas it began with honour, it ended in shame and a hideous death. Poetic justice was never more clearly demonstrated than in her case. Marie Madeleine Marguerite d'Aubray was born to beauty, wealth, influence, a title—and a demon lover. Her father was Civil Lieutenant of Paris, a key fact, one feels, which in this story unlocked the many chambers of death. In 1651, at the age of 21, she married a gay and reckless spendthrift, Antoine Gobelin, Marquis de Brinvilliers. He set the young girl a hot pace, loaded her with gifts, mockingly introduced her to various possible lovers.

He succeeded only too well when he brought home his best friend, Gaudin de Sainte-Croix. This rake-hell, scarcely believing that a girl

could look so innocent, put that traditional disbelief to the test. She not only became his mistress, but went about it so flagrantly that her father, Dreux d'Aubray, hustled Sainte-Croix into the Bastille. By so doing, the old man unwittingly signed his own death-warrant.

Away from Sainte-Croix's evil influence she resumed her charitable works, tending the sick and visiting the poor. *Noblesse oblige.* Her lover spent his time in the Bastille plotting revenge. From one of its prisoners, the Italian Exili, he learnt the art of poisoning. As a master, there could have been none more proficient—poisoning was practised *con amore* by Schools of Poison which arose in Venice, Rome and Naples in the 16th–18th centuries. From this adept, Sainte-Croix learnt how to distil *aqua toffana.*

Even modern toxicologists are uncertain of the nature of this passport to Lethe. They assume, since it was made by rubbing arsenic oxide into decayed hog's flesh, that it was some solution compounded of arsenic and bacteria. It was colourless, and without taste or odour. It had been devised by the Sicilian woman Toffana, and by its use the Toffana herself had poisoned over 600 people. However, liquidation was her trade. It was shortly to become the Marquise de Brinvillier's pastime. Therein, roughly, lies a difference.

When Sainte-Croix was released from the Bastille, his seduction of the fair Marguerite recommenced in earnest. She fell completely. First, they must be revenged on her father. To determine the right poison, she suggested experiments on her poor and sick subjects. Their agonies so delighted her that she herself began to study toxicology. Gläser, apothecary to the King, not only helped her but gave her access to curious poisons of his own. Her own favourites were (so she admitted) "toad's venom and rarefied arsenic." She also experimented with sugar of lead, copper sulphate and corrosive sublimate.

In 1665 her father became ill. For eight months she tended him devotedly, alternately kissing him and feeding him with sweets and cordials. In February 1666 she wearied of this masquerade. A tigress cannot play for ever with one mouse. With a caress she administered the last lethal dose. Long-suffering Dreux d'Aubray died. The perfect murder. Not a breath of suspicion. Madame Judas turned her blue eyes subtly on her two brothers.

Incited by Sainte-Croix, she coaxed and petted them both to their deaths in 1670. This further addition of the family fortune had indeed become necessary to maintain the evil lovers in their extravagant way of living. There were châteaux, servants, town residences in Paris to maintain; six-horse carriages, silver plate, weapons for the Seigneur de Sainte-Croix; jewellery, silks and cosmetics for his paramour; gaming debts to be paid; food, drink and entertainment for both. Only Thérèse d'Aubray stood finally in the way. And she was sister of the Marquise de Brinvilliers!

But the final act of destiny saved

Thérèse. On July 30th, 1670, Sainte-Croix died in his laboratory. His glass mask had fallen off during a lethal experiment. Among his "preparations" were found powders and phials which, when given to animals, caused their deaths. There were also papers implicating the Marquise de Brinvilliers. Her own papers confirmed the entire story.

She had, it was evident, amused herself by plotting her husband's death. By some narcotic like henbane he might languish in her arms while she watched the drowsy advance of death. Yet antimony, besides having the advantage that it would by slow stages corrode and waste him away, would prolong the pleasure for her. Indeed, she herself might feed on aconite and its antidote so that he imbibed the poison from her lips in her death-kisses—except that aconite, even in microscopic doses, spoils a lady's complexion. Sainte-Croix himself, alarmed at her devilry, is said to have given the Marquis antidotes. After all, in the usual French manner, the cuckold was his best friend. And he didn't want to *marry* the partner of his crimes. The documents he left spelt disaster for her.

She fled to England, then to Germany, and next to a convent at Liége. From this she was decoyed by a French political *agent*, disguised as a priest, and taken to Paris. Among her effects was found a confession of her crimes. Again the vanity of the criminal had brought its own betrayal.

These documents contained (to quote a French writer) "le récit de sa vie . . . la plus effroyable énumeration d'impoisonnements et de débauches qu'il soit possible d'imaginer." To extort from her the names of her accomplices she was put first to the question ordinary and then the question extraordinary. In less subtle English this means first to the more amiable forms of torture, such as the cell called Little Ease, the thumbscrews or the boot. If these failed (and in her case they did), then to as much torture as could be borne without destroying life.

Dauntlessly this marchioness of France faced this last horrible ordeal. Contemporary records describe her at that time as proud and serene, a tiny fair-haired woman with clear blue eyes and a strong little mouth which hinted of cruelty. It was hard to believe so delicate and beautiful a creature had committed such infamy. She even mocked the man in black who bound her back downwards to the frame, brought in three buckets of water and prepared to thrust a leather funnel down her throat. . . .

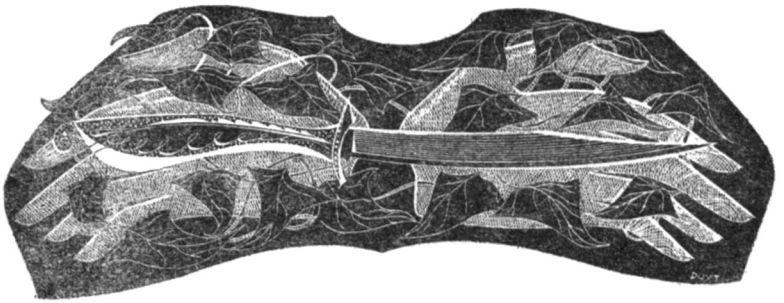
That inquisitive old bore John Evelyn has left us a harrowing description of one subjected to this form of question extraordinary. Conan Doyle in one of his terror stories recreates this very incident of the Marquise and the leather funnel. We prefer to draw a veil over that final incident.

But still a summary law had not yet finished with her. The judgment of the Tournelles was that (to quote from a contemporary record) "she

be taken in a cart with bare feet and a rope round her neck, holding in her hand a lighted torch, two pounds in weight, to the principal door of the church of Paris, there to make avowal of her wickedness . . . thereafter to be taken to the Place de Grève to have her head cut off, her body burnt, and the ashes thrown to the winds." In this manner, on July 16th, 1676, the Mistress of Death met her last lover.

Her trial and execution awakened some nervous subsidiary questions. What (husbands in high society asked) was in those cosmetic jars on milady's table? What (asked the possessors of rich estates) was this curious "Poudre de Succession"? Why should ladies present velvet gloves so demurely to their rivals? And was any reluctant lover safe from a good stiff dose of cantharides? It took years and all the rigours of the Burning Chamber to find the answers.

She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,
Turning to Poison while the bee-mouth sips:
JOHN KEATS (1795–1821): *Ode to Melancholy*.



CROOKS IN BOOKS

A review of some recent crime, mystery and detective books.

"THE DARKER TRAFFIC," by Martin Brett (*Reinhardt, 9s. 6d.*).

A toughie, set for a change in Montreal. Also for a change we have a tart for a heroine, and a fancy bordello for a central locale. The chase is urgent and exciting, and for intellectual ballast we have occasional cursory references to the "Praguerie" —a bunch of mid-fifteenth-century adventurers who tried unsuccessfully to dethrone Charles the Seventh of France. These serve to hold up the action a little, but not for long.

"ANOTHER WOMAN'S POISON," by W. H. Lane Crauford (*Ward Lock, 9s. 6d.*).

A shuffle of the mill tale of circumstantial poisoning suspicions. Wife A. dies from poison. *Ergo* so must wife B. if she is rich. It may be all right for the Old Bailey, but it certainly isn't good enough for real fiction.

"ONE DOWN AND TWO TO SLAY," by Henry Brinton (*Hutchinson, 9s. 6d.*).

This book has the same salty tang as *Death to Windward*, but is very much better. The mixture of gentle Devon life and high adventure in unworked tin-mines, with mysterious drownings and foreign ships thrown in for good measure, is piquant if not wholly satisfying. Somehow the background is wrong, but perhaps it is the only one Mr. Brinton knows.

"SMILE AND MURDER," by F. Addington Symonds (*Boardman, 9s. 6d.*).

A really excellent little twist-and-turn feast. The problem is who killed, or rather who did not kill, Clare Hale, the owner of bizarre Overton Lodge? Depressed husband? Greedy confidante in the occult? Slimy cousin Julian? Or none of them? The detective guesses wrong, yet ironically justice is done.

"PATTERN OF DEATH," by Peter George (*Boardman, 9s. 6d.*).

Jet fighters, night clubs, alleyways, luscious cheesecake, inscrutable foreign agents, cross and double cross and a kiss on the end. What can one say about this sort of thing? It is either indifferently written or it is badly written. This is indifferently written.

"SHARK AMONG HERRINGS," by George Milner (*Crime Club, 9s. 6d.*).

This is another in the long tradition of Crime Club hand-stitched, custom-built whodunits. Little violence, a great deal that is macabre and a splendid underwater murder, allied to a soufflé of Englishry in the telling make this a tale well worth reading.

"THE DESPERATE HOURS," by Joseph Hayes (*Andre Deutsch, 10s. 6d.*).

A really gripping book concerning the collective agony of an average Indianapolis family who are held captive by three killers on the run and forced to act in a normal manner *qua* their neighbours and business associates lest they guess that the wanted men are hiding in the family home. Husband, wife, daughter and even baby son come to realize that if they breathe a single word, or make one mistake in public, one or more of them will instantly be put to the gun. A terrible, inescapable dilemma which builds up into the sheerest nightmare. This story cries out for filming.

"THE VICTIM WAS IMPORTANT," by Joe Rater (*Reinhardt, 9s. 6d.*).

California here we come once again. Psychiatrists, gambling houses and alcoholics. The usual private op, a little less muscled and hormoned than usual, wanders around through it all flouting his inferiority complex, spouting off-beat cracks and finally stumbling on the not particularly inspired solution. There is less kick than usual for an addict.

"DEATH AT LOVERS' LEAP," by Robert Dean (*Boardman, 9s. 6d.*).

Blackmail and death in a ravine in Maine make up the background for this slower than usual chase to a virtuous conclusion.

"NO SALE FOR HEROES," by Anthony Graham (*Boardman, 9s. 6d.*).

Whenever I read of a long-lost daughter I reach for the nearest coincidence. Old Man Orson has one and hires shamus Eddie Delaney to find her. Delaney is also hired to kill Orson Jnr., the old man's son who is in love with guess who. However, once this pill is swallowed, it would be unjust to say that this little bundle of mayhem is anything but exciting, and of course the style bears the customary lacquer.

"THE DEMON WITHIN," by Brook Hastings (*Boardman, 9s. 6d.*).

The familiar mixture of carnival time and slaughter—a pushover for ironic effect—is here served up with renewed spice. At Fuego beach, smouldering passions banked down for years (how, is anyone's guess) sud-

denly break forth into murder, and a case which starts innocently enough with a childish request written on paper and embossed with a tiny blue elephant, is not finally solved until most of the cast are dead less than a week later. Mostly from the effects of paranoiac fever.

"SALLY OF SCOTLAND YARD," by Leonard Gribble and Geraldine Laws (*W. H. Allen*, 8*s.* 6*d.*).

The dust-cover on this book is just about the most ill-conceived and poorly executed art work to have adorned a thriller from a first-class publisher since somewhere around 1927. Perhaps it woud be unfair to blame the artist too much, for it may well be that he was merely taking the tone of his illustration from the contrived and outmoded style the authors employ throughout the book. It would at a pinch be possible to bear with the ultra mysterious Lassiter and the ultra mysterious Waldo; the glamorous Tony Marino and the glamorous Señora Dolores Andallora; and with, above all, Sally Dean, the popular woman cop of Scotland Yard's Ghost Squad, were it not for the antediluvian clichés which crowd through the narrative like currants in a Christmas pudding. Most of the time it's of the "Ha! You have been clever but not quite clever enough, my dear" school of writing. Alas, one wishes one could say even as much of the authors.

"ONLY HALF THE DOCTOR DIED," by Frank King (*Robert Hale*, 9*s.* 6*d.*).

Gross improbability is the keynote of this story about a Jekyll-and-Hyde Harley Street consultant who robs the safes of his rich patients out of surgery hours to give to the poor. He witnesses a murder and eventually brings the killer to justice with a recording of a confession which is effective reading, if probably inadmissible evidence in a murder trial.

"SAFER DEAD," by James Hadley Chase (*Robert Hale*, 10*s.* 6*d.*).

Mr. Chase is a much more exciting writer than one took him for when he wrote his establishing, if moronic, *No Orchids for Miss Blandish*. He still, unfortunately, uses extra-territorial Americanisms, but this story of husband-shooting and suspicious alibis, glamour pusses and murdered witnesses is as fast and cleverly knit as anything he has done.

"THE CASE OF THE THREE LOST LETTERS," by Christopher Bush (*Macdonald*, 9*s.* 6*d.*).

Mr. Bush, one of the dwindling band of orthodox practitioners, is well up to form in this solid question-and-answer tale of a murderer who is tracked down through the search for three stolen letters. It is the sort of book which is nourishing to the addict and slightly tedious to everyone else.

"SUICIDE EXCEPTED," by Cyril Hare (*Faber & Faber*, 10*s.* 6*d.*).

This is actually a reprint of a story which was printed and passed into obscurity in the early days of the war. The problem—was it suicide, accident or murder?—is a little hack-

neyed, and the identity of the murderer is obvious to the connoisseur, but its reprinting is justified as much for its sardonic character delineation as for its author's present popularity.

"THE RAPHAEL RESURRECTION," by Terry Newman (*Eyre & Spottiswoode*, 10*s.* 6*d.*).

A fine rush-and-tackle search for a lost Raphael picture allegedly secreted by a German officer during the retreat from Italy. Blind alleys, red herrings, double crossings and murder and a gloss of artistic kerfuffle. Maestros Ambler and Newman could hardly do better and have done worse.

"THE WAY OUT," by Bruce Graeme (*Hutchinson*, 9*s.* 6*d.*).

A slightly hysterical account of how a monotonously long-suffering wife tries to help her murdering husband to leave the country with the help of an organization called The Way Out Gang. Unfortunately, Mr. Graeme poses his character's personal problems in an aura of such improbability that they lose their power to spark the imagination into great interest.

"CASTLE OF FEAR," by J. Jefferson Farjeon (*The Crime Club*, 9*s.* 6*d.*).

Jolly old Jefferson Farjeon is back with his damsels in distress, honest, loyal Englishry as a substitute for romance and the usual gallery of unspeakably caddish brutes who duly collect what's coming to them around page 190. This time they are up to their bull necks in sinister doings in

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by Terry Newman

Francis Iles

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Times Lit. Supp.

"Apart from relating an absorbing adventure, it is a clever study in the blossoming of antipathy."

Irish Times

"Clean, swift, capable . . . a very promising thriller writer." (10/6 net)

★

THRILLERS OF THE MONTH

In March we shall publish the first in our new series of specially selected "Thrillers of the Month," the first three of which are the following:

The Man Inside
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Red Pawns
by George Griswold

The Evil of Time
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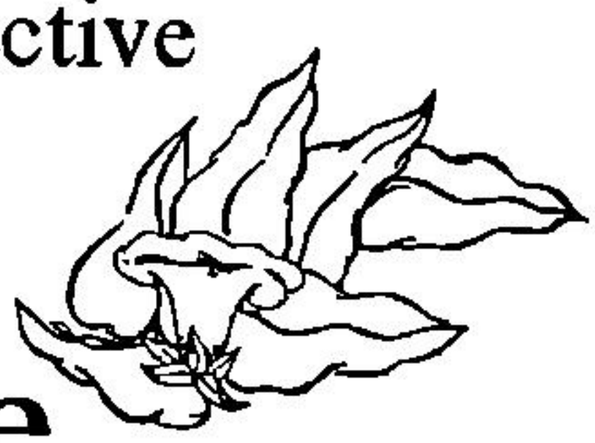

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A beguiling new mystery by the author of *No Man's Street.* The ingredients — a desolate moor, a rambling house, an odd assortment of characters all hating their benefactress; and pervading it all in the vast green-house the mysterious presence of *The Moonflower.*

12s. 6d.

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a lonely castle which is the inheritance of the above-mentioned damsel. And it is fair to add that her young heart takes a few turns around her shapely bosom before the matter is resolved by the current St. George. It is also nice to know that "millions of lives are saved" by his actions.

"MAN MISSING," by M. G. Eberhart (*Crime Club*, 10*s.* 6*d.*).

The scene is a desert in the American West where a large Naval ammunition dump is located. The emotional atmosphere is as charged as the shells. The book is long, and this electrical supply tends to wilt in places, but on the whole Miss Eberhart's Nurse Sarah Keate keeps things going at a merry pace, and the final revelation is as ingeniously concealed as maybe.

"PREY FOR ME," by Thomas B. Dewey (*Boardman*, 9*s.* 6*d.*).

A good pacey thriller, the trail commencing with a nude cookie lying dead on a rug, and journeying rapidly to its blackmailing, smutty, murderous end. It is designed to kick the reader where it really hurts, and succeeds in fair measure.

"MURDER ON MONDAY," by Robert Wilmot (*Boardman*, 9*s.* 6*d.*).

This is a vastly overwritten, gorgeously complicated, extravaganza, roughly about a homicidal shakedown, to be carried out by two psychopaths. The heroes, Steve Considine and Mike Zacharias, stumble uncomprehendingly around in a gallery of weirdies (a parolee with a boxer pup

and a cage of canaries, two awfully respectable ex-racketeers, a "ring-tailed junkie" and "a bitch who would eat her own young"), until in a pistol-whipping denouement all is revealed to the reader. It is strictly up to him to understand it.

"OF MASKS AND MINDS," by Frederick E. Smith (*Hutchinson*, 9*s.* 6*d.*).

In his first novel Mr. Smith has set himself the difficult problem of analysing and describing insanity within the rough framework of a thriller. His subject is the perhaps hackneyed one of a composer, and the problem is whether he should submit to a pre-frontal leucotomy operation to avoid his impending insanity, but at the cost of destroying his genius. There are overtones of Hollywood in this situation, and the writing is wildly over-lush ("His eyes were like the windows of hell"), but it is fair to say that on the whole a creditable melodrama is achieved.

"THE CORAL PRINCESS MURDERS," by Frances Crane (*Hammond Hammond*, 9*s.* 6*d.*).

Confused identities and plenty of "business" in a fast-moving narcotics-conte set in Morocco, where "Life is cheap and the dead are soon forgotten."

"PASSPORT TO TREASON," by Manning O'Brine (*Hammond Hammond*, 9*s.* 6*d.*).

Good rush-about spy stuff told in a style laced with untiring facetiousness. Chelsea and Palma are the locales, and the plot is a thick one

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A neat little disquisition on New York advertising and picture forgeries. Play the least-likelihood rule and you will get the answer.

"HELL IS A CITY," by Maurice Procter (*Hutchinson*, 9*s.* 6*d.*).

A salty account of the tracking down of a brutal robber and murderer by an unusually three-dimensional detective, ending with an unnecessarily detailed description of the last few minutes of a condemned man.

"DEAD DRUNK," by George Bagby (*Macdonald*, 9*s.* 6*d.*).

Another nice bundle of sharply etched confusion from the writer of *Give the Little Corpse a Great Big Hand*. The problem this time is to find the author of a tidy heap of slayings, beginning with the shooting of a discredited cop in the proverbial alley. Think hard and you might be right.

"JUDAS, C.I.D.," by Francis Grierson (*Robert Hale*, 9*s.* 6*d.*).

Chief Inspector Roger Frost (Icy Frost to his respectful colleagues) has a whale of a time hurling his hatchet features and sense of moral rectitude against a host of comical, forging, double-dealing and

murdering Frenchmen, whose representatives start off dying in London telephone boxes and wind up jumping off Channel steamers. The writing style imports an unmistakable air of the average.

"THE DOMESTIC AGENCY," by John Rhode (*Geoffrey Bles*, 9*s.* 6*d.*).

Immediately on top of the large John Rhode heap is a familiar masquerade—that of the undercover burglary gang. The title supplies the somewhat original mask this time, and a worthy attempt is made to draw attention away from the inevitable respectable murderer.

"UNLUCKY BREAK," by Osmington Mills (*Geoffrey Bles*, 9*s.* 6*d.*).

Unlucky break is really an understatement for the experiences of the eventual hero of this tale. Impossible break would be much more apposite. Not only is he consigned to jail on pretty preposterous evidence, but having broken out he encounters a fate worse than imagination. So, of course, does the reader.

"CROOKS' TOUR" (*Macdonald*, 10*s.* 6*d.*).

This is a collection of short stories by members of the Mystery Writers of America. On the whole, the stories are brilliantly thought out and finely written, notably those by Robert Arthur, Nigel Morland, Q. Patrick, Brett Halliday and Ellery Queen. On the other hand, takes like "Not a Lick of Sense," by Dorothy Gardiner, and "Nobody's Business," by Bruno

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Every new book by Mr. Macdonald proves that he is just about the best thriller writer in America. Once again his fine blend of lone-wolf toughness and passionate sensitivity make brilliant a story of degeneracy and corruption which would otherwise have little to save it from nausea.

"WITHERED MURDER," by Anthony and Peter Shaffer (*Gollancz*, 9*s*. 6*d*.).

The best of the bunch. Gorgeously styled, searingly witty, bafflingly insoluble, the whole book is one long outrageous *tour de force*, sent to the reader not only to tax his brains but to try his sense of the artificial.

PENGUIN BOOKS

"THE MAN WITH MY FACE," by Samuel W. Taylor.
"WHEN THE WIND BLOWS," by Cyril Hare.
"LONDON PARTICULAR," by Christianna Brand.
"DEATH AMONG THE SUNBATHERS," by E. R. Punshon.

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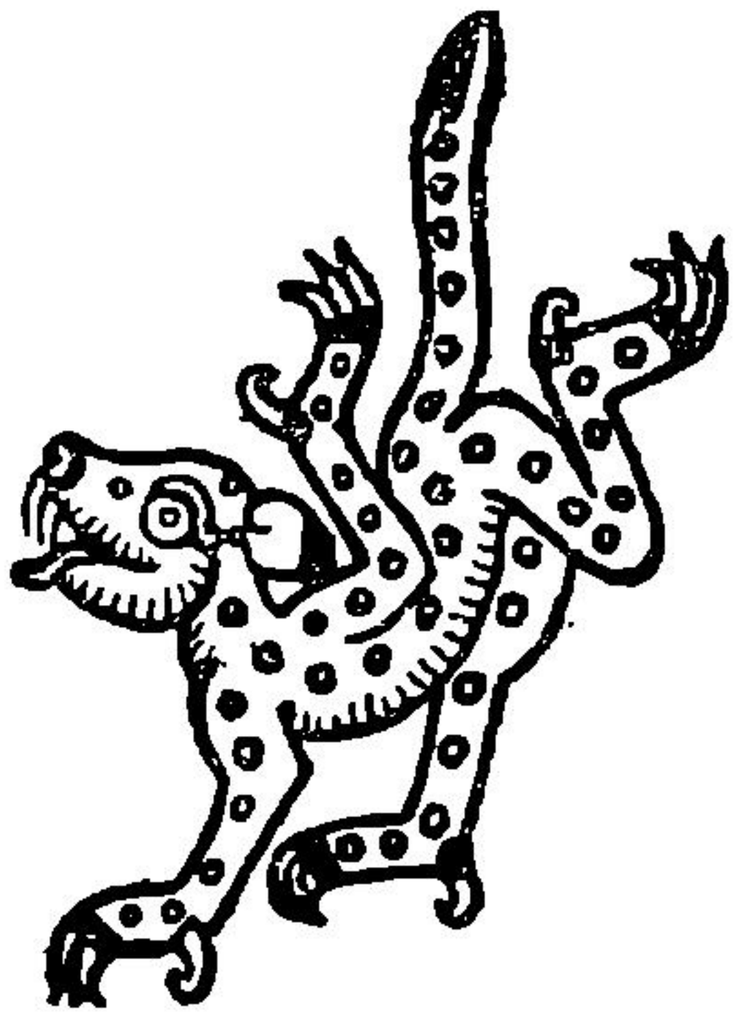
"DEATH HAS DEEP ROOTS," by Michael Gilbert.
"OPEN VERDICT," by Richard Keverne.



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