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MAGAZINE

26



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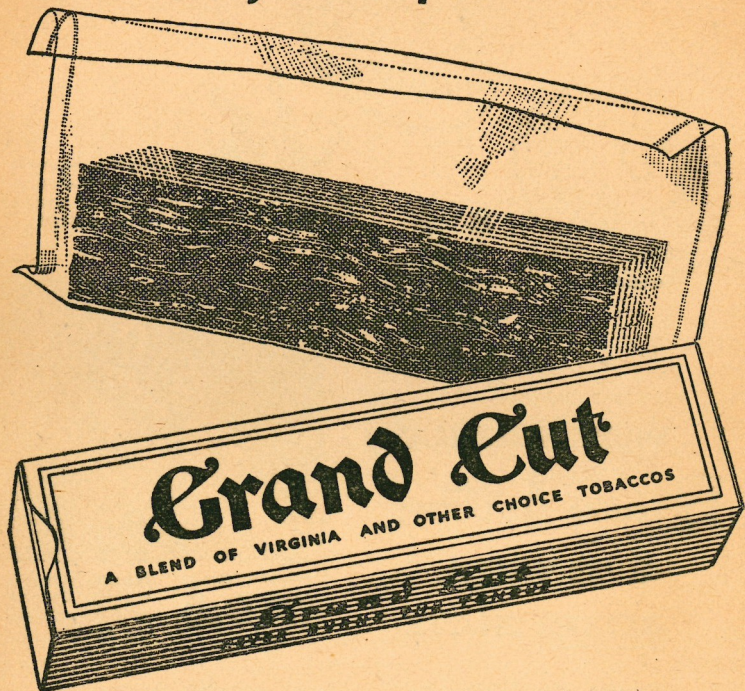
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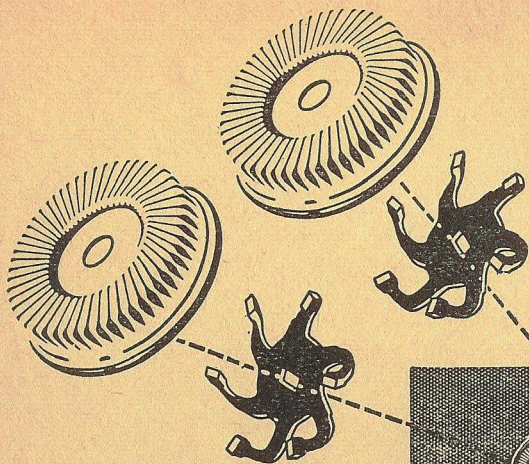
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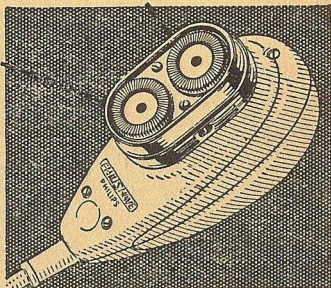
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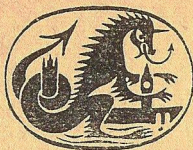
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THE LONDON MYSTERY MAGAZINE

This issue of the LONDON MYSTERY MAGAZINE separates the human body into its component parts, and shows some of the many and dreadful things that can happen to them, and how terribly they in turn can affect people.

Reading, as it were from top to toe, pride of place must go to hair. Human hair has always exercised a peculiar fascination on the mind of the crime and horror writer alike. Here, in "The Fifth String," it assumes a diabolical role, playing a vital part in a simple final scene of sheer horror.

The eyes too, have it, with practitioners of the macabre, and here, when "Uncle Arnold Intervenes," it is to show us some of the malignant terror that a pair of painted blue eyes can inspire in the hardest soul.

In "The Seventeenth Chimney," a long-dead wickedness is revealed by a foreshortened leg bone; in "Monsieur Vaudin's Guest" it is the dry crack of skeletal finger bones that brings a chill to the readers' spinal column; and in the Slave Detective's latest investigation honour is satisfied, and a murderer acknowledged, by the opening of veins.

Nerves—the old thriller writers' standby—are not neglected: Joan Fleming in "Boo to a Goose" and John Ludlow in "The Little Man's Diary" make sure they're tautened to the full. In fact, it is true to say that the body as a whole receives gratifying attentions. In four other stories (to identify them would be to spoil them) it is hewn apart, covered in plaster, possessed by sea serpents and made to perform a strip-tease dance down to the very skeleton.

Yes, all in all this is a most rewarding collection for connoisseurs of the terrifying, the macabre, and the criminal. And let me hasten to add that the LONDON MYSTERY MAGAZINE contains a crime book review column which is still the most comprehensive and perceptive anywhere.

EDITOR.

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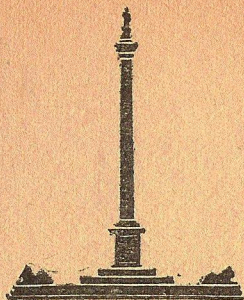
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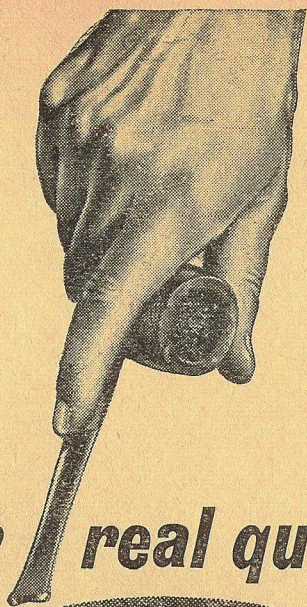
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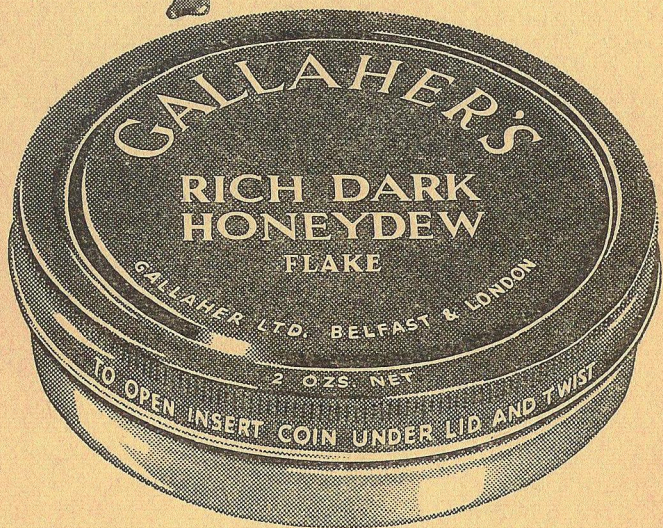
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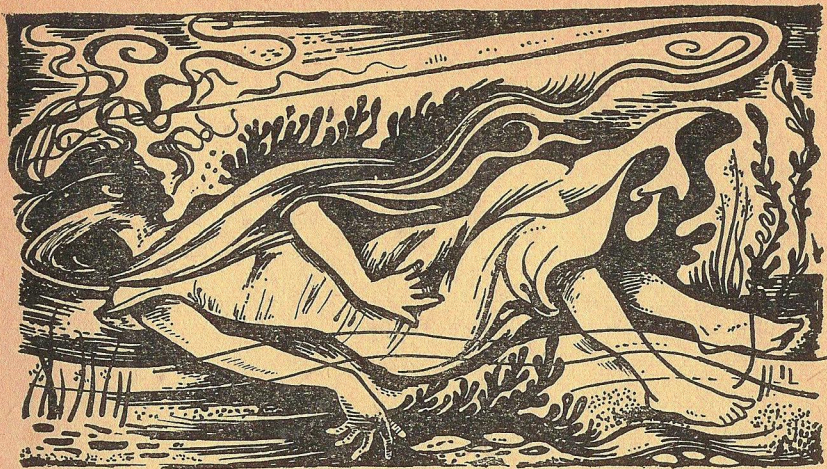
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THE FIFTH STRING

F. McDERMOTT

Illustrated by Roy L. Bickerton

CAN TWO WRONGS, after all, make a right? Is it possible for black to cancel out black and turn it to white? I do not know. At any rate I, who have always had a strong belief in the power of prayer, have prayed during the last few days, as I have never prayed in my life before, that this may be true.

It was while we were up at Balliol that Roger Vanstone and I became friends; though why it is hard to say. I loved study and he loathed it. But we both had a great passion for music, and he was, for an amateur, a very good performer on the violin. To him

the University was simply a place in which to find diversion, especially if the diversion appeared in female form. In fact, it was a particularly unsavoury incident involving the holding of a black mass in which a proctor's daughter took part which caused him to be sent down.

After I came down myself my life was fairly fully occupied taking my medical degree, and we corresponded only fitfully and saw each other rarely, though on several occasions I heard rumours of his discreditable affairs with a number of women.

Then one night, out of the blue, he called at the little room I was renting in Chelsea until such time as I could

set up in practice. I had the wireless on, and after the first shock of surprise at seeing him I made to switch off the set, but he quickly stopped me.

"Who's that playing the violin?" he asked.

"Campoli," I told him. "It's the old story that Paganini was supposed to be possessed by the devil—you remember. Campoli's taking the part of Paganini."

"Quite a coincidence, John, as you'll hear shortly." He slumped down into an arm-chair. "Or is it? Maybe it's just another of 'those things' we used to talk about in the old days. Anyway, let's listen. We can discuss afterwards how it fits in with what I came to tell you."

I will do him the credit of saying that any spark of spirituality he may have possessed did become evident in his love for music. During the very creditable rendering which Campoli gave of the great master's work, he sat silent and absorbed, a far-away, dreamy expression in his eyes. But for the weak, sensual mouth and the obvious marks of dissipation round his eyes, his face would have been almost beautiful. Adding this to the hypnotic power of his personality, I could well understand the extraordinary fascination he had for women.

When the broadcast was over he leapt up.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "Now you're just in the right frame of mind. Get your things on. I, too, have a magic violin, and I want you to see it—and hear it."

He brushed aside my protests that it was too late and that I had too

much work to do. As always, I found it impossible to resist him.

He had never lacked money, and his West End flat was the last word in luxury. The light he switched on was concealed, and flung from the ceiling a subdued rose-coloured glow which might almost have come from those last rays of a sunset when all the world seems hushed and waiting for the night. It had been cold outside, but an equally invisible source of heat radiated pleasant warmth throughout the room.

He motioned me to a divan, deep and comfortable, then noticed that my eyes were fixed on a woman's compact, lying on a near-by marquetry table.

He smiled.

"It's all right. I'm quite alone. She went last Tuesday."

Before I could make any comment he'd gone into an adjoining room and reappeared carrying an old violin-case, which he opened and laid beside me, taking off, as he did so, a much-worn silken cover on which were worked several initials and the date "1824."

"Well?" He stood over me with trembling eagerness.

"It's certainly lovely!" I answered, noting the beauty of the grain and the delicate lustre of the varnish. "But—good Lord! . . ."

I had just noticed that instead of the usual four strings, there were five. Next to the silvery sheen of the "G" string was another string, covered with what appeared to be human hair.

"What's the idea of the fifth string?" I asked.

He did not answer. Instead, he lifted the violin out of its case with a tenderness which was almost reverence.

"Not quite the grace of a Strad or an Amati," he said. "I think it's an old Dutch model by the heaviness of the scroll. But listen!"

He drew the bow gently across the usual four strings to see that they were in tune, then slipped easily into the beautiful *Andante* movement from *Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto*.

I had often heard him play it before, but this was something entirely different. Involuntarily I sank back into the luxury of the divan and closed my eyes. Was it just my imagination or was there behind him a huge orchestra, a beautiful, deep ocean of sound that carried upon its flowing bosom the resonant, triumphant notes which sang through the atmosphere of that little flat until the very air I breathed seemed charged with glorious melody.

He had always been slightly uncertain in the double-stopping movement, but now he merged into it with the assurance of a virtuoso, and once again the thought of water forced itself into my mind, this time with the double-stopping as a swift-flowing stream and the main air as little beacons of sunlight flickering from its surface.

Then, all at once there came a discord so loud and so horrible that I leapt from my seat with clenched hands.

"Good God! What happened?" I gasped.

He sat down beside me—a curious smile on his face.

"I accidentally—and very gently—touched the fifth string. It has occurred before."

Then he told me the story of how he had come by the violin. It was not in a music store, but in an old antique shop which he had entered because he had been attracted by a particularly hideous representation of the Indian god, Shiva, which now adorned one corner of the room in which we were sitting.

From the moment he saw the violin, lying neglected amidst a heap of junk, it had exercised on him a most uncanny fascination, but the little wizened, monkey-like shopkeeper had been very loath to part with it. Or perhaps it would be truer to say that he was extraordinarily eager to sell it, even at a most moderate price, but showed great reluctance to clinch the bargain finally.

To questions as to the idea behind the fifth string, he replied that he did not know. But when Roger had paid for his purchase and was carrying it out of the shop, the little man suddenly called out:

"Sir! Don't ever try to play on the fifth string!"

Roger naturally demanded to know the reason, but only with the utmost difficulty succeeded in making the old man talk. It appeared that when the violin first came into his hands he had considered having the silken cover repaired, but on pulling aside part of the worn silk had found, concealed in the lining, a yellowed piece of paper on which was some



faded writing. This told the familiar story of an ambitious violinist who had sold his soul to the devil in order to be able to play to perfection. But in this case there was a variation. The devil appeared to him in a dream and told him that he must fit a fifth string to his violin and bind around it the hair of a murdered woman. He would then play as no man had played before him. But the fifth string was to be reserved for the touch of immortals only, and must on no account be played upon. If he disobeyed this injunction, then his soul would immediately be forfeit and he would suffer the same fate as the murdered woman. The violinist, the faded writing went on, lured a sweet and innocent girl to the banks of a deep stream and there drowned her. Later, he too was found drowned in almost the same place.

The antique dealer, thinking this

manuscript might cramp the sale of the violin, had burnt it.

"H'm! An interesting story," I said as Roger paused. "And have you had the courage to play on the fifth string yet?"

He did not answer directly. Instead he said:

"There's a bit more to the yarn yet. It seems the old antique dealer had already sold the violin once, then came across it again in a sale and re-bought it. It was not until some time later that he found out that the man who first bought it from him had been drowned.

"As you said earlier in the evening," I remarked, "quite a coincidence!"

"There was another bit in the manuscript, too," he went on slowly. "If anyone accidentally touched the fifth string with the bow——"

He leant forward and nervously

flicked at the scarcely formed ash on a newly lit cigarette.

"—then a clear and unmistakable warning would be given him. Well, you heard the loudness of that discord, even though I barely touched the string. So—think me a superstitious ass if you like—but I'm never going to play on that fifth string. I can get all I want out of the other four."

It was some months afterwards that I met Netta. She was a Scots girl with that delightful variant of her native accent which has a singing drawl in it. A minister's daughter, she was quite unspoilt, never before having been away from her wind-swept heaths, and from the first I was fascinated by her excited interest in all the—to me—perfectly ordinary things which she saw around her in London. It did not take many meetings to make me realize that in the big dark depths of her eyes and the sweep of her chestnut hair and the clean, soft freshness of her was the meaning of the whole of life for me. With our engagement I felt a tremendous spur to my ambition, a driving force which made even the most monotonous of tasks and study worth-while.

We were so wonderfully happy until that night at Carino's. I had taken her to Carino's purposely to see her against a background which would throw her into contrast—to be able to compare her with the pleasure-drugged, heavily made-up women, and watch her big eyes open still wider as she gazed round at the hurrying waiters and the powdered and scented and hair-waved young men

playing hot rhythm with an intentness which would have done them credit in a performance of a difficult Beethoven symphony.

The moment I saw Roger coming across the floor towards us, I felt a stab of dismay. It was not merely that I disliked a man of his character meeting Netta. It was more than that—a deep psychic premonition that fate was about to snatch from me the greatest happiness I had ever known.

I watched his eyes as they fastened on her face, then travelled with an insolent slowness down the curve of her half-bared shoulder.

"Well, well!" he said. "I didn't think you had it in you, John."

Reluctantly I got to my feet and made the formal introductions.

"Your fiancée, eh? You lucky fellow! Anyway, as you're already engaged you get plenty of each other's company, so what about me joining you? I'd like to order a bottle of champagne and drink to this happy occasion."

At first Netta refused the wine, but in his practised hands she had no more chance than a baby rabbit in front of a stoat. I tried to interfere, but she turned to me with that lovely singing Scottish drawl and said:

"But, John, I can't be so rude as to refuse when your friend is drinking our health."

With a heavy heart I watched her become more and more animated, drinking in his words and seeming almost to forget that I was there.

Then the head waiter came across to us and glanced from Roger to myself.

"Excuse me, but which of you gentlemen is Doctor Brownlow?"

"I am Doctor Brownlow," I said, and once again foreboding reared its ugly head.

"I'm very sorry, sir, but there is a telephone message for you—from Whitfields Hospital. Your presence is required there immediately, as the duty doctor is ill."

I made one last desperate effort.

"I'm awfully sorry to break up the party," I said. "Are you coming, Netta?"

"What!" There was triumph in Roger's eyes. "You're not really going to do the poor little soul out of her meal, are you? Let her finish it. I'll run her to her home. My car's just outside."

What could I do—certainly not make a scene with those hundreds of eyes upon us?

I soon noticed the change in Netta. She was listless, unhappy. All the sparkle had gone out of her. I did my best to ignore it, and plunged with her into a whirlwind of gaiety which I could ill afford. But it was of no use. The showdown came in another restaurant—a little intimate place off Soho. She was eating nothing. Then I noticed two great tears form in her eyes and begin to roll down her cheeks.

"My darling—what is it?" I asked.

For reply she slowly slipped the engagement ring from her finger and pushed it over the table towards me.

"Netta—you can't mean it. What have I done?"

She buried her head in her hands and sobs tore at her shoulders.

"Oh, my dear, my poor dear," she moaned. "It isn't what *you* have done!"

"It's Roger, I suppose?"

She straightened up and suddenly became very calm.

"Yes, I am going to him tomorrow."

"But, Netta, you can't! For God's sake, listen to me. He's a fiend with women. He's had dozens. Does he offer to marry you?"

She was still deadly calm.

"That will come later—but he needs me now. He has told me about the others. He was searching—always searching. But he has never been really in love before—not truly and deeply—until he met me."

"Oh, you fool!" It was utter misery and anguish which dragged the exclamation from me. "You poor little fool!"

I saw her proud chin fling upwards and knew I had made a mistake. But by now the red mist of murder was in my brain. Although Roger had always been physically stronger than I, if he had been there at that moment I would have strangled him with my bare hands, slowly and with infinite pleasure at his miserable struggles. I found myself calling mentally upon all the fiends in hell to aid me in my search for vengeance. Maybe it was imagination caused by my distraught condition, but I thought I heard a voice answering me, telling me exactly and precisely what I had to do. And I did it.

It was the next night that my telephone rang and I heard Netta's agitated voice:

"Oh, John, is that you? Thank God! Please come—come quickly."

She was waiting for me in the entrance-hall to his block of flats, and as soon as she saw me she flung herself into my arms and clung to me.

"Where is he?" I asked gently.

"Upstairs—in the flat," she whispered. "I couldn't stay there."

He was lying on his back and a fierce surge of something almost demoniac flooded through me as I saw that his violin was lying in fragments beside him. The sinister fifth string was snapped, and the hair was curling from it in what looked like decaying particles.

He had a curiously bloated appearance, and for a moment my mind groped for the last time I had seen a body looking like that. Then I remem-

bered. It was when I had been called upon to deal with a man drowned on the north Cornish coast.

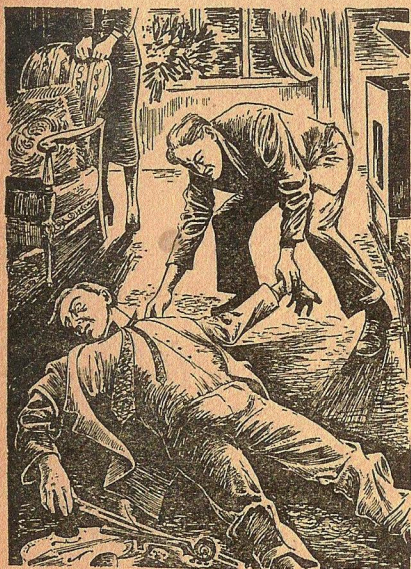
Instinctively I turned him over and began the movements of artificial respiration. Water gushed from his mouth in great streams.

"Ring for the police!" I called to Netta. "There will have to be a *post mortem*."

The police doctor certified death from serous pleurisy. It is not for me to question that decision. But I have never seen a case of serous pleurisy exhibit quite the symptoms this one did.

What is a murderer? Presumably one who, knowingly and deliberately, brings about the death of another. Then am I not a murderer, even though the law cannot touch me? For that night when Netta had handed my ring back to me and said that she was the only woman Roger had ever really loved, I had laughed at her. And, in response to the promptings of that strange inner voice, I had told her that I knew the hair bound round the fifth string of his violin was that of a woman he had loved above all others and still did. I saw the swift flare of jealousy in her eyes and followed up my advantage. He would tell her, I went on, all sorts of cock-and-bull stories to avoid playing on the string that meant so much to him. But let her test him. Let her make herself the price of his doing so.

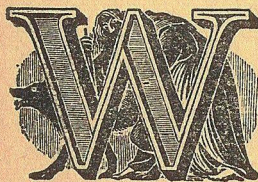
Netta and I are to be married to-morrow. That is why I ask whether two wrongs can make a right, and that is why I pray. For, after all, Netta has done no wrong, and surely she deserves happiness.



MURDER CASE

MAX MARQUIS

It may be true to say that the farther away from England, the nearer we are to France, but it is unwise to forget that the penalty for murder is death in both countries, be it by the hangman's rope or by the guillotine.



WHEN HAROLD STEWART, gentleman of independent means, walked up the gangway of the Channel ferry, he was a little less than two hours away from death. One hundred and twelve minutes later his cousin Kenneth Rollins was going to murder him.

For six months Rollins had planned to kill Stewart and acquire three of his possessions: his money, his wife and his identity. Now, on this gloomy May night, the perfect murder was about to reach its climax when Stewart's body would slide into the Channel.

As Stewart went aboard the ship, Rollins was just walking into the Customs shed. He was a heavily built man made to seem even more bulky by his boldly checked overcoat and broad-brimmed hat. Despite the thick spectacles he wore Rollins obviously had poor sight, for his head was thrust forward and his brow furrowed as he tried to focus his eyes in the sudden glare of the shed.

The Customs formalities were soon over—no cases were opened—and a few minutes later Rollins was in his

cabin, three doors away from his unsuspecting relative. The would-be murderer took off the striking overcoat and put his glasses on the edge of the small table beside the bunk. He rang for the steward.

"What time do we get in?" he asked.

"Three a.m., sir."

"Thanks. Er . . . I'm not taking the Paris train at Calais. Can I sleep on a while after we dock?"

"Well, you're not supposed to stay aboard after four o'clock, but——" the steward hinted.

Rollins passed the man a pound note.

"I'm afraid you'll have to be out by five-thirty, sir. I'll call you at five with a nice cup of tea."

"That's fine," Rollins said with a smile. He reached out for his spectacles, but his uncertain hand misjudged the distance and he knocked them to the floor.

"Look out, man," he cried. "Don't step on my glasses; I'm helpless without them."

The steward picked the spectacles off the carpet and put them in Rollins's hand.

"There you are, sir. See you at five," he concluded as he went out.

"You'll see me before then, son,

but you won't know it," Rollins thought grimly.

He took his glasses off again and put them back on the table. They would not be needed any more. Like the check overcoat, they had served their purpose.

Rollins lay on the bunk and smoked a cigarette while he went over the plan—the faultless plan—to kill his cousin and take his place.

It was to be the perfect murder, if such a thing is possible. ("Of course it's possible," Rollins said out loud as if someone had replied to his thought.) There are probably dozens of murders every year that no one knows about because they go down as disappearances, accidents and suicides. The one thing about a perfect crime is that no crime is suspected.

Luck had played its part in the scheme, but, Rollins reassured himself, it took a brilliant man to turn the single fortunate coincidence to such advantage. In his mind he went back eight months to the time when he first met Stewart face to face.

The two men were cousins; however, as sometimes happens in large families, they never saw each other until they were both nearly forty years old. When Rollins did finally set eyes on his cousin—at a party at Stewart's Buckinghamshire home—four things struck him immediately: that there was a marked physical resemblance between him and Stewart; that there was absolutely no similarity of character; that Stewart was comfortably rich (thanks to an inheritance from his father); and that

he had a very attractive but obviously bored wife.

Stewart was as strait-laced and conventional as only an Englishman, or German, can be—the sort of man, Rollins decided correctly at that first meeting, who would make a perfect senior clerk in some obscure Government office. He had the narrow, unimaginative mind of the born employee or a Victorian private soldier.

Mrs. Clara Stewart was ten or fifteen years younger than her husband, a voluptuous, calculating blonde. One did not have to be a cynic to think that she married her husband for his money; but the hard set of her mouth hinted that life with Stewart was not all she had expected. He was a dull, mean, cold-blooded fish, Rollins thought contemptuously. And from there it was a simple step to reckon that Mrs. Stewart would be easily interested in a gay, vigorous man of the world.

Rollins had made no mistake in his summing-up—a man who lives by his wits must be an excellent judge of bad character. When he saw Mrs. Stewart closer, the tiny lines around her mouth and a hardness at the back of her eyes told him that she could be ruthless, too.

It was within an hour of meeting the Stewarts that Rollins had the first vague glimmerings of decision to kill his cousin for his money.

He decided to cultivate Stewart. It was one of Rollins's principles that if you associate with rich people long enough, some of their money will run off on to you. And when the rich man

has an attractive and bored wife. . . . Rollins was a great success with both of them. He hid the unreliable and shady side of his character from Harold Stewart; and he let Clara see the attractive, charming and worldly-wise side of it.

Clara was, Rollins found, as ruthless and tough as he had suspected. She was a sensualist, too, and it was not long before they became lovers. The situation was a perfect breeding-ground for violence: a rich, yet mean husband; a discontented young wife and an unscrupulous opportunist. It was inevitable, then, that Kenneth and Clara soon began to talk over ways to rid themselves of the frugal Harold.

Kenneth Rollins refused to be rushed into action. He knew that the key to pulling off a successful crime was his startling resemblance to his cousin, but at first he could not see a way to turn this likeness to advantage. Then one day when Kenneth and Clara were complaining of the furtive way in which they had to meet, she said:

"In May I'll be able to come and stay with you for a while."

"How's that, darling?" he asked as he reached for a cigarette on the bedside table.

"Well, every May Harold goes to Nice to get our villa ready for a holiday. His father left him four places there—one we keep for ourselves, the other three we let, and the rents pay for our three months' holiday.

"Harold leaves first to see the solicitors and collect the money. He

spends a week arranging the villa, and then I join him."

Kenneth sat up with a start, his eyes wide. "Darling," she pouted, "you're not listening to me."

"On the contrary," Rollins gloated, "I heard every word, my love. You've just said the nicest things I've ever heard you say. You have just told me the perfect way to—er—eliminate your troublesome husband." And this was the plan he outlined to her.

For the next six months Rollins would prepare for the night when Harold took the Channel ferry. Kenneth would grow a moustache. Then he would say that he had lost his passport so he could get a new one with a photograph of himself with a big moustache and wearing thick spectacles. "Those two things will change my appearance enough, and I can go back to looking like my normal self at five minutes' notice," he explained.

He expounded his plan with mounting excitement.

"I travel on the same boat as Harold—you make sure that he takes a cabin and tell me the number—without his knowing. When we're well out to sea, I'll kill him and take his passport and papers. Then I'll drop him overboard; I can think of a way to do that without making a splash later.

"Next I shave off my moustache, throw away my cases, my spectacles and a flashy overcoat I'll have specially for the trip. See? Mr. Kenneth Rollins has become Mr. Harold Stewart, and the dead Mr. Stewart becomes the mysteriously disappeared Mr. Kenneth Rollins. That's if any-

one even notices that I'm missing. The only clue will be that the tickets at Dover and Calais won't match up—and the odds are that the railway people will think one has got lost, or something.

"I go on to Nice, where I am taken 'ill' with 'flu and stay in an hotel. You, my dear *wife*, fly over to take care of me. *You* will see the solicitors, bring me the papers to sign, and when Mr. Harold Stewart the Second 'recovers,' we both move to the villa.

"When we come back to England, we'll take a house here in London instead of in the country, and cut away from all the dull friends of Mr. Harold Stewart the First. How's that for a plan, darling?"

Clara was not in the least horrified by a calm discussion of her husband's murder; on the contrary, she was listening to it with shining eyes.

"But why not just kill him and leave it at that, sweet? I'll get his money and we can be married later."

"No good," Kenneth pointed out. "You'd have to wait six years or something to presume death." (He was also thinking that the more he involved Clara in the affair, the safer he would be. Once she had accepted him as her "husband" it would be impossible for her to give him away without admitting that she was an accessory before and after the murder.)

"Leave a suicide note, then," she suggested. "That way they'll know he's gone overboard."

"Look, darling," Rollins explained patiently. "A man doesn't go to make arrangements for a holiday and commit suicide on the way. No, my way

is the best—in fact, it's the only way.

"As soon as you can get a specimen of Harold's signature let me have it, and I'll put in some good, hard practice. And before he's due to go to France, I'll make a few trips on the same route to get the lie of the land—or the sea, rather."

Clara looked at him admiringly.

"Darling, you're marvellous." She thought for a minute.

"Ooh, we'll be rich and have a wonderful time, and I'll have lots of new clothes and we won't have to live in the nasty dull country and——" She tailed off breathlessly. "Kiss me again, sweetheart," she concluded. "I have to go soon. I'm supposed to be with a girl friend."

That was six months ago, and almost every day since Rollins had gone over the plan with a concentrated intensity, for his own life depended on its perfect execution. By the time he was due to make his reconnoitring trips on the Channel boat, he was satisfied that everything that could be done had been done.

His luck was still in, Kenneth found when he first walked into one of the cabins in the Channel steamer. The portholes were big enough to get a body through; and equally important, it could be lowered into the sea without passing an open deck. He noted, too, that there were carpets in the cabin and a pair of spectacles could fall from the table to the floor without breaking.

The murder plan was ready.

Clara and Kenneth met for the last time three nights before Harold was due to leave for France.

"I'm glad it's nearly over," she said with a shiver. "I think Harold is beginning to suspect about us."

"Nonsense, pet," he comforted her. "It's just that you're on edge a bit. Harold's type never suspect their wives; it's not done. And if anyone tells them what's going on, they just say: 'Here, old girl, this will have to stop, you know, this nonsense between you and this damned fellow.'" He imitated Harold's ponderous manner so exactly that Clara gave a little giggle and nearly spilled the gin she was holding.

"You're probably right, but I'm still glad it won't be much longer now."

"Don't forget," Kenneth warned her, "you'll get a wire from Nice signed 'Harold.' Don't panic—it'll be me. Now give me a kiss and get off home; I've still got things to do."

She swung her fur cape round her shoulders. "See you in less than a week. *Bon voyage!*"

Rollins looked at his watch. They had been at sea an hour now: time to make a move. He lit another cigarette, took three quick puffs and then stubbed it out. The first moment of unavoidable risk was now, on his way to Stewart's cabin. He turned out the light, carefully opened the door and glanced quickly into the corridor. It was empty.

He picked up one of his suit-cases and strode along to his cousin's cabin. He tapped on the door.

There was a noise of someone moving around inside for a few seconds,

then a flushed-looking Harold opened the door.

"Kenneth! What the devil are you doing on this boat?"

"May I come in?"

Rather ungraciously for such a formal man, Harold invited him inside with a brusque gesture. Kenneth shut the door behind him and, keeping his body between the door and Harold, shot the small bolt.

"What am I doing on the boat? Come a little closer; it's a secret and I shouldn't like to be overheard."

Harold approached with a puzzled expression on his face. As soon as he was within reach, Kenneth Rollins grabbed him round the throat.

"What am I doing on this boat? The secret, dear Harold, is that I am here to kill you."

His thumbs dug relentlessly into Stewart's neck, and he threshed around wildly, clutching at the hands which were choking out his life, but he could not loosen their grip on his windpipe. As the two men swayed in the death struggle, Stewart staggered back, dragging Rollins with him, slipped and hit his head on the steel side of the ship. He went limp, but Rollins kept on the pressure for another full two minutes.

The murderer gently lowered his victim to the floor. He stood there, panting and trembling. It seemed to him that the wild beating of his heart was making more noise than the scuffle had done. He listened intently, but there was no sound from outside the cabin.

Rollins sat on the bunk for a moment to pull himself together.

Then he went over to the case he had brought into the cabin, took out a nylon rope dyed black, snapped the case shut, and finally put both the case (full of old clothes and shoes) and the rope beside Stewart's body. He tried to keep his eyes away from the dead man's face. "I didn't know they looked like that after being strangled," he muttered.

Next step was to open the porthole. It was only half-closed, held in place by the catch, which was not screwed down.

"Now to get him overboard," thought Kenneth. He tied one end of the rope to Stewart's feet and fastened the suit-case half-way down its length. He started to lift the corpse, then suddenly lowered it again.

"My God! I nearly forgot to take the things out of his pockets!" Rollins said out loud in a terrified voice.

He was trembling again as he realized how near he had been to wrecking his plan.

"Pull yourself together, *Mr. Stewart*," Rollins encouraged himself; and he grinned at the way he had already accepted the dead man's identity. It gave him back his confidence. He set to work rifling Harold's pockets.

With Stewart's watch, keys, passport, travellers' cheques, ticket, cigarette-case, lighter, one or two letters and a monogrammed handkerchief on the bunk, Rollins prepared himself once more to throw Stewart into the sea.

He struggled the corpse to its feet, then, with one arm round its waist, Kenneth pushed the still-limp arms

through the porthole. He bent quickly and grabbed the ankles. One strong heave, and the body was half-way out, jack-knifed on either side of the porthole rim. Kenneth passed the nylon rope tied to Stewart's feet under his arms—and gave the final shove.

He gripped the rope tightly, letting the body down comparatively slowly to avoid a big splash when it hit the water. Rapidly he passed out the heavy suit-case and let that down behind Stewart. As soon as Rollins felt a jerk on the rope when the body touched the water, he let it go. The end of the black rope snaked silently through the porthole.

Behind the ship the suit-case quickly filled with water and dragged the late Harold Stewart down below the black surface of the Channel.

In his cabin, Rollins clutched the edge of the bunk, his knees weak, as he listened once again. But there was no sound: the whole thing had gone unobserved. The final risk had been run; now there were one or two details to tidy up, like ridding himself of the check overcoat and the spectacles.

And, of course, the moustache. Rollins stretched his hand in front of him: it was as steady as the hand of an innocent child. He was whistling gaily as he turned to Stewart's cases. There were two of them, which puzzled him for a moment, for he thought he had seen the porter take four off the train—but Kenneth dismissed the point as unimportant.

In the first case he tried there was shaving tackle and a set of old-

fashioned cut-throat razors.

"Just as well I haven't got the shakes," Rollins thought with a self-satisfied smile.

Five minutes later, clean-shaven, he grinned at himself in the mirror.

"How do you feel, Mr. Stewart? You're looking rather more handsome than usual, if I may say so."

It was done. Just a few hours and "Mr. Stewart" would be on the way to wealth, a pleasant life and the beautiful Mrs. Stewart.

"And if ever she becomes troublesome in the future," thought Kenneth, "what I can get away with once I can get away with again. . . ."

He decided to rest until the boat docked, and even managed to sleep—quite dreamlessly—for a while.

By the time he called for the steward to carry his cases off the boat, Rollins was perfectly composed and fully confident that the man would take him for the same passenger who had gone into the cabin at Dover.

As he followed the steward along the corridor, up the companion-way and across the deck to the gangway, Rollins could not suppress a little song.

"Feeling pretty cheerful for this time of the morning, sir," the steward commented.

"Ah yes. I'm looking forward to my holiday. It's almost like starting life all over again, you know."

"That's what I always say, sir. Er—I'll put your bags up for Customs inspection, then carry them through to the train. Do you have a reserved seat, sir?"

Rollins managed to keep a calm ex-

pression, but his brain was racing. Had he seen a reservation voucher attached to Stewart's rail ticket? It was only a detail, but any question for which he did not have a ready answer started his heart thumping.

"You fool," he thought savagely, "pull yourself together. It's not that important."

The murderer replied to the question in a voice that gave no hint of his momentary alarm.

"Yes, I have one somewhere. I'll get it out in a minute and tell you the seat number."

At that moment there was a shout from the ship. Rollins forced himself to turn slowly, although every nerve in his body was screaming. A sailor on deck was calling to a workman on the dockside. The smile on their faces told Rollins that there was nothing to worry about.

"I was getting over-confident, and this is just the natural reaction," he tried to reason with himself. "Just the same, I'll be glad to get away from here and on the train. If there's any trouble, the more time they have to forget faces the better I'll like it."

"*Rien à déclarer?* Not'in' to declare?" The Customs officer's question broke into Kenneth's thoughts. He looked up and saw a man in a dark blue uniform jacket studying him over his two cases on the bench.

"What? Oh—er—no."

"*Bien.*" The chalk hovered over the cases, then the officer gave Rollins a shrewd look.

"*Ouvrez, s'il vous plaît—open*

t's, please." He touched one of the bags.

"Good thing that Stewart isn't the sort of chap to go in for smuggling—or at least, he wasn't," Rollins thought as he bent down to undo the unfamiliar catches.

They would not open. The case was locked.

Again a blind, unreasoning panic gripped the murderer, and he felt beads of perspiration start on his face.

"Keys, keys, where did I put the keys? If I can't find the damned keys perhaps they'll hold me here and I'll still be around when they find an empty cabin. Then I'll . . ."

He thrust his hand into the pocket of Stewart's overcoat and felt the comforting cold steel of a bunch of keys.

From the look of them, there was only one that would fit the locks on

the bag. He tried it. It fitted.

"That was a nasty moment, but it should be the last," Rollins thought with a tiny sigh of relief.

He watched quietly as the Customs officer opened the case. On top was a pad of screwed-up newspapers. The Frenchman removed them, stared, then screamed "*Police!*"

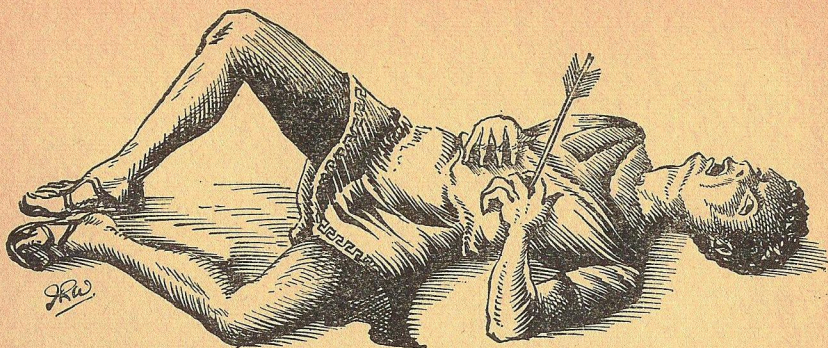
Two sleepy-eyed *agents de police* came running over, while the Customs officer continued shouting in French, high-pitched and rapid. But the policemen need not have hurried: Rollins had not moved. All at once he had understood the reason for the porthole in the cabin not being locked, for the two missing cases.

He broke into a horrible, thin, retching laughter as he stared with bursting eyes at the suit-case, which contained the neatly severed head of Mrs. Clara Stewart.



All things that we ordained festival,
Turn from their office to black funeral;
Our instruments to melancholy bells,
Our wedding cheer to a sad burial feast,
Our solemn hymns to sullen dirges change,
Our bridal flowers serve for a buried corse,
And all things change them to the contrary.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: *Romeo and Juliet*.



THE SLAVE DETECTIVE

THE CASE OF THE PARTHIAN ARROW

WALLACE NICHOLS

Illustrated by J. Ramsey Wherrett

THE CITY PREFECT detailed Gratianus, an officer in the Urban Cohort, to fetch Sollius in haste.

"What is it all about?" asked the Slave Detective as he entered the chariot which had been sent for him.

"Caius Ligurianus has been murdered," answered Gratianus. Sollius whistled. To murder a favourite of the Emperor Commodus was to ask for the utmost retribution. The City Prefect greeted him with a frown and a grunt.

"Sit down, Sollius," he growled. "This is a terrible business—as terrible for me as for the victim. *This*

murderer is one who has to be found!"

"How did it happen?" asked the Slave Detective, twiddling his thumbs.

"He was found early this morning in a small marble pavilion in his garden on the Esquiline," answered the Prefect, "an arrow through his heart."

"Is there a suspect?"

"That is why I have sent for you, Sollius," said the Prefect earnestly. "There are two, and the scales seem equally loaded—his wife and his best friend. They, at least, have motives. Licinia because of the infidelities which dishonour her in society, and Severus because he loves the wife.

This is well known and the cause of gossip."

"Have you any evidence against either of them?"

"None. Licinia says she slept the whole night through; Severus swears that he was writing in his chamber from moonrise to dawn. He is—or says he is—a poet," the Prefect added with a touch of contempt. "There is, and can be, no witness to either statement. Now comes the darker side of the matter. The Emperor declares himself convinced that Severus is the murderer; but Severus has offended him by an incautious lampoon, and Commodus would be glad of the chance to punish him, justly or not," he whispered. "Now I, Sollius, have benefits to repay the family of Severus, and am not prepared, even though it would please the Emperor, to twist any evidence against one who may be innocent. I can only save Severus, however—if he *is* innocent—by finding the actual murderer. You have to help me, Sollius."

"What of the wife?" asked Sollius.

"A sweet young girl," replied the City Prefect gloomily. "I should hate to believe her guilty of a vicious crime. Yet I feel that it lies somewhere between them."

"Perhaps in league," suggested Sollius, and the Prefect shrugged heavy shoulders.

"It is possible—but, hardened dealer with criminals as I am, I cannot look into her eyes and believe it."

"Take me to the scene," said the Slave Detective.

The pavilion stood at the end of a long, wide path of gravel, and was

circular, surrounded by fluted columns. It was only a summer resting-place, with a marble seat running all round, and with a fountain in the centre.

"The body," said the Prefect, "lay there. I let them take it into the house. Show Sollius the arrow," he commanded one of the guard that he had placed there.

"A curious one," muttered Sollius, taking it. "I have never seen one quite like it. Not a Roman one, neither in use by the legions nor for hunting."

"That is so," agreed the Prefect. "The arrow itself puzzles me. It looks to me quite old."

"How was it used?" asked Sollius. "Was it shot into him? You do not show me the bow."

"We have not found a bow."

"You say it went straight through him?"

"Straight through the heart and partly out through the back."

"No arrow," said the Slave Detective, "could be *thrust* through a man like that. It will have been shot from a bow. We have to find that bow, Prefect. Let us search the house, and you had better arrange for the house of Severus to be searched also."

"That has already been done," answered the Prefect, "and no bow of any kind has been found. Neither Ligurianus nor Severus was ever a huntsman, nor anything but a sybaritic idler about the court. Their obsequiousness to the Emperor never sent them even to box with him in the arena! The father-in-law of Li-

gurianus—a man of the old school—has publicly expressed his disgust with his daughter's husband."

"The wife, then, is of the better family?" suggested Sollius.

"It took the Emperor's express command to make Marcus Licinius Crassus consent to the marriage."

"Did any of you men come here mounted?" suddenly asked the Slave Detective.

"No, Sollius. Why do you ask?"

"Do you not see what I see?"

"What?" asked the Prefect.

"Hoof-prints—both coming and going."

"Oh yes, I saw those," replied the Prefect impatiently. "That only tells us that the murderer came on horseback, probably the better to escape if seen. Severus is a good horseman. I have already found out *that!*" he added with a touch of complacency.

"Did you look to see if any of his horse's hoofs contains gravel?" asked Sollius.

The Prefect glanced inquiringly at Gratianus, who shook his head.

"It might help to clear him if there is none," said the Slave Detective, and at a sign from the Prefect Gratianus hastily departed.

Hitherto the morning had been cloudy, but now a burst of sunshine lit up the pavilion, throwing, as it were, iridescent gleams over the marble roof from the playing fountain.

"What is that under the seat over there?" asked Sollius and, crossing over, he bent down and picked up a ring. It was of gold and obviously of value.

"A woman's ring," murmured the Prefect. "An ancient pattern: it looks like an heirloom."

"Licinia could have dropped it here at any time," said Sollius. "This is her garden and pavilion as well as her husband's."

"It may be none the less a clue," the Prefect persisted. "She has not yet been interrogated. Shall we go in together?"

Licinia was tall and beautiful, with a complexion as perfectly pale as alabaster. Her deep grey eyes were troubled but as candid as the morning.

Sollius, however, had seen a murderer with exactly the same candid look of innocence, and he was not prepared to let himself be deceived by a face. He was still carrying the arrow—and the ring.

"I am told that you heard nothing last night," Sollius began at a sign from the City Prefect.

"Nothing," she whispered.

"Is there any reason why your husband should visit the pavilion at night?"

A flush fleetingly stained the alabaster of her cheeks.

"I am not surprised at it," she breathed. "It has . . . happened before."

"You did not go there to confront him?" snapped the Prefect.

"No," she answered, and at least Sollius believed her.

"Show her the arrow, Sollius," ordered the Prefect. "Have you ever seen this arrow before?"

She stared at it and shuddered.

"No," she answered steadily.

"Or this ring?" asked Sollius, showing it suddenly on the palm of his hand.

"It is not mine," she answered, equally steadily, but after a slight pause.

"Let us send for her maid," said Sollius, and the Prefect gave the order. "One of you," added Sollius, "take the lady Licinia into the garden—for a moment. Keep within call."

The Prefect nodded his acquiescence, and Licinia had hardly been ushered out in the portico when an elderly woman was brought in.

"What is your name?" asked the Slave Detective.

"Mallia," came the answer in a tight, precise voice.

"How long have you been the lady Licinia's maid?"

"Five years—ever since her marriage," came the answer.

"Have you ever seen in the house an arrow like this?"

"No, never."

"This ring belongs to your mistress, doesn't it? Take it into your hand, and examine it carefully," said Sollius.

"It is not hers," replied Mallia.

"You swear it?" asked the Prefect.

"By Isis herself!"

"Let her go," said Sollius. "I think it is the truth."

The maid was dismissed, and the lady Licinia was politely ushered back into the room.

"Who is your nearest relative?" asked Sollius, kindness in his voice.

"My father," she answered, and her pale lips trembled.

"Have you a mother?"

"She is dead; only my father is left. I have neither sister nor brother. I am the last of our race—a proud one, as you know, O Prefect."

"This lady and her father," said the Prefect, turning to Sollius, "are descended from the Triumvir Crassus, the friend of the great Cæsar and Pompeius, and who lost his life heroically in the disaster at Carrhæ."

Sollius bowed.

"I have no further questions to ask the lady Licinia," he said.

Returning to the barracks of the City Cohorts, they found Gratianus, who reported that no traces of gravel were discernible in any hoof of any horse belonging to Severus.

"They could have been washed clean," muttered the Prefect.

"I think some trace would have been found—either in a hoof or in the stables," said Sollius.

"There was nothing at all," insisted Gratianus. "I looked very carefully."

A pause of consideration followed, and then Sollius said:

"If you will let me have the arrow for a while, I think I know where I may learn something about it. The chief armourer of the Gladiators is my friend."

With the arrow in his hand the Slave Detective made his way to the great gladiatorial circus and turned into the gladiators' quarters. He only hoped that the Emperor himself was not practising there.

"Is Arvandus, the chief armourer, in the Circus?" he asked of one of the gladiators who, there being no show that day, were lounging about,

gossiping or throwing dice, with others boxing together or burnishing their armour and weapons.

The man he had asked pointed silently towards a narrow passage way. Sollius followed the unspoken direction, and found himself in what was the gladiatorial armoury, a semi-underground chamber of vast proportions, lighted by lines of small circular windows high up along one wall. A number of men were working there, and the din of hammer-struck metal was considerable. Seeing the man he sought in the far corner, working at a bench under a lamp, Sollius edged his way across to him through busy slaves and a mass of variously heaped pieces of armour.

"Arvandus!" he cried.

The other swung round in a sweat of fear, and then, recognizing his visitor, his face lightened, and he

straightened his back and greeted him.

"Why, Sollius, it is months since I saw you."

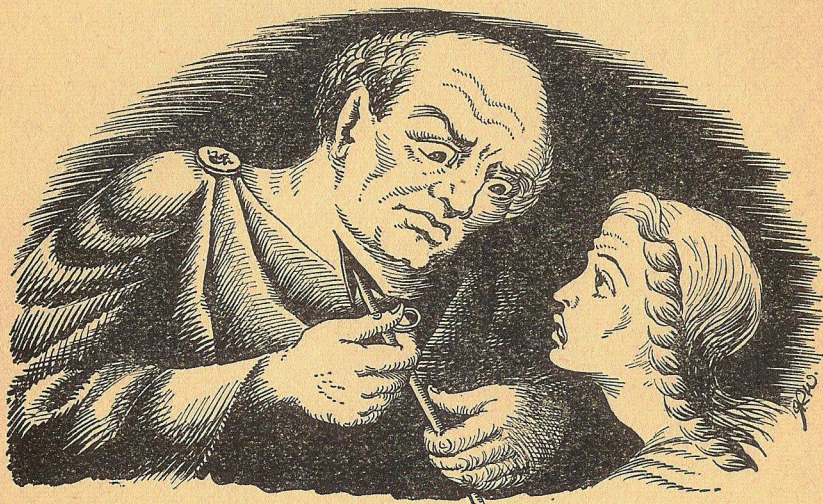
"Months, truly, old friend," said the Slave Detective, and took the stool which the other put forward for him.

For a while the two gossiped together. Then, with a sly wink, Arvandus said:

"I don't suppose you've come to see me, Sollius, for the mere sake of chatter. You've a case on; I can smell it"—he laughed—"and you want my help."

"Your nose is as excellent as a Gallic hound's," laughed Sollius in turn. "I do, indeed, want your advice. That is to say, I need the benefit of your special knowledge as an armourer."

"You have only to ask, old friend," answered Arvandus.



"I have here an arrow," continued Sollius, and he produced it from under his cloak. "Can you tell me what kind of arrow it is and its possible origin?"

"I suppose it has been used in a murder," said the other, taking it. "The murder of the Emperor's friend Ligurianus? The news of it is all over Rome."

"That is the arrow which killed Ligurianus," admitted Sollius. "What can you tell me about it? I have never seen its like."

"Many Romans have seen—and felt!—its like," replied Arvandus grimly, "especially in the wars of the past. It is a Parthian arrow."

"Would there be many of them in Rome?" asked the Slave Detective.

"Hardly in private possession, but probably some in the imperial armouries—mostly in trophies of past campaigns in the East. I doubt whether even the Parthians themselves make their arrows of this pattern now," Arvandus concluded.

"Thank you," said Sollius, and after gossiping lightly for a few more moments to deceive whichever slaves might be curiously listening, he took his limping leave.

Passing back through the gladiators' quarters he came full upon the Emperor, being armed for practice in the arena.

Commodus stayed him with a quick gesture.

"What are you doing here, Sollius?" he rasped.

"I was showing this arrow to Arvandus, Majesty, to see if he could tell me what kind of arrow it is."

Commodus took it from him and examined it.

"Eastern," he said, and his eyes narrowed. "I have seen the foul-minded poet Severus practising at archery with just such an arrow. I believe . . . but how clever, Sollius! Is this the arrow which killed my dear Ligurianus? I can see by your face that it is. You are pleasing me. If necessary I will myself bear witness that I have seen Severus using such an arrow."

He returned it, patted Sollius approvingly on the back and dismissed him. Sollius returned thoughtfully to his master's house.

The obvious hostility of Commodus to Severus had gone a great way towards eliminating the latter from suspicion. Sollius did not for a moment believe that Commodus had really seen Severus use any such arrow at any time. But if the real murderer was not quickly discovered, the Emperor's own testimony and false witness would condemn him beyond reprieve. With a sigh the Slave Detective decided to interview Licinia again. He felt intuitively that the solution to the mystery lay somewhere in the victim's family circumstances.

First, however, he begged to see his master.

"Well, Sollius?" asked Sabinus the Senator.

"What can you tell me, lord, of the Battle of Carrhæ?"

"It was one of the worst disasters ever suffered by Roman arms," was the answer. "Crassus the Triumvir and his whole army were massacred. It happened in the last days of the Republic, but in the reign of the Em-

peror Augustus it was avenged and the Parthians were compelled to restore to Rome the standards that had been lost. Rome, Sollius, always avenges her defeats."

"Then it is likely, lord, that the imperial armouries might contain Parthian weapons of all sorts as trophies of that revenge?"

"I have actually seen such," replied Sabinus.

"Thank you, lord."

As Sollius slowly limped to Licinia's house his mind was busy with his suspicions. Who could get at such a trophy of arms better than the Emperor himself? Was the whole thing a plot to destroy Severus obliquely? But the actual victim had been Ligurianus, the Emperor's friend! Or . . . had the Emperor and Ligurianus secretly quarrelled? A veritable gulf of possibilities yawned before the Slave Detective.

The house was not very far from his master's own, and arriving there, Sollius found that the elderly Crassus, hearing of the murder, had hurried to visit his daughter. He was a tall, burly man, clean shaven in the old Roman fashion, slow and dignified of speech, and with a cold, haughty manner, Gratianus and a few soldiers of the Urban Cohort were still in the gardens and questioning the slaves in the house. On his inquiry, Gratianus admitted ruefully that they had learnt nothing new from their further investigations.

"Had you far to come, lord?" Sollius politely asked Crassus.

"I have a villa half-way on the road to Tivoli," replied the old man

stiffly. "I cannot allow you to question my daughter again. She is—quite naturally—ill."

"I must insist," answered Sollius.

"A slave insists!" cried Crassus angrily, and lifted his hand to strike him.

"This slave, lord, has authority to question," put in Gratianus..

"Whose authority?" snapped Crassus.

"The City Prefect's," answered Gratianus.

"And the Emperor's," quietly added Sollius.

"Ha! So this is the famous Slave Detective, is it?" said Crassus, and stared at him with patrician disdain. "Do you think you will discover the murderer of my son-in-law? A slave? I doubt it, fellow."

"I have solved more than one murder, lord," answered Sollius, meeting the other's eyes unflinchingly, "and I hope to solve this, too."

"Were it not the murder of one of my own family, slave, I would lay you a firm bet to the contrary, but it wouldn't be seemly," growled the old man, and turned away, saying over his shoulder: "If you have the authority, you may see my daughter, but only in my presence."

"I desire your presence, lord," said Sollius.

Licinia was paler even than before; she looked afraid, too. For her lover, Severus? Or for herself? Certainly she was afraid.

"I am not satisfied," began Sollius, "that you did not recognize a certain ring when I showed it to you."

"What ring is that?" snapped out

her father, turning swiftly.

"A ring that was found in the pavilion, lord, where your son-in-law was killed," Sollius answered blandly. "Does it belong to the lord Severus, lady?"

"No, no, no!" she cried desperately. "I swear it does not!"

"How do you know?" asked Sollius instantly.

"I . . . I have never seen him wearing such a ring," she stammered.

"Isn't it suspicious that you are so sure it is not his ring?" persisted Sollius.

"Not at all," she replied with some spirit. "Severus and I have known one another since childhood."

"That is the truth, slave," interjected her father.

"It may well be," commented Sollius. "It is a cameo ring," he went on, and left his remark in the air.

"A man might wear it on his little finger," flashed out Crassus contemptuously.

"You persist, lady," went on the Slave Detective, ignoring the old patrician, "that it is not your ring?"

"Did Mallia recognize it?" she asked with trembling lips.

"She said she did not," replied Sollius quietly, and waited for the second mistake; one had already been made. He felt that he was on the edge of knowing everything.

The silence grew. He kept his gaze fixed upon Licinia, and he knew that his eyes, when he chose, were uncomfortable to meet. Crassus, behind him, was standing perfectly still.

"Mallia has probably never seen it," she stammered. "I lied to you. It

—it was my mother's ring."

"There is no reason," said Crassus, "why a ring which I gave my daughter should not be found in her own pavilion!"

"Truly, none, lord," answered Sollius placidly. "But I am not satisfied. Her maid did not recognize it, so the lady Licinia is not accustomed to wearing it. Whom are you shielding, lady? Did you—as a pledge of love, perhaps—give the ring to your lover, the lord Severus?"

"No, no; oh, never!" she cried in a distraught tone.

"You have questioned my daughter enough, slave!" angrily burst out Crassus.

"Oh, it is no good, Father," Licinia moaned, and sank to her knees before him. "I confess! I confess!"

"Silence, Licinia!" cried Crassus. "It is not in your sweet soul to do such a deed."

Sollius breathed deeply. The second mistake had been made, one by each of them.

"That is true, lord," he said. "Your daughter did not murder her husband. The man who did so came and went on horseback."

"If that is so," replied Crassus instantly, "it points to Severus."

"Oh no, Father!" protested Licinia in an agony of tears.

"Listen, lord," said the Slave Detective. "During this interrogation two mistakes have been made. It was one mistake for your daughter to confess to a crime she has not committed. It was too obvious that she was protecting someone. Since I know that the lord Severus is not guilty, I ask

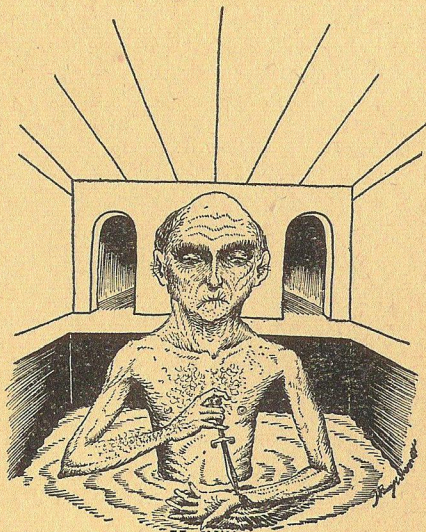
myself whom she would be at such pains to protect. It was another mistake, lord, for you yourself to say that a man might wear on his little finger a ring *which I had not shown you*. So how did you know? How did you know it was a woman's ring? You yourself wore the ring—in memory, no doubt, of a loved wife, since, on your daughter's statement, it was her mother's ring. Lord, your daughter is too filial, but the law cannot permit the sacrifice."

"Father, oh, Father . . ." groaned Licinia in despair.

Marcus Licinius Crassus gave a great bellow.

"Your weakling ninny of a husband," he burst out, his face suffused

with passion, "deserved all I gave him! I could not see the blood of the great Crassus my ancestor so continually disgraced by the follies of an effeminate villain. He asked for money—the impudence!—to help pay his debts, and I made the appointment. I came prepared with the right weapon—a relic of the Parthian surrender given to the son of Crassus by the Emperor Augustus, and in true Parthian fashion I shot him as I rode away, aiming behind me. How I had to practise that way of shooting an arrow! The bow you will find in my villa. Well, it is over. You, slave, tell the Emperor the truth. I myself am going home, and shall open my veins in a bath."



THE SEVENTEENTH CHIMNEY

ROSWELL B. ROHDE

IT WAS WITH A distinct sense of foreboding that Leland Asher approached the old manor. He was not one much subject to moods induced by his environment, but the pall that held the place seemed to pervade even the atmosphere.

For nearly four centuries Sedgeley House had stood on this forlorn bit of ground overlooking the tors and mires of Dartmoor. The slate roof showed dull grey from the washings of unnumbered rains, and the seventeen chimneys had crumbled so that they were no longer straight, but seemed to sag a little as though they, too, like the house, were incredibly weary.

"It's the place, all right," he thought, as he drew his collar more closely about his neck and shook the rain from where it had collected on his hat brim. "It is Sedgeley, and it is little changed. Decomposition is, after all, a slow process."

Of course he had little by which to judge that decay. Only the picture, and he compared the two now, opening his coat and using it to shield the photograph which was dated in one corner in fine script "June 1900." The similarity was unmistakable, though the trees were larger now and some were gone, but the grounds were unkempt where the picture showed them to be well-tended.

Born in America, Asher had come

a long way to this place, and now he was vaguely disappointed. Not that he had expected much or even known what to expect. But he had thought that the manor might at least be occupied. Instead he found it desolate and forlorn—deserted utterly, with the ivy brown on its sides and the gardens a tangled mass of weed and wild growth.

This, now, was Sedgeley and, according to Mrs. Crowden at the Rose and Crown, the ancestral estate of the Dukes of Devon!

Twelve Dukes had lived in it, and the great hall had sounded with their laughter and the clanking armour of their retainers. Even the seventh Duke, who had been tortured to death within its three-foot-thick stone walls by the Roundheads, had filled it with weird cries—and there were those who said on stormy winter nights his wild, incoherent shrieks could still be heard, and natives of the region gave Sedgeley a wide berth if they need be abroad after dusk.

Seeing it now, its splendour gone, a great dark, dank mass of lichened stone on sour, unfriendly soil, Asher could well understand their unwillingness to approach. Some of the Dukes, they told him at the inn, had not been saints exactly, and it seemed as though their evil lingered yet, floating like wisps of fog in corners and small slit-windows that were like sightless eyes.

Here was the house in the picture,

and Asher knew now it was Sedgeley; but the mystery remained. Why had the picture been in his father's possession? Why had it been framed and hung in his parents' bedroom when he was very young, and then removed and put away when he was eight years old? He remembered once his father looking at it, and his mother exchanging glances with him and saying, "No regrets?" And his father smiling and shaking his head, "None!" Any inferences that he could draw from his memory were necessarily just that, and perhaps their confirmation or denial was forever lost down the long corridor of time.

The rain came down in earnest now, and Asher shivered. He told himself it was because of cold and damp; but there was something else, too. It seemed to emanate from the old manor-house, and it was as intangible as it was positive. It didn't exist; yet there it was, like a voice from the distant past—from the grave, even, for the house seemed dead and not merely sleeping.

It had seemed like a good idea to bring the picture with him to England, and when his business in London concluded, he went down to Devon, of which he had heard his parents speak. He had been almost eager to locate the house and solve the enigma of the picture. At Torquay his guarded inquiries had at first met with little success. A half-century is a long time, even in a country that prides itself on the old, but eventually a barrister had put him on to Sedgeley. Now his en-

thusiasm had turned into rather dismal thought, and he considered leaving the Rose and Crown for Southampton and his boat. Well, he'd see after tonight. He was certain Mrs. Crowden knew more than she'd yet spoken.

He stood for a few minutes longer while the wet wind tore at him, but he could not bring himself to go closer to the house. Then he turned and faced towards the inn that lay over the undulating mud and rock in Acton-on-Mere. There at least was warmth, a passable supper and good ale.

Weltha Crowden was more friendly than she had been at first. As she said, it was so seldom a guest came her way these days she didn't quite know how to act. She even went so far as to "make bold" that he seemed a good deal familiar to her—he reminded her of someone, but for the life of her she'd not know who!

Leland Asher for his part smiled and said that was always the way, and while it was a small world after all, he was sure she'd never seen him before as this was his first time over.

He had not shown her the photograph, partly because he thought it would serve no purpose, and partly because he was curiously reticent about what had obviously been his father's secret and therefore not wholly his to divulge. He was certain Sedgeley was the house in the picture, and that was that. Now to learn what connection, if any, his parents might have had with it. . . .

"I've seen Sedgeley," he began

cautiously, not knowing exactly how one went about "drawing" another out, not having much experience in that line.

"Did you now?" Mrs. Crowden said as she polished the dark-stained bar at which he was sitting following a supper which he had intelligently told her was excellent, though it was only fair. "And what did you think of it?"

"It's very old, to judge from the look of it," he said, slowly. "Quite run-down."

"Aye—that it is! It's not much like 'twas when I was a maid there fifty-odd years ago."

Asher brightened; here was a bit of luck, surely. It was more than fifty years since his father had gone to America, and he almost blurted the whole story of the picture and the mystery attending it. But Mrs. Crowden had stopped polishing, and leaned her bulk on the bar, looking past him as though she saw something that was not in the room, and her tone became confidential.

"A fine place 'twas then, sir!"

She leaned more heavily still and rested her tousled grey head in her hands. She reminded him a little of an English sheep-dog, and the thought was not intended to be unkind. Asher looked at her with what he hoped was the right amount of interest, and waited expectantly.

"So you were a maid there then!" he prompted.

"Aye! And I near died of fright there once, too!" She sighed and looked at him in a way he decided must be archly. "But then, sir. You

wouldn't be interested in that, I don't guess—you bein' an architect lookin' up old buildin's only."

It was the story he'd given, not knowing just why he'd done it, and he was a poor liar. He wondered now if she were baiting him; looked at her sharply, and then decided she only wanted urging to continue.

"I'd like to hear of it—if you'd care to tell me," he said humbly. God—she mustn't stop now!

"The twelfth Duke was master of Sedgeley then—his father havin' just passed to his reward, as you might say. And a fine young Duke he made, sir, handsome and pleasant, too! As nice a chap as you'd be wantin' to know was Loring Sedgeley, even if he was the twelfth Duke of Devon. Dignified, you understand, but nothin' uppity."

"You liked the Duke," Asher said encouragingly.

"Aye!" She seemed lost in thought for a moment, then continued:

"His Highness—the Duke—came into Sedgeley the summer of nineteen hundred, and auspicious it seemed then, in a manner of speaking. You know what I mean—a new century, and a new Duke. . . ."

Asher smiled and nodded, but she seemed to have forgotten his existence, and went on, her brow knit with the effort of remembering.

"But it wasn't to be that way—no, sir! The Duke was marked for ill from the start, he was!

"No sooner was he situated than the crops on his estate began to die. Oh, there was nothing supernatural about it—it was the drouth—but

imagine a drouth in Devonshire! It only lasted a few weeks, but the black mire cracked under the sun, and before the rains came half the crops was dead. It rained for a week steady then, and that finished them.

"Fine crops they would have been, sir. You don't see the good land from Sedgeley—it's back farther, and there were plenty of tenants in those days, too.

"Well, the tenants was bad off, and the Duke helped them out a good bit, and I suspect he was hard put to do it. Kept all the servants on at the house, and paid us, too, though there's no doubt some would have stuck anyway.

"Seems like that was only the beginning of his bad luck, though, for 'twasn't long after that Bart Grimsby showed up. . . ."

"Bart Grimsby?"

"Aye—the Duke's cousin from London. Bringing with him his child bride—as fair a creature as you ever set eyes on, and her not knowin' the blackguard she'd wed with! And him a cripple to boot!"

Asher decided that underneath the Widow Crowden was an old romantic, and found himself wondering, irrelevantly, if her husband had ever satisfied any of her sentimental notions. Probably not, and so she was imbuing Sedgeley and its occupants with colour that had never existed.

"So Grimsby was a scoundrel, was he?"

"Aye. A rogue, sir! Drinking and carousing. Why—you'd not believe it to look at me now, I 'low, but I wasn't bad to see in those days my-

self—and more than once I was hard put to fight him off! He was a proper lecher, he was!"

Asher suppressed a smile.

"How old were you then? If you don't mind telling, that is?"

"Not at all. Not at all! Just turned fourteen that spring, sir, and with the bloom of a child still on my cheek!"

Asher clucked sympathetically, his grey eyes concealing all but concern, and adjusted his spare frame more comfortably on his stool. He wanted more ale, but dared not call for it—it might disturb Mrs. Crowden's story. But she had sensed his thirst and refilled his mug, and drew one for herself which she sipped noisily.

"You're a good-looking woman yet," he ventured.

"I'm not! But I wasn't bad then, and no matter. Grimsby made passes at all the women in the house, and the Duke, he spoke to him more than once."

"Why didn't he send his cousin away?"

"Aye—there's a question for you! Why didn't he, indeed?" She hunched forward closer, though there was no one in the inn, and not likely to be on account of the weather. "I think the Duke had a fancy for Cynthia Grimsby, that's why! He was single and a deal nearer her age, bein' only twenty-five himself. Not that there was anything wrong—oh no, sir! But he was sorry for her, and Grimsby hadn't a farthing of his own, and wouldn't work, they said.

"So he kept them as much to give the poor bride a home as anything. And she was grateful—I could see

that, in spite of her misery—the dear child—hardly more than my age, though she never said. She thought plenty of the Duke, she did. But her husband—he was a terror to her! Drinking like a fish, and beating her when he was in one of his rages. And that was often, I'll tell you!"

"Didn't the Duke try to stop him—I mean, he couldn't very well stand idle and see her hurt, could he?"

"There was a scuffle once, though she begged him not to, for fear her husband would take her away! She told me she'd die if he did. But more than once words was said. It was all heading up, so to speak, and then it happened!"

"What . . . happened?"

"Why—the murder, you know!"

"I didn't know. I'm a stranger, remember. I've heard nothing. . . ."

"They said it was a duel when I described it—but it was murder, if you ask me! The Duke—he'd scarcely fenced before, I'd swear to that. Late at night, it was—with all the servants asleep except me. I'd a toothache and had to come by the great hall just then, hearing Mrs. Grimsby's scream, and all. . . ."

"You say she screamed?"

"A little cry it was. She'd stifled it—lady that she was; but I was passin' in the hall and heard it, and I came to the door just as . . . just as——"

"Just as what, Mrs. Crowden?"

"Just as the sword went deep in the front of the Duke's wine coat! He was bent back over a table, he was, with his head way back, and that sword went clean through him,

sir, for it gouged the veneer, it did! You'll see the scratch if you look, sir—not a pretty thing, I can tell you!"

"What happened then?"

"I fainted! Oh, I know it was a terrible time to faint, but I was young, and it was horrible—simply horrible—what with that sword sliding through that coat and all . . . so easy."

Mrs. Crowden shuddered, and Asher found a queer chill creeping the length of his spine. He remembered Sedgeley, cold and forlorn, standing ominous and grim in the rain and fog, and something of the horror of it held him.

"Not a pretty tale, is it?" she said at last. "But true. True for all of that!"

Asher gulped his ale, and its cold did him no good.

"What happened then? Was Grimsby hanged?"

"That's the pity of it! He wasn't! Got clean away, he did, and they never found him.

"When I came to, I was in Mrs. Grimsby's room and she was bendin' over me, pale and sick lookin', but bearin' up nobly, sir. Nobly!

"I wanted to get up—knowin' how she felt about the Duke, and knowin' she'd be for calling the constable from Acton right away. But she made me lie still and gave me some warm wine—and would you believe it—I went off to sleep and never woke 'til morning! A fine help I was!"

"By then Grimsby had cleared out?"

"He had! And forced his wife to

go with him, too. A woman in the village who had reason of being up with a sick child saw 'em pass with a light wagon, and a bulk in the back that must have been the . . . the poor Duke's body! She said he opened the gate down the lane to the cliff, limpin' like he always did. And it's a certainty it was from the cliff he threw the Duke—his remains, I mean, for sure the sword had killed him!"

"And no trace was ever turned up of this Grimsby, eh?"

"None—but it's not surprisin', you might know. There are ways—dark ways—open to men of his ilk!"

Asher nodded. Then he inquired: "The Duke's body—was it recovered?"

"No—but 'tis not strange, for there's a mean undertow 'neath that cliff. And 'twas three days before they found the horses grazing on the moor, and the wagon smashed over on some rocks."

Asher finished his mug, and stared into the empty bottom, pondering what he had just heard.

"Was the Yard called in on the case?"

"Aye. They sent a man, for there was a great todo, him bein' a Duke what was murdered, and he questioned the servants and me. Then he went away, and the servants left—it seemed that what little the Duke had had left had disappeared at the same time as Grimsby, though of course that's just hearsay. There bein' no heir—I expect Grimsby might have taken the title except that there was a murder charge waitin' for him with it—Sedgeley was closed up."

"Just left to decay, eh? I suppose it belongs to the Crown, then?"

"So I've heard. Mr. Bowling, our old solicitor, he was, sold out the furniture and sent the money somewhere—all except the big table I was tellin' you about. He requested that of Queen's Court for his services, and then died sudden-like without ever taking it. And no one hereabouts would touch it!"

"I suppose the property could never have been sold—it being so large and all."

"'Twas never, at any rate. There's talk now of Sedgeley bein' used for a rest-home of some sort. 'Tis quite certain."

Leland Asher thanked Mrs. Crowden and went above stairs to his room. He took the photograph of Sedgeley out of his bag, and sat by the hearth a long time, looking at it and reviewing the widow's story. Sedgeley—grim and foreboding even in the picture, though in better repair when it was taken. Why had it been with his father's private papers? And why had it been taken down from the wall when he was old enough to ask about it? He started as a sudden thought occurred to him. The answer was rather obvious! *His father had limped*, the result, he had been told, of a horse falling the year he, Leland, was born.

But no—it could not be! His father Bart Grimsby? A murderer? Never! He had recollections of the ideal life his parents had led—of their love and devotion that had been at times rather touching and always admirable. Now that they were both

gone, he must not allow this thing to touch even their memory! What he had almost concluded was unworthy of their only son—it was low and treacherous! Yet he knew the suspicions would remain with him, insidious and evil, until he could manage somehow to absolve his conscience from them. . . .

Sedgeley — stone-walled, covered with moss and lichen and untrained ivy. Did it have the power to reach forth with evil tentacles after so many years? Sedgeley—its seventeen chimneys crumbling from frost and exposure. He stared at the picture steadily.

Suddenly he jerked himself upright in the chair, then bent to hold the photograph closer to the light. Seventeen chimneys! He'd counted them as he stood before the house. He was sure of the number—positive! *But the picture showed only sixteen!*

Perhaps one of them was hidden behind another. But no—they had been all evident from where he'd stood, and he had been in exactly the spot from which the picture must have been taken, had indeed planned to be in that place so that he could make accurate comparison! He counted them again, carefully. There were sixteen!

He rose and paced the floor, clutching the picture nervously. Mystery on mystery! Why, now, had a chimney been added since the picture was taken?

With difficulty he calmed himself and went down to where Mrs. Crowden still lingered, lost in thought, in the tap-room. He tried to suppress

his emotions and speak casually.

"By the way, Mrs. Crowden. Has any building been done at Sedgeley since the Duke's . . . er . . . death?"

She looked at him curiously.

"I told you, sir. It's been going to ruin ever since. What in the world would anyone be building there?"

"Oh—probably nothing. I just thought one of the . . . er . . . chimneys looked to be newer than the rest of the house. . . ."

It did not sound quite true as he said it. His ears seemed to be ringing, and he felt as though his face were pale and his head was unaccountably light.

Understanding came visibly to Mrs. Crowden's face.

"Oh, so you noticed. I'd no idea you got that close today—you mentioned seeing it from the edge of the copse. As a matter of fact, the Duke ordered another chimney built and a fireplace in the great hall. It was always cold there, and he couldn't afford central heating. It wasn't a pleasant place in winter, really. Let's see—yes, I believe it was just done when he was killed, or nearly so. I don't think there was ever a fire laid in it, and a pity 'twas, too."

"I see. Well—it's of no importance. Good night, Mrs. Crowden."

He had the uncomfortable feeling of eyes on his back as he mounted the stair. He was a wretched liar, but he was far too agitated now to think much about it. In his room he resumed his pacing, decided Mrs. Crowden would think it odd, sat down, and then rose again to continue an erratic pattern on the thread-



bare carpet that had already served a generation of travellers.

After a time he heard Mrs. Crowden come up and go to her room down the landing. He was the only guest, and he wondered how the widow made-do on her little income. He supposed she received a pension of some sort, having mentioned that her late husband had been a sailor.

He waited what seemed an endless length of time, then pulled on his raincoat and took his torch from his bag. Eventually he got downstairs without having visibly aroused his landlady, and slipped out, leaving the door unlatched against his return. Outside he made the best time possible through the woods and over the hills to Sedgely, though it was slippery and a cold fog had replaced the steady rain of earlier, so that he nearly lost his way.

He stood in the great hall of Sedgely and shivered. The fog, he decided, was as conducive to pneumonia as the infernal English rain. He swung the torch in an arc, examining the warped and rotted panelling and floor, and a light wind rustled an accumulation of leaves in a corner. Somehow windows always got broken in unused buildings, no matter in how great awe a place might be held. Fifty years might be a long time, but he had no difficulty discerning which was the newer fireplace in the room. There was even a bit of mortar, dropped there a half-century before, crumbling on the hearth. He scuffed some of the leaves into the old fireplace and lit them, piling on more.

Unless he missed his guess, the other would not draw!

He passed by the great table that stood midway in the room, and though the veneer was dull and cracking, he had no difficulty seeing the slash left in it by the sword that summer so long ago.

In the little tool-shed behind the inn, Asher had found a crowbar and spade, and now he knelt in the eerie light, laying his torch so that it shone into the unused fireplace. Then he prodded up into the chimney with the crowbar. The iron sounded on stonel. There was no opening through which smoke could pass!

He set to work, using the crowbar as both hammer and pry. The sound of falling mortar and bits of stone seemed weirdly amplified in the echoing hall. It was not long before larger pieces of field stone dropped. Apparently the wall-up had been a hasty job, undoubtedly performed by one not used to such work, for all at once the entire mass gave way and dropped with a resounding crash into the fireplace, and with it came something else!

It had happened so suddenly that Asher scrambled back a pace or two on his hands and knees, for he had been working almost in the fireplace itself. The leaves had nearly burned themselves out at the far end of the room, and he was left with the light from his torch alone. He picked it up and directed it at what had fallen with the stones, and his hand shook visibly so that the light wavered; but the coat was unmistakable. Though rain down the chimney had turned it

nearly grey, it had once been wine-coloured! And it was still pinned to the ribcage by a length of rusty sword! Mrs. Crowden, it appeared, had spoken the truth! The skull had fallen to one side, the empty sockets staring at him accusingly it seemed.

"The twelfth Duke of Devon!" Asher thought. "Ashes to ashes; dust to dust!"

Then his eye caught the leg bones; they had fallen nearly side by side, and one of the lower ones was a good two inches shorter than the other! But one must be an arm bone—he was mistaken, surely! He poked aside the dust that had fallen, and the rotted leaves that the wind had dropped into the chimney. No—the arm bones were there, accounted for. Then these *were* the lower leg bones! And this was not the skeleton of the Duke, after all! What had Mrs. Crowden said? *Bart Grimsby limped!* Then this was his skeleton—and the Duke had escaped the hangman's knot, and found freedom—where?

Leland Asher settled back, snapping off his torch which showed signs of weakening, and in the darkness the picture of the great hall as it had been in 1900 slowly formed. It was really quite clear what had happened; it only remained to sketch in the details. Perhaps Grimsby, jealous of the Duke, coveting Sedgeley and his living, had put on the wine coat, and was strutting before his wife. The Duke had come in, there had been words—bitter, hate-filled words on the part of Grimsby—then the

swords above the fireplace or wherever they had hung were torn down, and the two men were at it—Grimsby clever, the Duke doing his best, realizing finally that his life depended on his small knowledge of fencing and his courage.

Then, perhaps the Duke was slightly wounded, or particularly hard-pressed, and Cynthia Grimsby had given herself away, had shown without meaning to that her affection had transferred from her husband to the Duke. Then it had become a fight to the death, with the Duke making a lucky thrust, just as Weltha Crowden came to the door!

Asher could almost feel the panic as Grimsby died—the certain knowledge that the law was no respecter of persons, that duelling was as surely murder as a shot would have been, not knowing what sort of testimony Weltha or the other servants might give! Then—the sudden decision to flee a place that must, on that moment, have become hated above all else in the world!

They would have carried Weltha Crowden to her room, drugged her wine, packed what they could, and what was later mistaken for the "poor Duke's body." Then the Duke, thinking to delay pursuit by concealing the body, stuffing it up the chimney, where it had stuck while he used the materials left that day by the workmen to wall it up.

The light in the cottage in Acton must have given him quite a fright, but he had carried it off well, limping like Grimsby, adding confusion to the tale that must inevitably follow.

And somewhere along the way, perhaps in a few short moments, an understanding had been reached between Cynthia Grimsby and the Duke, an acknowledgment of what they had both been too proud to say before, the realization of a love that was all the more precious and tender because it might be of so short duration. Asher's sigh, just then, contained a little bit of satisfaction.

The house had been closed immediately—no further work was done on the nearly completed fireplace, and the grisly secret had remained so for over half a century!

One other thing, perhaps the most important thing in his whole life, still troubled Asher. It was the memory of his parents looking at the picture of Sedgeley; his mother saying "No regrets" as though it were more statement than question, and his father's smile as he nodded "None!"

Had his father been the Duke? He'd never know for certain, but undeniably—he hoped so!

It didn't take long to clean up the stones and fling them far afield, nor to bury the remains of Bart Grimsby, sword, wine coat and all. It was a

grave that would never settle and disclose its secret.

And in the morning he took his leave of Mrs. Crowden, thanking her for her hospitality and assuring her that he could not face another trip to Sedgeley, since the rain persisted drearily.

"Faith, and I don't blame you, sir!" she said, and her smile was friendly though she plainly disliked losing her guest.

"But I hope when you're in these parts again you'll do me the honour of stopping here."

Asher said he would, though he had little intention of returning. He picked up his bag and started for the door. He was riding to Torquay with the man who brought the post to Acton-on-Mere. He felt Mrs. Crowden's eyes on him, and turned and said farewell.

"You know," she said, shaking her head, "'tis the strangest feelin' persists! Like I'd knowed you before, sir! For the life of me, I can't get over it . . .!"

Sedgeley would keep its dark secret for always now, but Asher's smile was a bit grim as he went out. After all—thirteen might be an unlucky number!



MONSIEUR VAUDIN'S GUEST

FRANCIS MERRILEES

Illustrated by Anthony Baynes

When an antique collector carries his passion to the extent of embodying in the structure of his house diverse and often grim relics of the past, startling consequences may ensue.

THIS TEMPLE OF MITHRAS," sighed M. Vaudin. "It is not for sale, no? The Vaudin Collection must therefore remain incomplete." He nodded to himself with an air of finality, putting down his coffee-cup and taking out a cigarette-case.

"You didn't think of buying it?" I asked, half in jest, for the old man's appearance and manner were very much the comic-opera, non-existent Frenchman.

"In the present age," he answered, "all valuable things have their price." He picked up the cheap metal tray. "Even this trifle, my friend, may in time achieve a certain value." He spoke with an earnestness that reminded me of his European reputation. "This café," he continued, "will in time vanish, as will modern London, but in a thousand, perhaps two thousand, years relics of it may be discovered and treasured, just as to-day we treasure Roman relics, whether of Mithras or a broken urn. If one can be bought, why not the other?

"But as for your temple," he resumed with a smile that was part humour, part pride, "when news of it reached Paris, the savants shook their heads. 'The English will lose their Mithras,' said they. 'Behold, our M. Vaudin goes to acquire it.'"

He rose, brushing the crumbs from his old-fashioned frock-coat and smoothing his short, neat beard. "Voilà, M. Richardson, it is thus they regard me in the Rue Gazelles behind the Opéra."

I had, of course, heard of the Vaudin Collection, as every lover of antiques is sure in time to hear, but I had also heard how difficult it was to meet their owner. I was therefore very reluctant to lose this chance of further acquaintance.

"I hope you are staying some time in England," I ventured. "I myself have a small collection, and although it is scarcely worth your notice, I have a comfortable house, and would consider it an honour if you would visit me before returning to Paris."

He shook his head. "There is work to be done," he said, "and I leave to-night." He looked at me closely before adding, "Since you are so kind

as to offer me hospitality in England, perhaps you will permit me to suggest you accompany me to France as my guest?"

The invitation was as welcome as it was flattering and unexpected. Many eminent antiquarians had failed in their attempts to see the Vaudin Collection. Yet here was I, a young man of no reputation, invited on one hour's acquaintance, and even that due to chance. Then, perhaps unworthily, I thought of his words—"Everything of value has its price."

Was this invitation pure courtesy? Or could there be another motive? True, I had inherited my father's not inconsiderable property, including the Malplaquet Memoirs and a Mal-lory First Edition; but these were of small account beside the Vaudin masterpieces. Moreover, he preferred furniture and glass to documents. No, it was improbable he coveted anything I had. More likely he'd asked me on the spur of the moment—the whim of an artist, and as quickly forgotten. I reflected that his motive didn't matter; what did was this unusual opportunity, and I resolved to make the most of it.

I thanked him therefore, and was the more delighted when he suggested I travel with him that very night. His answer seemed a little odd then. It doesn't now. He said, "You are kind, M. Richardson, and I have no doubt you possess the *courage* of your race."

We reached Paris as the sun was breaking through the early mist of what promised to be a hot day. Noth-

ing, to my way of thinking, is so exhilarating as this; it even lent freshness to the Rue Gazelles.

This latter is a drab thoroughfare. It is the French edition of Victorian London, with the same ornamental stonework, Venetian blinds, cupids writhing across the ceilings, and gentility decaying in plush and antimacassar.

M. Vaudin hurried me up the balustraded steps of Number 22, and shut the door expressively.

"*C'est triste*," he said. "To me, it is haunted by a past that can never return. It is like a Grande Dame who pawns her diamonds to exist. Soon there are no more diamonds. Thus are slums manufactured."

He showed me into a front room. "In here, at least, we may for a time forget the phantoms outside."

It was an amazing room. Like a perfectly dressed man, its harmony at first concealed its worth. Then I saw that everything in the room—pictures, furniture, glass, carpet, even the veriest trifles—were of immense value. The wonder was he had fitted so vast a compass of time and space into such a perfect pattern. I mean, it was not a "period" room; it contained all periods, all countries. Yet it was harmonious beyond conception. Not the least remarkable thing in the room was M. Vaudin himself. Gone was the music-hall figure I had known in London. Here, amongst his own surroundings, he was dignified and distinguished—a master among numberless masters.

"You will forgive me if I hurry you," he said, after showing me

over the house. "Later perhaps we will have leisure for a more careful inspection. Allow me to offer you a glass of wine. It is of an age one appreciates."

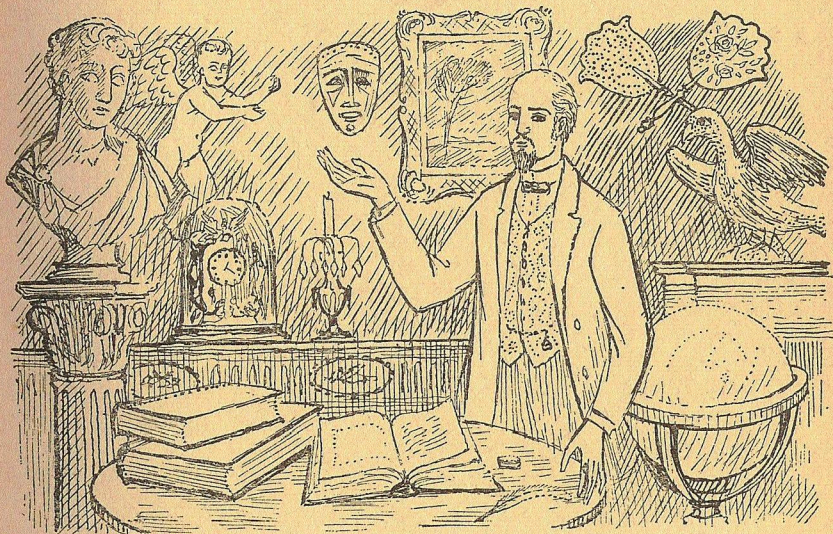
I had noticed his manner become increasingly nervous during our tour of the house, but had hardly expected so abrupt an end as this to my visit. Was he expecting a caller? Or had

a searching, almost a pleading, look in his eyes. "It was because of him I sought you in London."

"Then our meeting wasn't chance?"

"Only the place was accidental. Sooner or later I would have found you."

"How did you recognize me?" I asked, for many people had visited the Mithras relics that day.



the spontaneous urge which prompted his invitation suddenly evaporated? You could never tell with artistic temperaments. Glancing at him, I got the impression of a man looking forward with eagerness, yet uneasiness, to an appointment. I was about to ask him if he'd prefer me to leave, when he pulled up a chair and sat facing me.

"I knew your father," he said with

"You are very like your father," he answered. "Because of that and because I have heard well of you, I decided you are the man for my purpose. I apologize for not declaring myself sooner. Should you prefer to leave, I will understand."

"What is your purpose?" I asked. There was that in M. Vaudin's tone which intrigued me and held promise of adventure.

"Have I your word of honour not to tell anyone?"

"You have."

"Nor," he insisted, "to disclose by one single hint the direction in which we will travel presently?"

"I will tell nothing without your leave, perhaps not even with it."

"Excellent! I had hoped it might be so. And yet, M. Richardson, I must warn you our undertaking is not without hazard."

I asked him to explain, but he shook his head. "I dare not at this stage," he said; and I was now quite sure there was apprehension in his eyes. "We must trust one another. I knew your father very well, and I know I can trust his son, if that son trusts me." He rose and refilled our glasses. "This much I can say," he continued after a pause, "being yourself an antiquary, you understand that art attains its summit only when its environment is perfect. To keep these possessions of mine in the Rue Gazelles is disastrous, just as it is wrong to keep Egyptian mummies in so ordinary a place as the British Museum. I have therefore constructed a house elsewhere."

"You want me to help you move them?" Even as I asked it, the foolishness of the question struck me. If M. Vaudin feared theft, he could ask for police protection. He was, moreover, rich, and could provide additional cover in many ways.

He waved my question aside. "This is a delicate matter," he said, "and must be explained in my own way—in so far as I can explain it at all. It is indeed my purpose to move every-

thing to La Tric——" He broke off suddenly, and I saw again that nervous look, this time more pronounced.

"I will say no more just now if you do not mind," he went on hesitatingly; "but the house to which I will take you—my new house which is so very very ancient—it may be there is a *guest* who does not welcome others. I must discover the intention of my *guest*." His voice dropped almost to a whisper as he added, more to himself than me, "I dare not do so alone."

It would have been unchivalrous as well as unwise to press for more details. Baffled though I was by his last remark, I resolved to go through with the matter. The fact that he was afraid of something aroused my curiosity as well as pity, for I had taken a liking to the man. I must admit, too, that I had hopes of learning much from his unique collection.

"I must again warn you," he repeated, "that there is danger."

"I think I'm fairly used to that," I said, remembering certain events in the war.

"Not from bullets, my young friend," said M. Vaudin, putting his hand on my shoulder.

After lunch we got into a black saloon car which the old connoisseur drove with a skill and at a pace that showed him to be aware of modern conveniences even though his life was wrapped up in the past. He spoke little, concentrating on the road ahead, twisting through tortuous side alleys till I was wholly bewildered. Soon we were in the suburbs, then out on a wide highway, where our speed

reached quite sixty miles an hour. I tried to read the signposts, but we turned off the main road and plunged once more into obscure lanes and byways.

"It is well to take precautions," he observed at last. "I have no wish to be followed."

"What about your Paris house?" I asked. "I wonder you dare leave it so long."

"It is sufficiently watched," he answered. "Nor do burglars like such bulky and frail objects as it contains. They prefer what they can readily sell."

With that he began describing some of his adventures in pursuit of antiques, and proved so diverting a talker that time and distance slid by unnoticed.

It was past four o'clock, and we must have been more than a hundred miles from Paris when we topped a rise and saw before us a valley with a stream in its centre. Beyond was dense forest. It was the first change in scenery after miles of bleak, desolate moorland.

"That is the Bois Soutance," said Vaudin. "We have not far to go now."

The dim, cool wood was at first welcome after the glaring afternoon sun, but it was also gloomy. Perhaps my companion's nervousness was beginning to infect me, for I wondered what would happen if the car broke down. I did not fancy being stranded in this deserted place. I wondered how much farther we had to go. Vaudin had said not far, but I could

see no sign of habitation or even of a clearing in the wood.

Vaudin evidently guessed my thoughts, for he pointed ahead to a small bridge. "That is our turning," he said, slowing the car. "In a few minutes you shall see what no other Englishman has seen."

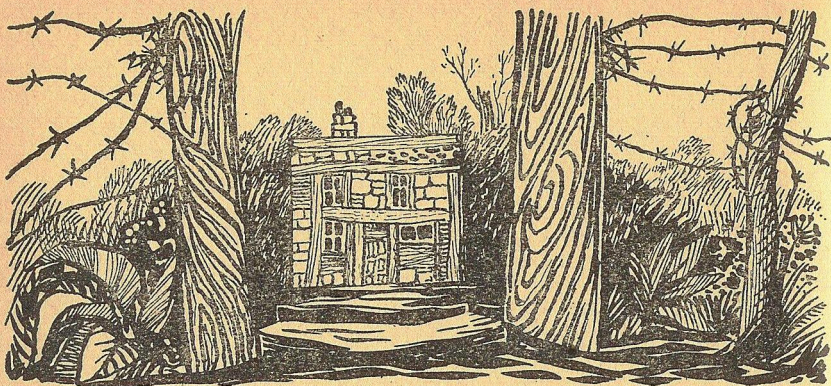
The side road was little more than a cart track which climbed steeply till it reached an open space bounded by a fence. It was a curious fence, some of its uprights being of stone, others great baulks of timber, all connected by thick barbed wire. The gate was a ponderous wooden affair, out of all proportion to the fence.

Beyond lay a short paved walk, at the end of which was the most singular building I ever saw. It was a two-storey house, roughly square, but embodying at least six different types of stone. Enormous beams dwarfed the windows and doors they framed, these again displaying an irregularity which suggested grievous shortage of material.

Vaudin put the car in a shed—the only normal structure in sight—and joined me by the gate. Pride, unmixed with any other emotion, now dominated his voice and manner.

"M. Richardson," he said, "you now behold the perfect museum, the only one of its kind in the world. These posts"—laying his hand on the unwieldy gate—"once carried the sails of Villeneuve's *Amiral Marie Papillon*, till Nelson blew the masts out of her at the Nile. I had them from a scrap merchant in Toulon.

"The wire of this fence," he went on, "played its part in halting the



Germans at Verdun, and the steps leading to my front door were secured at some personal inconvenience from Hadrian's Wall in your own country. Everything you see here has left its mark on history.

"Look closely at this window," he continued as we approached the house, "you can even now trace on it the bolts which gave way when the Tay Bridge fell. Here, too, in the dining-room, is a chair made from wreckage washed up in Norway after the same catastrophe. This fire-screen bears the imprint of an English battle-axe, for it formed part of the *Sieur d'Esperet's* shield at Cr cy. See how deep that arrow head has sunk into the oak!"

In the drawing-room he showed me a great hearth with traces of hieroglyphs on the stone. "It came," said he, "from the tomb of the Pharaohs, whilst the mantelpiece you see above it is made from a Babylonian aqueduct."

In the kitchen he showed me a table

constructed from remains of a Roman ballista; in the scullery was a draining-board that had formed part of a slave-galley seat; whilst, as a towel-roller, he had, with grim disregard for its associations, hung two massive wooden pins that had, in the Middle Ages, formed the mechanism operating that dreadful instrument of torture, the rack.

We spent so long and were so absorbed in the downstairs rooms that it was twilight before he showed me where I was to sleep. It was now well after nine o'clock, and the sun was down. Outside our little clearing, the forest looked black and formidable; whilst the strange house itself became mysterious to a degree I didn't altogether like.

In the failing light M. Vaudin's nervousness returned. "Let us light the lamps quickly," he said. "After that I will show you your room; but first we will drink a glass of cognac. It is not good to be here without light—that is, I am growing older and

more fanciful. To a young man such as you, there can be no real harm. Come, Monsieur, I will accompany you up to your room. Take this lamp and I will take the other; then we can keep together. These stairs are treacherous at times. . . ." He trailed off, obviously very ill at ease and talking rapidly as though afraid of what he might hear if he stopped.

"You will find all you need," he said as we went upstairs. "The furniture, it has not arrived as I want it, but there is sufficient for a night, just for one night, M. Richardson. Here, at the back, is your room, and mine is next it."

It was an oblong chamber, low-ceilinged like the rest, but without a fireplace. I had little time to examine it, however, for Vaudin called me back almost immediately.

"This is my room, next door," he repeated. "Should you—should you want me during the night—that is, if you lack anything you need, you can call me. I am a light sleeper, do not fail to call me. Come then, we will light all the lamps and leave them burning. There is no one else up here, you understand, no one at all. But I will place another lamp on the landing—so."

His hand trembled, and he kept darting glances behind and around him as he spoke.

Fear, as everyone knows, is infectious, but fear of the unknown is trebly so. I am not an imaginative man—at least, I wasn't at that time—but I had to take a firm grip on myself to avoid being seized by my host's extreme nervousness. It was

certainly an eerie place, the lamplight leaving black and mysterious shadows and throwing grotesque images on the walls, from heaven knew what grisly relics. The mind plays strange pranks in such places, and I found myself obsessed by that thing in the scullery; the very dullness of its present use threw into horrid relief the origin of those towel-rollers. I thought, too, of the Tay Bridge, and could almost see, sitting in the chair Vaudin had fashioned from its wreck, some mangled phantom, drowned and sightless. Unaccountable creaks and groans came from all over this uncanny building in the quiet summer night, and it seemed as though a procession of mournful figures, with gaping wounds and tortured faces, flitted from room to room amongst the relics of their former life.

Before going to bed that night, I had a good look at my room. The oil-lamp, helped by a bright moon, provided enough light, and Vaudin's excellent brandy had banished my attack of nerves. I was glad to think it had done the same for him also, for supper had been quite a cheerful, if not conventional, meal, and he had departed in a much more confident frame of mind. One thought only persisted—why had he been so insistent that we were alone in the house? And what had he meant, earlier today, by "*A guest who does not welcome others*"?

Perhaps, after all, it was only fancy. If this house affected me so strongly, much more would it affect the man who was responsible for it and had

accumulated its rather sinister components.

It didn't take me more than a minute or two to see there was nothing remarkable in my room; indeed, much less so than downstairs. The feather-bed, clearly of fairly recent origin, seemed comfortable. Apart from it, a chair and table, also modern, completed the furniture. It looked as though he had thrown these things in temporarily, perhaps expressly for my benefit. Doubtless in time they would be replaced by his Parisian antiques.

I crossed to the window, for the night was thundery and airless, and I like to sleep with plenty of fresh air.

The room, being at the back, looked out across a small courtyard to the woods. A slight ground mist was rising about the trees, lending them an air of unreality which matched the house. It was an uncommonly still night, the only sound being that of a distant stream.

I opened the window, leaning far out to catch what few puffs of breeze I could. From here I could see the wall of the house beneath me, its curious patchwork stone washed in moonlight. What an enormous frame this window had! Massive as were those on the ground floor, this stretched as far below the sill as above. I wondered from what outlandish source Vaudin had collected such beams. From some ship, doubtless. Yes, here at my elbow was a deep U-shaped groove such as might be cut to allow passage of the mast through the deck. I fingered it idly, a little surprised to find it so warm. It

was sticky, too, as though resin still oozed from it. In that case, it couldn't be of any age. With some disappointment and perhaps a little relief, too, I realized this room could well be a fake, sculptured and toned to suit the rest of the house. The unromantic feather-bed supported such a view.

No sooner was I in that bed than the window I had just opened banged shut again. This was annoying and rather disturbing. It had been stiff to open (further supporting my theory of new wood disguised as old), and I had thrust it very firmly into position.

I got out of bed and forced it up as far as it would go, testing with a downward jerk that must have dislodged it if the frame were at all slack. Satisfied that it was indeed firm, I went back to bed and was soon asleep.

It was not an easy or restful sleep. An unusual and rather frightening dream haunted me. In it I saw an immense crowd, ragged and angry. They filled the streets and squares of a city—which city it was impossible to tell—and were gesticulating towards some people on a balcony or platform. The mob swayed and shouted, brandishing weapons and surging forward; yet they were not without discipline of a sort, for, when one of the men raised his arm for silence, they stood quiet, listening to him. All at once there came a tremendous, concerted yell; followed by a metallic crash.

It was at this point that I woke up, uncomfortably aware that the crash was no dream. It was still echoing in

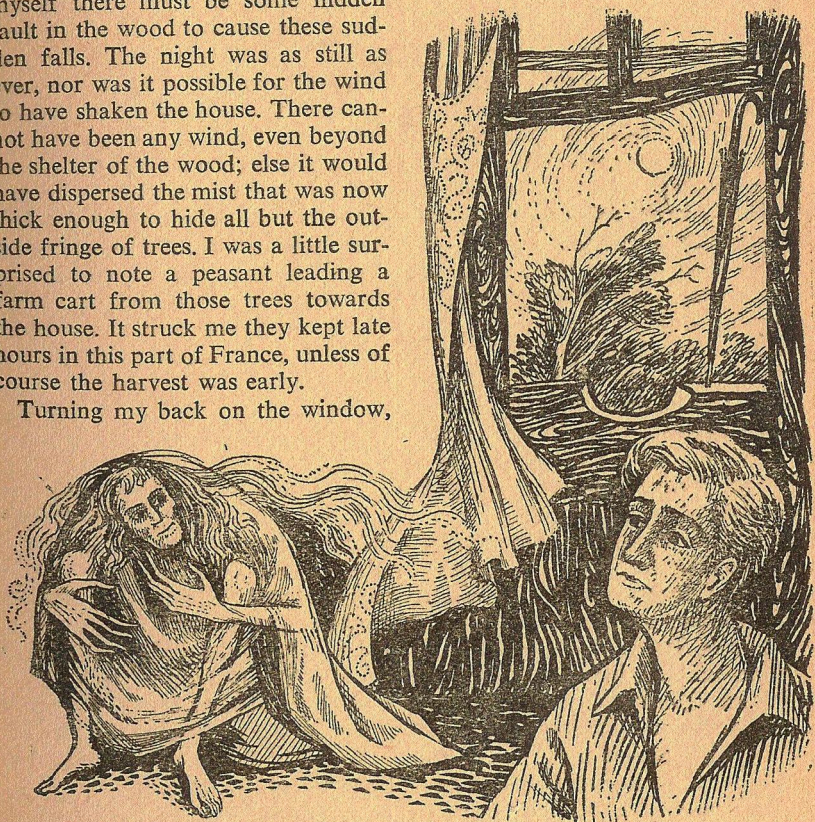
the room when I realized the window had again dropped.

Determined to end this annoyance, and also, I confess, to quell a growing disquiet in my own mind, I rose quickly and sought for something with which to prop the window open. The only thing I could find was my umbrella. It was new and fairly strong—strong enough to resist the weight of an ordinary casement at least. I fixed it in place, persuading myself there must be some hidden fault in the wood to cause these sudden falls. The night was as still as ever, nor was it possible for the wind to have shaken the house. There cannot have been any wind, even beyond the shelter of the wood; else it would have dispersed the mist that was now thick enough to hide all but the outside fringe of trees. I was a little surprised to note a peasant leading a farm cart from those trees towards the house. It struck me they kept late hours in this part of France, unless of course the harvest was early.

Turning my back on the window,

I was just climbing back into bed when I saw something huddled in the far corner of the room. I had fetched the umbrella from that corner not five minutes before, and I knew absolutely for certain it had been empty then.

Fascinated and rather horrified, I stared at the thing in the corner. It was in deep shadow, but I could make out a shapeless outline wrapped in coarse, striped material. It did not



move, but there was movement *on* it—like two big spiders scrabbling together on the cloth. They made a clicking noise, dry and repellent.

Then the moon must have broken through cloud, because the object in the corner became suddenly clear. I very much dislike remembering it, but M. Vaudin insists on my testimony. I saw a coarse, dirty mane of hair, framing what was once a human face, dreadfully holed by disease and decay. The eyes, red and animal, stared with inexpressible hatred beyond me, at the window. Its hands, with long skeleton fingers, groped together like spiders with a fly. I knew if I took my eyes off it or made the least sound, this fiendish creature would turn its attention to me. Then I heard behind me a creaking, straining noise, and I knew the window was coming down. Would my umbrella hold? It seemed vitally important that it should. Creak—creak. I could almost see the haft of it bend under an unnatural strain. Crack! The window came faster now and the frightful thing in the corner half rose and started to come in my direction. Then the window stopped descending altogether.

At this, the apparition threw up its hands in mad fury. What happened after that I do not know. All I recall is a loathsome, an intensely loathsome, sensation of fingers that had no flesh on them and of some brittle hairy substance. Then the door opened, and Monsieur Vaudin—surely the bravest man I even knew—was there.

"See here," he said, lifting the bed-clothes from where, in blind terror, I

had thrown them to impede that dreadful onslaught, "there is nothing; there is no one in the room, no one but you and I."

It was true. There *was* no one—not now.

In the thrice-blessed sunlight next morning he questioned me eagerly. "You are ready to swear you saw her, M. Richardson?"

"I could not possibly be mistaken," said I with a strong shudder.

He sighed with relief. "They will no longer doubt me now," he said. "They cannot now think me unbalanced, not with you as my witness. But you guessed, naturally, who she is?"

I told him I had no idea.

"She is La Tricoteuse," he said slowly. "The Woman who Knits. You will have remarked, Monsieur, that today is July the Fourteenth. La Tricoteuse always comes on Bastille Day. But she will come no more now. Because you arranged matters so that the knife failed to descend."

"What!" I cried, a dreadful thought crossing my mind. "You don't mean that window——?"

"The window," said M. Vaudin, "is not part of a ship, as some have thought; nor is it new. The groove in it was never designed for a mast to pass through." He paused, and instead of last night's fear, his eyes filled again with pure pride as he said, "I have nothing in Paris or even here to equal that window-frame. It was the frame of the original guillotine."

"So what I took to be resin——" I murmured.

"Precisely," said M. Vaudin.

LAST ASSIGNMENT

DENYS VAL BAKER



RYMMER, A PLUMP, round-faced, pinkish little man of about forty-five whose voluminous papers clearly identified him as a respectable citizen of Amsterdam—but whose less-heralded aim was to discover for the information of a certain foreign government the location and effectiveness of British bomber headquarters—arrived one day at the leading hotel in a small market town in Southern England. Wearing an expensive tweed suit, brown suède shoes and a black Hom-burg hat, he had all the appearance of confident prosperity. Obviously a professional man—a doctor, a lawyer, perhaps some sort of impresario. In fact, the character he had taken, and which he was at pains to outline to the impressed hotel manager, was that of a well-known Continental author. In Holland, he mentioned casually, his writings were read very widely, his books running into numerous editions. Now he was paying a visit to England, to learn something of the national customs.

With incredible patience and skill, Rymmer proceeded to extract from his docile fellow-residents a useful amount of preliminary information; but he found the going slow and exhausting, and it was not long before he decided better results would be obtained by establishing a friendly and

personal contact with somebody more permanently and genuinely local than hotel guests. It was the purest chance that directed him, one evening, to the local branch of the county library, and to the prim, sober, angular-faced woman who sat, in austere authority, at the librarian's desk. His first thought, as he regarded her from behind a blandly innocent outer gaze, was that she was the typical English spinster: grey and hard and cold, rather dully without life—and, of course, heavily repressed. But that did not prevent him from being persuasively genial and friendly, alternately embarrassing the woman with his flamboyant compliments and impressing her with his modest revelations about his reputation as a novelist. She was pathetically grateful for his patronage, of course, and he was able, quite neatly, to obtain for himself a rather nervous invitation to come round the following evening for some supper with the woman, Hilda Loxley, and her father, owner of the town's main hairdressing shop.

Established comfortably in the Loxleys' best arm-chair, Rymmer soon made himself at home. He felt very pleased with himself. Next perhaps to a publican, a hairdresser could be said to represent a nerve centre of life in a country town. He found Mr. Loxley, a lean, grey-haired man with far-away weak eyes, a polite but somewhat taciturn type,

inclined at first to be a little suspicious about this sudden intrusion into the quiet routine of his home life. However, it required small effort on the part of Rymmer, a fluent speaker, to capture and completely enthrall both father and daughter with some lurid accounts of recollections of wartime adventures while escaping from the Nazi terror. Very carefully he described the inhuman activities of Luftwaffe pilots who relentlessly bombed the defenceless city.

"The brutes!" exclaimed Hilda Loxley, her dull paleness diffused with indignant colour.

"Indeed, yes!" he said approvingly, but aware secretly of a queer thrill of curiosity to know how far the sudden flash of savageness might have permeated the seemingly lifeless woman. She must be capable of many feelings that are normally kept deep beneath the surface, he thought, eyeing dispassionately the formal, neat and rather unexciting bun of hair tucked above the white nape of her neck.

He went on talking, allowing them half an hour of undiluted adventure entertainment, and then, having consumed an excellent supper and lit up one of Mr. Loxley's special cigars, he laboriously directed the conversation into the specific channel of his interest.

"I suppose you are kept pretty busy these days?" he said casually to the hairdresser.

"Yes, pretty busy," said Mr. Loxley.

"Especially now that the aerodrome's open, I suppose," hazarded

Rymmer. He had already had a far-away glimpse of the aerodrome, half-hidden among flat, innocent fields outside the town.

"Oh yes—yes, we get a lot of Air Force men," admitted Mr. Loxley reflectively.

"A lot of them come to father in preference to the service hairdresser," exclaimed Hilda Loxley proudly. Now, in the warm bright room, Rymmer wondered whether perhaps there was a certain quality about her. But still she irritated him by her faded, shrivelled impersonality. He had an extraordinary desire to shake her.

"I suppose they're quite an interesting lot of fellows?" he went on mildly. "I used to know a lot of pilots in the Dutch Air Force—a grand lot of fellows. . . ."

"Yes, some interesting, some not so interesting," muttered Mr. Loxley. Now that the conversation had left the realms of romantic fiction and turned towards dull "shop," he became self-evidently less interested, and sat for the most part smoking an old pipe and dozing. Rymmer was not sorry to continue the conversation with the more talkative daughter. From her he elucidated the fact that not only corporals and aircraftsmen came to Mr. Loxley's shop, but also many officers.

He smiled jovially at the angular woman opposite him.

"Ahah, and I'll bet some of them make up to you, too, Miss Loxley, eh?"

She flushed. He saw the thin lips tighten. Again, inexplicably, he felt

the urge to do something to break the prudish exterior.

"No, indeed, Mr. Rymmer!" Her voice was harshly upset.

"Oh, pardon me," he said quickly.

Immediately her face softened, and she smiled back at him forgivingly. The lips were now miraculously parted.

"Oh, it's all right, Mr. Rymmer—there's no offence." She looked up at him swiftly. "I know you didn't mean it nastily."

Suddenly he found himself staring fascinatedly at the upturned face. The way the lips were parted, the sudden softness—was there not an invitation? And yet—he realized, looking penetratingly at the blank, deprecating eyes—yet she was quite unconscious of this revelation of hidden desire. There was something repugnant and yet compelling about her naïveté. If anything, it had been he who had felt nervous and repressed before the buxom and flashy women of Amsterdam, and of Brussels and Paris and Munich and Berlin and other Continental cities. He found himself thinking, with sudden dryness: this is the first time a man has got under her skin like this. She has probably never even kissed a man. He felt a queer superiority over the stream of airmen who had passed in and out of this woman's life without moving her. For she was not altogether unpleasant to look at, he thought defensively.

He put a hand over his forehead.

"Er, what was I saying? Oh, well, it doesn't matter."

Recovering himself, he launched

out into an elaborate and highly coloured account of his career as a novelist of international repute. But he was careful, remembering that she was, in her spare time, a librarian, to add that unfortunately none of his books had been translated into English. She listened in worshipping silence, and it was a considerable time before he recollected the real purpose of his being there and began once more to guide the conversation back to airmen and the aerodrome. When he eventually left, she came to the door with him.

"Good night, Miss Loxley, it's been a real pleasure," he said softly, and took her hand. It felt cold and heavy to his touch, yet somehow he was conscious only that it sank resiliently into his own flesh.

The following evening he came round again, making some pretext or other which he realized was hardly needed. Thereafter it became a recognized thing for him to call in every evening. Each visit produced its piece of information for his jigsaw puzzle. Inevitably, sooner or later, there was the tiny, unnoticed revelation. Sometimes it would be buried in a remark of the father's. But he began to get more and more information from the daughter. Under his skilful persuasion, the dried-up reticence melted away. She began talking to him as he was quite sure she had never talked before to anyone else. The pace and vast quantity of words appalled him, so much of it maddeningly trivial; but he endured it all, continuing with his quiet, persistent moulding of the conversation, every now and then

seizing on a buried spark, a fragmentary phrase. Every night, no matter how late he got back to the hotel, he went straight to the writing-desk in his room and took out a small red book from his jacket pocket. Then, in his neat round handwriting he entered the items from the evening's conversation that he had tucked away in his memory. He wrote them down in a very un-English language; and then sat staring at them, and at previous items: staring and staring until slowly, piece by piece, they began to fall into place. Every night he went to bed very late and with aching eyes, but always he had a sense of deep satisfaction, always he complimented himself on the progress he was making, the speed with which he was carrying out his task. He seldom if ever noticed that before going to sleep his thoughts turned away from the main problem and centred around the prim, sallow, annoyingly plain face of Hilda Loxley. But once or twice he was puzzled to find himself dreaming about her, and about her pale, harsh, untouched body.

During the ensuing weeks Rymmer settled into a precise routine. With great caution he inserted himself into the social life of the town. There was not a lot of it: a whist-drive here, a concert there, an occasional amateur dramatic performance. But each and all offered new avenues of contact, inevitably there were present men in the familiar blue uniform. They were seldom, indeed, talkative in the way he desired; but occasionally, especially under the influence of liberal free drinks, one or two of

them might drop an incautious remark.

It would have been unwise to attend many of these events alone, and this was another reason why he felt it necessary to continue his friendship with Hilda Loxley. She had obviously led a secluded social life in the past. On the other hand, she was a member of an old-established local family and to be seen about with her lent an air of added respectability and reliability to his reputation. Meanwhile, the new experience of being accompanied consistently by an apparently well-to-do and reasonably desirable man seemed to give a strange new vitality to Hilda Loxley—a vitality that was very much apparent to Rymmer in the form of sudden unexpected flashes of coquetry, curiously delicate flushes of colour across the high cheekbones, or a pleasantly intense interest in his well-being. This, together with the value of being seen about with a local resident, made him inclined to feel highly satisfied with things. There were, of course, other and more attractive women about the town (he had been quick enough to notice them, mingling among the shoppers and the audiences at various social events). But, he felt, it might even be an advantage to be associated with plain, harmless Hilda Loxley. It would, at least, help to allay any conventional suspicions about his being one of those "fast" (hence untrustworthy) Continental gentlemen against whom one was always warned.

In the mornings he would often

sit at the back of the hairdresser's shop and carry on an intermittent gossip with Mr. Loxley—a gossip always elastic enough to facilitate friendly conversations with visiting airmen and their friends who might come in for a haircut and a shave. Sometimes it meant a wasted morning, other times it produced at least one item of value. If the information was peculiarly obscure, he would store it away in his mind until he met Hilda Loxley after work. Then he would mention it casually, tucked away between trivialities, and usually, swiftly and innocently, she would supply the answer needed.

But he could hardly talk to her endlessly about the aerodrome and its environments. He found himself forced to enter into something of what he supposed could only be called a relationship with the meek, unobtrusive woman who belonged so obviously to the dull desk of a library or the shadowy anonymity of a hairdresser's shop. And so, if only to avoid sheer boredom, he could not resist embarking on a lazy, casual attempt to unravel the knots of her tight repression, could not resist trying to mould her into something more interesting, more to his taste.

One sunny afternoon, when they were walking along the top of a rise overlooking the vast flatness that was the aerodrome, he suddenly found himself eyeing with distaste her high collar, the long, effusive sleeves, the austere woollen stockings. Suddenly the idea struck him, and before he could restrain himself he spoke.

"It's very hot," he said. "So hot—

I wonder you wear such long sleeves. Why not let your arms get sun-burnt?"

For a moment she continued walking, her face averted. He wondered if he had offended her. A moment later she stopped and turned towards him, blushing.

"Is that better?" she said shyly. She held out her arms, the sleeves rolled far back, showing white curves of flesh. He stared, thinking not only how they had previously been denied the sun, but how they had been denied everything, had known nothing other than the dry black covering of prim sleeves.

"Why yes, that's better," he said, still staring. Slowly he lifted his own arms, plump and bare and brown, and held them beside her outstretched ones. "See," he said softly, "it won't be long before yours are as brown as mine."

He went on staring for a long time, and was conscious without looking of her own taut stare. But the thing that frightened him most was the overwhelming desire that came over him to put his arm against hers, to feel his warm plumpness against her hard coldness. His arms began trembling, and he lowered them and went on climbing across the slope. For the rest of the walk he spoke only once or twice, and he arrived back in the town completely oblivious of why he had deliberately chosen to walk in that particular direction. He was only aware of having, somehow, set in motion some inexorable passage of events.

For a few days he managed to re-

cover his composure, to reimpose the austere platonic pattern of their companionship. As long as he did this, she seemed to shrivel up and become rigid, so that every avenue of conversation dried up into swift emptiness—including the one all-important avenue. Alarmed, he went back to the hotel, and began pacing up and down his room, swinging a small watch-chain backwards and forwards, trying to track down the safest route for his future. He studied the little note-book, frowning. There was still much he needed to know. He thought about making a fresh start: a waste of time, money and effort. Obsessed by a curious compulsion, he sat down at his desk, took out a piece of notepaper and began writing her name: Hilda, Hilda, Hilda. He tried to visualize, by staring at the name, the dull, repugnant, yellowy spinster he had first seen. But even as he looked the picture clouded over, half-hidden by the shadows of her white arms. Looking, he suddenly realized that he was actually tracing the curves with his pencil point. Decisively he got up and went down to the hotel lobby, where there was a telephone.

"Hallo?" he said, when he got through. "Hallo—Hilda?"

"Yes." It seemed to him that her voice shivered, as if with strange anticipation.

Clearing his throat, he spoke quickly, urgently, with a gruff persuasiveness.

"Hilda, tonight we will go to a dance. So put on your nicest dress. I want you to look very, very nice,

Hilda," he said, lowering his voice. He felt almost nervous at the thought of the look that might be exposed on the face at the other end of the line.

The last time he had been to a dance was in a crowded Bavarian market town. There the fun had been fast and furious, and he remembered whirling round gaily with several podgy, rather voluptuous peasant women. Here everything was more restrained. Many of the young men looked self-conscious and clean-scrubbed, either in their best suits or their best uniforms, and the girls, too, looked not sure of themselves, in their medley of party frocks. Hilda had come in a somewhat reproving black dress, but at least it was glossy and capable of suggestiveness. He had bought her a small carnation and insisted on pinning it in her hair. She coloured as she looked at herself in the mirror, but he guessed she was flattered.

Seeing her so naïvely and assuredly his prey, seeing so clearly the route he must follow, he felt swept by a breezy exhilaration. He took her firmly by the hand, locking his own round fingers in her lean ones, and pulled her towards the dance-floor. "Let's dance, Hilda!" he cried gaily, and swept her into a waltz, knowing somehow that even if she had never danced before he could will her into following him around the floor. For the first time he felt her body, angular and half-strained away from him. Carefully he pressed her towards him and—as his soft palm sank into her back and as he let his hot, heavy breath fall along the exposed flesh of

her neck and shoulder—he felt the first awakening shiver through her whole being.

After that he gave himself up completely to the sadistic excitement of alternately stimulating and rebuffing her sharpened awareness. Never, not even with his first woman, a young, wide-eyed Hungarian girl, had he enjoyed quite such a sensation of complete power over another human being. It was a painful pleasure to touch some part of her—an arm, a shoulder, a fringe of her back—and then to revert back to a position of intolerable strain, of taut apartness. He was reminded, exquisitely, of a time when he had spent an afternoon at the zoo poking with a long stick at a sensuous tiger—goading it and goading it, but never quite too far. Only, of course, in this case the tiger was quite harmless, and his power so complete that the goading could be carried to a leisurely and logical conclusion. He spent the entire dance with her, always close to her, always making her aware of him. But he did not attempt to kiss her, and when they said good night he was content merely to stroke her hand, like he might stroke a cat. When he was back in his hotel room, he lay on his bed for a long time enjoying the thought of her somewhere in the dark, her body smouldering with a strange hidden fire which she probably could not understand. He fell asleep then, curled up into a small warm ball, and the squat diary in his pocket remained unopened, unremembered.

The days after that were exquisite torture. He noted the tiny shadows

under her eyes, but they seemed to him merely to accentuate a certain new hollow beauty about her. He liked to think of her spending sleepless nights tormented by the thought of his own warm body, as yet inaccessible. Not that she would think in quite such frank terms, of course—that was one of the fascinations of playing with her, the tantalizing uncertainty as to the whole extent of her feelings. It was only after five drawn-out days that, in the quiet warmth of her father's spacious drawing-room, he impulsively swept her into his arms and kissed her. Then, feeling the hot blood rushing into her dry lips, he knew the extent of his savage, purposeless will to possess her.

"Hilda!" he said. "Hilda, Hilda!" And, looking into the dark, frightened depths of her eyes he saw, with a strange thrill, all the shadowy barriers which he would tear away in his process of possession.

Consequently, it was a temporary setback to him when, despite the swift, relentless flow of passion, he came up sharply against the one, the only but seemingly irrevocable, barrier. He had forgotten the ageless traditions, the huge façade of respectability, which enveloped generation after generation of human beings such as Hilda Loxley. Even as he held her in his arms, he sensed at once a hidden taut refusal—a refusal all the more perplexing since it was so obviously contrary to the animal desire to surrender. "Hilda," he said softly, under the lobe of her ear, "I want to love you, Hilda." But he

knew, even as he spoke, that there was something conclusive in her tautness.

It came out that she wanted him to marry her. The stupid, stupid creature he thought, alone again, alone with his comfortable hotel room and his neat, secret papers. He was even piqued at the thought that it had been she, the dull virgin, who had had the initiative of refusal. He felt half inclined to go out to the nearest public bar and stay there until he found someone with less mock scruples—and no doubt considerably more charm—than Hilda Loxley. He had been a fool to waste his time with the woman, the best thing would be to dismiss her from his mind. But try as he would, he could not suppress entirely the festering curiosity that had been born in him. He had seen this lifeless piece of flesh become alive, had witnessed its first sproutings of passion. How old was he? Forty-five. . . . But I would be the first one, he thought, and he could not repress an uneasy thrill. After all, he thought, I really created her, before I came along she was as dead as that wooden desk at which she was sitting. It seems a pity that after all that, all my awakening of her, someone else should reap the benefit. There is no doubt that she would do anything I say, if only . . . Slowly, he let himself drift towards the idea of agreeing to her request. But all the time he was conscious of tiny jabs of uneasiness. There was nothing about this sort of thing in his plan. A few weeks more and his work should be completed. Why bother?

Why bother? he thought. But he went on turning his unfinished jigsaw puzzle round in his mind, trying to rearrange it so as to fit in an additional piece. In the end, quite simply, he found the excuse he wanted in the shape of the little diary, the maps, the incomplete instructions. It might easily make things simpler, and quicker, he thought; and then he had more or less made up his mind.

But he did not admit it at once, he presented a blank wall of injured pride just for the pleasure of seeing her miserable, lashing herself with the whip of her temptation. However, she had her woman's intuition that gave her a queer confidence. He could not help being impressed to learn that she had been going round quietly and making inquiries about a place where they could live. One day she took him for a walk out of the village, along to a pleasant and secluded cottage which, she said, they could rent at a reasonable figure. He became suddenly excited, not because the rent was reasonable—but because the cottage stood not very far away from the outskirts of the aerodrome. Such a blessing of material expediency was all he required. Four days later they were married by special licence.

Of course, he thought, it would be intolerable if it were not temporary. Leaning against the front gate in the morning sunshine, he would look through the criss-crosses of the windows and see her tall shadow flitting about the cottage. Shadow was an appropriate word. Now that she had attained her frightened ambition, duly legalized and all, she had adapted

herself with remarkable ability into a new form of life. The whole aim of that life, so far as he could judge, was to weld herself into the very structure of his existence. In some ways it was pleasant, even exciting. It was a new experience for him to have so completely at his mercy, for as long as he willed, the body and soul of another human being. For it was quite clear to him that, for her, his coming had been nothing less than a miracle, and she was only too glad to worship the miracle. This sense of being adulated lent a majestic touch of power to his love-making, so that he even felt there might be something in it that had been missing from previous affairs. And there were other, more placid, instances. As quietly and unobtrusively as a shadow, she flitted around seeing to a hundred and one little comforts. He had always thought it would be extremely nice to have someone—he had been thinking in the old-world terms of "slave"—who would remove from one's life all the trivial and wearisome minor tasks and troubles. It was—very nice. She was the first up in the morning, slipping down into the tiny kitchen and reappearing with a morning cup of coffee. She arranged for his morning bath, his shaving water, his clean shirts, his neatly brushed shoes. She provided just the sort of breakfast he desired. There was nothing at all for him to do about the house—she even insisted on chopping wood and fetching the water from a well in the garden. She created for him an extremely attractive writing study, saw to it that

the desk and cupboards were kept spotlessly clean—that his writing-papers, pen and ink were always laid out ready. She had procured from the library several books on Continental cookery and, cautiously but with growing skill, she managed to concoct for his pleasure a surprising variety of typical Dutch dishes.

Unfortunately he found certain difficulties about having such a close, intimate shadow in his life. He was used to a certain space for movement—living among people, yes, but being able to retire into the comfortable shell of his own company when he required. At first the excitement of possessing her and tantalizing her awakened instincts occupied his full attention. But he knew that in time this would settle into an ordinary routine, and that he would often wish to be alone. For this reason it was perhaps fortunate that he had carefully created the myth of Rymmer, author and novelist. It seemed to be the one aspect of his existence into which she was prepared, indeed careful, not to intrude—while at the same time being at considerable pains to encourage him to continue to devote himself to its development. It became an understood thing that he should spend every afternoon sitting in his secluded study, and that he should on no account be disturbed. He wondered what on earth she supposed he did. When he came down to tea she merely smiled up at him, rather like a mother at a clever child, and said: "Has it gone well?" He said: "Yes, quite well," and there were no further questions. There were times

when he felt a little peeved about this—after all, the wife of a famous novelist should have a certain interest in what he was writing; and he might have enjoyed concocting a serial drama about himself and his mythical novels—but he realized that things were probably best as they were. In fact, he spent a portion of each afternoon studying his intricate jigsaw puzzle: the diary and the maps; adding a piece here, a piece there. Occasionally he wrote a guarded letter to an address in London, always being extremely careful to post it himself. The rest of the time he doodled on the backs of old envelopes, or dozed in an arm-chair in front of the fire which she always lit for his comfort.

A week after they had been there, judging that the time had now come to advance his investigations, he suggested to her: "It might be rather a good idea to invite one or two of those airmen in for a chat in the evenings. I'm sure they'd welcome it—I know I would if I was stuck away on a lonely aerodrome like that." He was not sure that she really liked his suggestion, but she agreed if only because it came from him. And he persuaded her to write the letter of invitation to the commanding officer.

They began to come quite regularly, two or three times a week. Most of them were ordinary aircraftmen in whom he was not particularly interested, although he greeted them with spacious bonhomie and made them very much at home. But gradually—also thanks to friendly contacts achieved at Mr. Loxley's hairdressing establishment—the cottage began to

be the visiting-place of a number of pilot officers and flying officers, and even a wing-commander. It was quite natural and obvious that they should be attracted, he thought. First, there was himself—the educated and cultured foreigner with a wide fund of amusing stories of life and adventure abroad (plus an excellent selection of drinks). Second, he fancied there was by now a certain charm about his wife—no doubt due entirely to his own encouragements—and, as he was ready to admit, she made a good and efficient hostess. Certainly, together with the comfort of a cosy sitting-room and a warm fire if ever the evenings turned cold, these were more than sufficient attractions to draw the most discriminating officer. And, of course, some of them, under the relaxing influence of their environment, became reasonably loquacious. Not always or directly about the things he most desired to know about, but sufficiently talkative for him to seize, here and there, upon the tiny pieces that added illumination to his unfinished puzzle.

It was, indeed, rather amazing, he thought, sitting in his study, how tiny, odd, disconnected things could be extracted from a morass of trivialities and then subtly linked up with one another. It was, in effect, an art of its own, and he felt justified in regarding his own mastery of it as something of a creative triumph. A word here, a phrase there, little slips no one else noticed. . . . It was while running along in this placid groove of self-congratulation one afternoon that his mind darted a little farther

on and jogged out of his memory a thought that had hitherto escaped him—a thought also about slips of the tongue, incautious words here and there. But instead of being connected with visiting airmen, he suddenly realized that they were associated with a much more intimate source: his wife.

At first he told himself: it's just coincidence, I'm imagining things, I'm remembering things wrongly. And when he had recreated a second and a third, a fourth and even a fifth occasion when his wife had made a rather strange and curious remark, he felt the first seed of doubt born in mind. It *was* true that she had said, only the previous evening, that of all the filthy and evil occupations, that of a spy was the filthiest and most evil. It had been said in general conversation—anyone might have said such a thing—but why, just why should she have said it? And again, about three days previously (he remembered now with a start) she had come up to him in the garden, putting an arm round his shoulder, and had suggested that they stopped having so many visitors, for a time at least. "It's getting a bit beyond me—you know, with rationing, etc.," she had said. At the time he had laughed it aside, unthinkingly. Now he tried urgently to remember how she had said it, and whether she had said it calmly or with emotion. And, anyway, why should she say it? As far as he could remember, she seemed to enjoy the visits. Indeed, he even felt she blossomed out in the company of men, especially as she was automatically

inserted into a position of prominence as the only woman there. He had even played with the idea of encouraging the wing-commander into an infatuation with her, so as to be able to utilize his resultant moral advantage as a means of extracting, very directly, the remaining information he wanted. But he had not felt quite sure enough of her to proceed further; besides which, vanity flattered him that she was too completely absorbed in himself.

He felt it difficult to translate his vague uneasiness into words or into direct action. But, almost unconsciously, he began watching her more closely than before. Partly to allay any possible suspicions, at the same time he flattered her and made up to her more than usual. But whenever the chance came he gave her little tests. "I'll bet you wonder sometimes what I do shut away in my room, eh?" he said once teasingly. He was irritated when she merely looked at him innocently and replied: "No—no, Alfred, I'm quite content that you should get on with your own work." Other times, however, he did not feel so satisfied with the answers—occasionally they seemed to him to be curiously ambiguous. Feeling like this, he was inclined to be savage with her when they were alone in the silent bedroom, burying his smouldering resentment venomously into the soft folds of her subjugated body.

He still made frequent walks around or in the neighbourhood of the aerodrome. She seldom came with him, pleading housework, and he was not sorry, as he was thus able to

carry on with the very thorough geographical mapping of the locality which would be an invaluable accompaniment to the rest of his information. But one morning, when he returned earlier than usual from one such walk, there occurred an episode which turned his mind at last, and definitely, to its disturbing conclusion. He came into the sitting-room quietly and found her before the fire, holding out his jacket coat to warm. He remembered that he had foolishly left some papers in the inside pocket. Abruptly he snatched the coat out of her hands and held it up to the light. The papers were still there, but he could not be sure that they had not been taken out and put back again. He could not be sure.

He looked at her suspiciously.

"What are you doing with my coat, Hilda, eh?"

He saw her round, startled eyes looking up at him. Devoid of guilt, surely devoid of guilt?

"Nothing, why nothing, dear. I was just cleaning and airing it ready for you when you came back. I air it every morning about this time."

Every morning, he thought rapidly. Every morning! She must have wondered about the papers. He longed to frame the question, to ask her point-blank. Yet he could not be sure. Even if she had looked, might she not have thought they were jottings written for his novels? He took his coat and put it on without looking at her, and went out of the room, feeling her puzzled gaze following him.

After that the doubts began to torment him. He had a new occupation

now. In addition to recording certain expressions of his visitors, he began noting down any remark of his wife's which might have any ulterior significance. Surely, he thought irritably, he would be able to build up a corroborative picture out of all the small pieces, in the same way as he had been able to do in regard to the aerodrome. But it wasn't like that at all. There were no facts about the other secret he was trying to unravel, everything was most hypothetical. Even the remark that seemed most incriminating might equally well be quite innocent.

Perhaps it was for this reason that he found it difficult to control himself and his exasperation. It was all very well to tell himself that it was only a case of hanging on a few weeks more, by which time his task would be completed and he could quietly disappear. The fact remained that there now existed the possibility—only the possibility, but still the possibility—of there being a weak link in the chain: perhaps even a stab in the back. He brooded over these thoughts hour by hour, sitting in his study every afternoon, doodling endlessly on a blank sheet of paper—frequently leaving the diary and the maps and the other papers untouched. And when he came into her presence he was abrupt and even rude, incessantly aware of a burning desire to catch hold of her and shake her until he shook out of her a decisive yes or no as to whether she suspected. On such occasions he had to go out of the room and walk about in the garden, or go upstairs and lie on the

bed. And when, after a time, she crept up to him, timid, meek, frightened, he drew her to him roughly but with a new sense of frustration. Even with her in his possession, he found himself still conscious of this great doubt pricking at the back of his mind. Sometimes he would become so furious with her that he would throw her to one side, quite callously, leaving her to whimper and cry like a hurt dog—no, he thought, like a hurt cat. One could not trust a cat.

It was a night soon afterwards when they had a party of officers in for a drink and a smoke. All the evening he found himself paying more attention to his wife than to any of the visitors; a thing exasperating enough in itself. Yet, there was nothing direct, nothing concrete he could seize upon. She talked about books, about the weather, about the war, about her husband's work. His eyes narrowed at one point when she said, with seeming vagueness: "Oh yes, I expect soon my husband will have finished his present work, and then, of course, he'll start on a new task." One sentence among a hundred: somehow it became fixed in his mind. He began analysing it word by word, phrase by phrase, until it became meaningless. *Expect*—why should she expect? *Finished*—what did she mean by finished? *New task*—what new task?

He sat there smoking, in a solitary world of his own, answering their conversation non-committally, leaving the main burden to his wife. And he felt himself seething with suspicion after suspicion as she began

talking more shrilly and rapidly than usual, no doubt in order to cover up any awkward gaps. But she was, he was sure, nervous. Nervous about what?

Bad-temperedly he refused to get up when the time came for them to go.

"Hilda will see you out," he said peevishly.

He watched her shepherd them out into the hall, out into the starlit night. Then, moved by a wild impulse, he sprang to his feet and darted to the doorway. He heard their voices floating up out of the darkness. "Nice time. . . . Thank you so much, Mrs. Rymmer. . . . Hope to see you again soon. . . ." And then, clearly, he caught her rejoinder to the last remark. "Yes, come again—fairly soon, anyway." *Fairly soon*—the two innocent words darted at him in a crimson rush. What did she mean? Why was she trying to put them off? Why? Why? The questions tumbled through his mind in a frantic waterfall, and he found himself unable to control them.

When she came in, a little flushed from the cool evening air, he pulled her to him by the fireplace, holding her hand so tightly that he hurt her. He twisted it slowly, glaring down at her surprised face.

"You've got to tell me!" he spat out. "Come on, out with it. I'll know, or by heavens. . . ." He felt rage getting him in its insane grip. He took her other arm and began squeezing them both backwards and forwards, listening in satisfaction as she began crying.

"I don't care if I do hurt you!" he shouted. "I will hurt you if you don't tell me."

"Tell you what?" she cried back.

"About—about——" But he could not get the words out. Abruptly he let go his hold on her arms and crept his hand along her bare throat.

"I know!" he said uglily. "I've been watching you. You suspect something or other, don't you? Don't you?" He made an effort to control his voice. "You've been reading my papers, you've been snooping around—I know you have."

He held her now directly in front of him, his body obliterating hers, his hands curving around her, framing her pale face, with its dull fringe of hair. He pressed his fingers into her neck, feeling his finger-nails bite deep into the flesh, conscious of a fierce exultance.

"Please!" she screamed. "Please, Alfred, you're hurting!"

"You've been suspecting something, haven't you?" he repeated wildly, ignoring her cry.

He saw her eyes rolling desperately and, automatically, slackened his grip. She half-coughed out the denial.

"No! I don't know what you mean. I don't suspect you. Really, I don't, Alfred. What should I suspect you of?"

He felt a sudden unbearable weight of despondence sink upon him, as she jerked out her last, unanswerable question. He could not, he simply could not find out the truth. He could not answer her question: neither could he be sure if her answer was true or false. The huge impasse

of it all swept over him, dragging him into the mire. Trembling, he relaxed his grip on her throat, watched her fall slowly to the ground, her eyes closed with pain. Around her neck he saw, with detached curiosity, the bright red marks where his finger-nails had cut the flesh.

"Oh! Sorry!" he said emptily. He stood there for a long time, not looking at her or anything, not really thinking at all. Then, with slow, heavy steps he made his way up to the bedroom, undressed and got into bed.

Some time later, when he was already half-asleep, he heard her footsteps come falteringly up the stairs. He felt the draught as the door opened, and a moment later he sensed her bending over him, but he was too weary to look up. He felt a hand across his forehead, cool and soothing. He remembered, curiously, the first time he had felt her hand, when it was cold and limp, and now he had made it warm, with a pulse beating. He smiled strangely and fell asleep, never knowing about her slow, unending tears and the look they drowned.

It was late when he awoke the next morning. He watched the sun pouring in through the open window, the light falling with false brightness on the bed-cover. Then he felt the bed empty beside him, and listening, heard the strange hush about the house. With an exclamation he jumped out of bed and ran out to the top of the stairs. "Hilda!" he cried. "Hilda!" But there was only the strange echo of his own voice.

When he went down there was no fire in the kitchen, no smooth white breakfast cloth, only everything put away neatly, and an atmosphere of unrealness. He went into the sitting-room and saw the upset furniture and the ruffled carpet where she had fallen. Then, on the mantel-piece, he saw the white envelope with his name on it. He picked it up and turned it round and round between his small fingers before he finally opened it.

"My only love," he read. "Believe me, I love you with all my heart. But I have noticed you have been acting strangely towards me lately—I tried to pretend I was imagining it, but I knew it was so. And then, last night—last night I saw no love in your eyes, only fear and suspicion, even hate—oh, my darling, what have I done? I have thought and thought and I don't know why—but I know in my heart that you no longer love me. Don't blame yourself, perhaps it's not your fault. I only know that I can't bear to see your love turn to hate—it has been the only real thing in my life. So I am going away, darling, away right out of your life. I love you always. Hilda."

He read it through once, twice, three times, still not understanding. His mind swirled through a mist of fear, dismay, incredulity and, still, suspicion. Suppose it was true, suppose she had gone away, broken-hearted—all very well. But, he thought, the fear gnawing deep inside him, last night she had been frightened, he had seen the fear in her eyes. Supposing she *did* know, all the time? It would be natural for her to run

away, she would be frightened of what he might do to her. . . . He tried to work it out, clutching at this clue and that. But he could only identify the fear, the sense of urgency. At all costs he must make her come back, so that he could somehow be sure.

Slowly, mechanically, he got ready to go out. He carefully tidied the room, and then, without eating any breakfast, he went out into the garden and the fresh air and the sunshine, and walked hurriedly down the road towards the town.

He went first to the hairdresser's shop. Mr. Loxley was busy with a customer. Imperatively, he beckoned him into the tiny back room.

"Hilda," he said. "Hilda—have you seen her?"

The hairdresser blinked his watery eyes and shook his head.

"She's gone away, run away," said Rymmer dully. He waved aside the other's startled protests. "No, I don't know where. Why? I can't think, can't make it out?—we had a tiff, that was all." (He had carefully burnt the letter: it was his tale against hers. If only he could find her, get her to himself.)

"We'd better tell the police," said Mr. Loxley nervously.

"Police?" He had not thought of that. He flinched. Then, controlling himself, he thought: Yes. Yes, if we go to them quickly, they may be able to catch her before she gets right away. They have methods. . . . "Yes, of course," he said, and they went out together to the police-station.

He told the inspector simply that

she had run away. They had had a row; she had become hysterical and threatened to leave him; when he awoke in the morning, she had gone. He could not understand it, he just could not understand it. Rymmer showed his round, pink, injured plumpness to the inspector, creased his rosy face with worry. They discussed the possibilities, the directions in which she might have gone. "We'll have all the main railway stations watched," said the inspector. With the father's help, he gave them a description of the missing woman. "She's about thirty. Tall, well-built, pale-faced, dark hair. . . ." He stumbled awkwardly for the words. He was suddenly aware how little he really knew her.

"I think perhaps it might be a good idea for one of our men to come back with you and have a look round," said the inspector.

Rymmer stared. "Yes, of course. . . ."

They went back together, he and a solid, rather silent police constable. He showed the man carefully into the sitting-room and disappeared for a moment. When he came in again he had every revelation securely tucked away in his pocket. The police could search the house now if they liked; he even, flamboyantly, suggested it.

"Have a good look round," he said. "There's the bedroom and a study. She might have left something—I couldn't find anything." All the time his mind was racing ahead, racing out towards her, seeing her fleeing away on some train, away out of

his reach. He hoped the police here were efficient.

When the constable had gone, he sat down bleakly in the sitting-room. Usually at this time of the morning he would be out walking along the quiet country lanes around the aerodrome, and Hilda would be bustling about the cottage, tidying up, moving things about—meddling, he thought, with a surge of irritability. He sat there and tried to recreate her existence in the cottage while he was out, tried to watch her as she moved about. Slow, rather awkward movements—there was little real grace about her—often he had compared her to a clumsy animal. At the same time . . . He hesitated: she was not a fool. She was capable of putting two and two together. Supposing, somehow, she *had* suspected? Supposing she, too, had been listening for the unthinkable isolated remarks—had heard enough to form the hard core of a suspicion. Even then, it would hardly be enough. Ah, but then. . . . His mind travelled on, he saw the conscientious wife tidying the study, turning out drawers, emptying the pockets of jackets. True, he had forbidden her to touch things—but what had happened when he was away from the house? Was she entirely the obedient mouse? The thought of her rummaging like a strange, inquisitive dog through the flimsy paper foundations of his very existence seared through him like a poison. Once more he took out his wallet, counting through the precise items, counting over and over again before replacing them. Perhaps, even if she had seen

them she had not understood them. . . .

He walked over to the window and stared out at the bright clumps of tulips in the front garden. Or even, even if she had seen and had understood, it was still possible that she would say nothing. He remembered her as the readily offered sacrifice, the willing slave, the suppliant lover; human nature, the emotions, all was in his favour. Perhaps she had realized, and had felt unable to face up to him. It was understandable. For a time she would want to go away, to become adjusted to the idea that her husband was an espionage agent. She would say nothing, and then, a little later, she would become lonely, the craving once aroused would not sleep lightly—yes, and then she would come quietly back, and all would be well. Let her just come back and he would pretend all was forgiven, and then, delicately, he would soon be able to find out how much she really knew. In any case, it would only be a question of keeping her quiet for a while. But now, in the meantime, he did not feel easy at the thought of her at loose, adrift in the world—a piece in the jigsaw puzzle that was missing.

For a long time he sat staring out of the window. Then, almost without surprise, he saw the constable who had come in the morning appear at the gateway and begin walking up the path.

He went and opened the door.

"Come in," he said politely. "Have you some fresh news?"

The constable remained standing in the porch.

"Er—no, I won't come in," he said hesitantly. "As a matter of fact——"

"Yes?" said Rymmer curiously. "Have you heard something?"

The constable looked up at him.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, we've had some news. The inspector sent me up. He'd be glad if you would come down to the station. He thinks you might be able to help."

They must have caught her, thought Rymmer. At all costs, he must get down and stop her talking too much. A little tact and persuasion and it could be all smoothed over.

"Coming right away!" he exclaimed, and without bothering even to put on a hat he walked straight out with the constable. They began walking down the road that wound into the town, Rymmer's round head gleaming pinkly in the sunlight.

The inspector was waiting in a small room at the back of the police-station. He did not look directly at Rymmer but motioned him to sit down.

"I'm afraid," he said gruffly, "I'm afraid we've some bad news for you."

Rymmer felt a far-away chill.

"Bad news?" he said.

"Yes. Your wife has been found—dead. Her body was recovered today from the reservoir just outside the town."

Rymmer thought: "Going away right out of your life. Away right out of your life." That was what she had meant, then.

"Dead?" he repeated. He was trying to think; but of something else,

something that momentarily eluded him. He did not, in that moment, think of the dull, yellow-faced woman, blown out from drowning. His head felt as if it was swelling and swelling, a thousand jagged pieces of jigsaw puzzles whirling round inside. He clutched at his forehead to control the pain.

Through the cracks between his fingers, he watched the inspector rise to his feet and lean forward.

"Mr. Rymmer," he said. "Mr. Rymmer, I shall have to ask you to identify the body of your wife."

"No!" cried out Rymmer.

"And"—went on the inspector evenly—"I'm afraid we shall have to ask you to answer a few questions. Although your wife was found drowned, we are not at all sure it was suicide. There is evidence that she had been violently attacked. There are signs of bruises on the body—more important, there is a very clear set of imprints where someone attempted to strangle her. We shall have to insist, I'm afraid, on taking an imprint of your finger-nails, Mr. Rymmer."

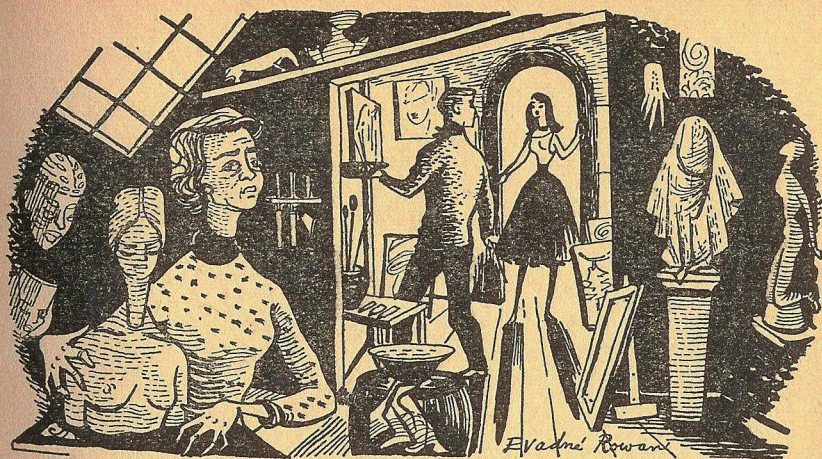
Slowly, as if they would somehow provide the solution to everything, he held out his hands. But when they were stretched in front of him he did not, in fact, see them at all: for their movement, rubbing an elbow

across the rough bulging shape of his inside breast pocket, brought the whole edifice of his future crashing around him.

For a moment he sat stunned and silent. Then, despairingly, he clutched at the last delusion. She did know, she did know, he thought with wild conviction. She knew all the time! She drowned herself on purpose, knowing the police would be dragged in, knowing they would fix it on me, get me in their power. . . . The magnitude of her cunning overcame him with horror. Inside him a huge blister of frustration swelled up and burst, and he cried out with venom, so that he almost believed it himself: "Yes, I killed her: of course, I killed her! I hope she suffered agonies, I hope she burns in hell! Yes, I killed her—and I'm glad! Glad, do you hear? Glad! Glad! Glad!"

He went on shouting and screaming, heaping frantic curses upon her cold, absent lifelessness. And all the time he waited, in appalled helplessness, for the ponderous procedure of authority to make the final, infinitely more incredible exposure: the tiny coloured maps, the coded messages, the precise navigation directions that would now never guide the far-away bombers.





THE GENTLE ART

PATRICIA MATTHEWS

Illustrated by Evadne Rowan

IT'S VERY UPSETTING living the way we are. It's beginning to affect my work, and of course Paul hasn't done anything worth-while for months. It's making me very miserable. I keep telling him to pull himself together, but it doesn't seem to do any good.

He grabs the mail every day, and dashes through it before I even have a chance to see it. It distresses me to see his disappointment, because of course the letter he's waiting for will never arrive. I haven't said so in as many words, but I've tried to hint, as kindly as I possibly can, that he'll never hear from her.

It probably creeps into my voice, although I've never said it outright and never will, because I respect his feelings, that I think it's plain good-riddance. But when I mention her at all, even in the kindest fashion, it just makes him angry, and of course that makes the situation worse.

When I think of the good life we had together and how happy we were, it just makes me sick to see what has happened to our lives. I try not to brood about it too much, because I believe that harsh and unkind thoughts affect my work. I really believe that. I've always tried to let my art reflect my tranquil spirit and my love of mankind. It's so much easier

to open your heart and embrace the whole world than to concentrate on one person and allow him to devour you.

I don't want to give the impression that I'm not a good wife. That's not true at all. If I'd neglected Paul in any way, I could feel perhaps that this unhappy state of affairs was justified; but there's never been anything like that, ever.

There was never a single cross word between us until Eloise came to live with us. Paul was contented with our life. We have a beautiful home. A huge, rambling, white-brick place surrounded by nearly three acres of gardens and woods. It was my parents' home and I was an only child, so when they died the house became mine. And Paul's, too, of course.

We have everything we needed to live comfortably. My father left me a comfortable income, and I've never been niggardly when it came to little luxuries for Paul and myself. I did everything I could to make things pleasant. Even our work is closely related. Paul paints and I sculpt, and before Eloise came we worked in perfect accord, advising and criticizing each other's efforts. Paul's studio is a beautiful room, and when I remodelled and decorated it for him for a wedding present, I took great pains with it because I wanted it to be perfect. I believe so much that the influence of one's surroundings affects one's work. I even had one whole wall knocked out and replaced with a great sweep of glass that gave him all the light he needed as well as a glorious view of the countryside. He

wasn't too keen about his studio when he first saw it, but I was adamant about no alterations. I have an eye for that kind of thing, and, besides, I spent a great deal of money on it.

I do my work right in the next room. There are sliding doors between, and I keep them open all the time now, because I don't like to see him mooning about and staring out of the window the way he does lately. It's not good for him. If the doors are open, I can call through to him and coax him back to his easel when he gets restless. He didn't like this at first and used to get quite huffy, but when I explained to him that this kind of behaviour upset me and showed in my work, he stopped it.

Now he simply looks at me and goes straight back to work. Essentially he is a very thoughtful and unselfish man, and it takes only a word from me at the appropriate moment to remind him that his behaviour is not acceptable.

If he would only forget Eloise and concentrate on his painting, I'm sure that we would soon be back on our old pleasant footing.

I didn't raise many objections when Eloise came to us. She was a sort of distant cousin of Paul's. He hadn't seen her since they were children and hardly remembered her, and then suddenly there were letters flying back and forth. Her parents had been killed in an accident and she was left quite alone. And then, before I could raise any real objections, almost before I knew what was happening, it was arranged that she should

come and live with us. A secretary-housekeeper sort of thing.

I blame my monstrous stupidity about the whole business on the fact that I was engrossed with an exhibition piece at the time. A lovely thing. I could hardly bear to tear myself away from it, even to eat. Then, with the hangover of the excitement of completing such a perfect piece of work keeping me in a state of agitation, I played around with some plaster casting to steady myself and became intensely interested in it. Casting death-masks interested me particularly. When I wasn't actually working and experimenting in this unfamiliar medium, I spent every spare moment reading everything about it I could lay my hands on. It was completely fascinating. So much could be accomplished with it so swiftly. I almost decided to ask Paul to be a "victim" to see what I could do, but for some inexplicable reason I changed my mind and didn't mention the subject to him at all. I can't explain my reticence, because until this time Paul and I had shared all phases of our work, and ordinarily I would have thoroughly enjoyed discussing it with him. It seemed simply that in this particular instance I wanted to keep my newfound knowledge to myself.

So between my work and the reading I was doing, I was a bit remote from what was going on. When I questioned him about her, all he remembered was a dark, thin child who had been a bit of a tomboy. I gathered that her parents had treated him kindly when he was young, and he had spent several summer holi-

days at their home on the coast.

I was a bit put out that my home should be used as a convenience in return for generosity shown to Paul when he was a child. Too many people impose on the slightest relationship, I think, but I hope I have as much charity as anyone else, so I told Paul I supposed it would be all right.

It seemed that the arrangements were made almost behind my back. Of course I don't mean that *exactly*. It was just that I was so engrossed in my work at the time, nothing could be allowed to intrude. And, anyway, Paul had no reason to be underhanded about it; he had no idea what was in store for us either.

But when she arrived a week or so later I realized my mistake immediately. An utterly fabulous creature! Well, I work with beauty and I know what I'm talking about. I nearly fainted when they drove up from the station. My first feeling was one of chagrin that I hadn't taken more trouble with my own appearance. My slacks were flecked with plaster droppings and discoloured with paint stains, and my comfortable old sweater wasn't the last word in elegance. Beside this dark-eyed, beautiful young girl, I felt for a moment old and weary.

Paul had driven down to the station to get her. They were old friends again by the time they reached the house. She was stunningly beautiful. I couldn't take my eyes off her. After we'd exchanged greetings, I laughed and said:

"You'll have to pose for me if you

can find time between your house-keeping and secretarial duties, Eloise."

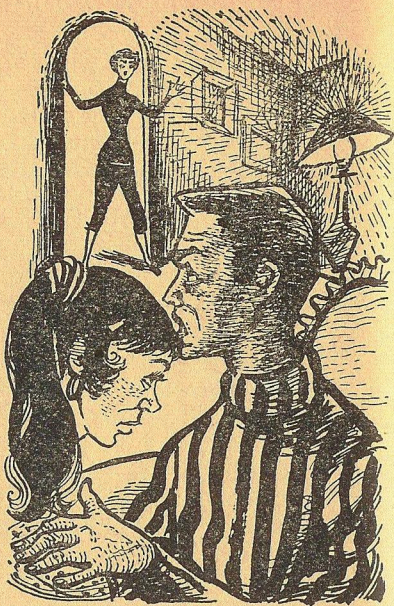
And Paul cut in merrily, and he usually so sober, "You're too late, Fay, she's agreed to pose for me in her spare time."

A bit of a shock, but I joined in the laughter and managed to give a fair account of myself at dinner.

You have to admit that not every woman could accept a beauty like Eloise into her home and carry on as usual, but I did my best to act naturally. I don't believe either of them was aware of my extreme agitation.

The change in Paul was quite remarkable. Usually quiet and withdrawn, almost morose at times—although I think that that's mostly concentration on his work—he blossomed as a conversationalist. He and Eloise seemed to find no end of things to do together. At first I put it down to his concern about her parents, and was doing his best to take her mind off it; but even after the first shock and grief had blunted, they sought each other out and spent much time together. I was always coming upon them in some corner or strolling in the grounds, laughing and talking together in a way that was quite foreign to Paul's nature.

As I've said, our life together has been happy and pleasant. There was never anything hectic or passionate about our relationship. I feel, intuitively, that that kind of thing is so unnecessary between two people gifted as Paul and I are. Sex is all right in its place, I suppose, but I've never given it a very important place in our lives. There is so much to be



done, of real importance I mean, and sex always seems to affect my work if I allow it to assume an exaggerated role in my life. At one time I almost let him persuade me that to fulfil myself both as a sculptress and a woman, I should change my outlook on life. But it was too shattering, and I pointed out to Paul, and finally convinced him, that the finer things of life remain fine only if we keep our lives as nearly as possible on a spiritual plane.

We've been married five years. I thought that that part of our adjustment was nicely disposed of. We were managing extremely well on my terms and were both turning out excellent work, which proved my point.

But with Eloise in our midst things were changed. She was an extremely healthy young woman with a great deal of animal attraction. In no time at all, it was obvious that Paul was quite smitten.

I resolved to be patient and let the little passion burn itself out. These things *do*, if you give them time. But the weeks went by, and it became obvious that the situation wasn't improving at all.

One day I caught them kissing in her room. They were sprawled across her bed. I was shocked and outraged at the cheapness of it all. Of course they were dressed, down to their shoes. I particularly remember the shoes because I'd bought a new bed-spread for that room. It annoyed me to see their cavalier attitude towards my belongings.

I was glad that it was one of my good days and I was looking my very best. I've always taken care of my figure, and I'm as slim at thirty as I was at seventeen, thank heaven. I was wearing a pair of matador pants. Heavenly things, I have them made specially. They were made up in scarlet velvet, and I wore them with a black shirt. I'd piled my hair up on top, the way Paul liked it, and my lipstick matched the pants.

It disgusted me to find them so, especially when I'd taken such trouble to make myself attractive for Paul.

While I'd been in my room carefully choosing what to wear, to give him pleasure, he had been rollicking here with Eloise and hadn't given me a thought.

I waited a moment to see if they'd notice me standing there, but they were utterly oblivious. After a moment or two it was just a bit more than I could stand. I coughed and tapped on the inside of the door I'd pushed open, and managed to smile as they tore apart and stared at me in utter consternation.

"Well—how long has this been going on?" And I can't tell you the effort it cost me to keep my voice light.

They just lay there on the bed, propped up on their elbows, and stared at me. Paul was almost pop-eyed with dismay, and Eloise looked utterly bedraggled with her face streaked with tears and her hair disordered.

"If I'm intruding, I'll go away," I told them, and I even managed a tiny laugh.

"I thought you were working on your exhibition stuff," Paul said at last. He struggled up off the bed and Eloise stood up beside him.

"Well, actually I was. But it's such a beautiful day, I thought we'd drive down to the village and do some errands. We seem to get together alone so seldom lately." I glanced at Eloise as I spoke to him and she had the nerve to stare back at me. "Anyway, Paul"—I turned back to my husband—"I came up and changed and came to find you. And I guess I found you," I said simply.

"But how quietly you came," he said.

"Well"—I glanced down deprecatingly at my feet—"these little matador slippers don't make any noise at

all." They exchanged a glance, and Paul reached out and took her hand. "Perhaps I should have come with a cape and sword," I said bitterly. I turned to leave but Paul called me back.

"Fay, don't leave it like this. We may as well have it out now."

"Have what out? I caught you in an indiscretion, and I think it's better if we pretend it didn't happen and say no more about it."

"It's no indiscretion. It *did* happen—and there's a great deal more to be said about it."

"If you want to apologize for your disgusting behaviour, I accept your apology."

"No, that's not what I want to do. I want you to give me a divorce."

"My dear Paul, that's rather dramatic, isn't it?"

"We can't go on living like this, Fay."

"No, of course, we certainly cannot. But when Eloise leaves, you will feel quite differently about things, I feel sure."

"Fay, for Heaven's sake, I want my freedom."

"We don't want to become hysterical just because you've been caught in an embarrassing position. Or perhaps *put in one* might be the better term. But I don't blame you, Paul. Believe me, I don't blame you."

"Can't you see I've stood all I can take? I'm finished, Fay."

I couldn't see anything of the sort, naturally. His head had been turned and he imagined himself in love. It's really amazing how a mature and intelligent man can delude himself into

believing that he wants to leave his wife and try greener pastures.

"Suppose we leave it for now and discuss it later, Paul, when we're both feeling less distraught."

I refused to say any more on the subject then, and waited until Paul and I were alone that night.

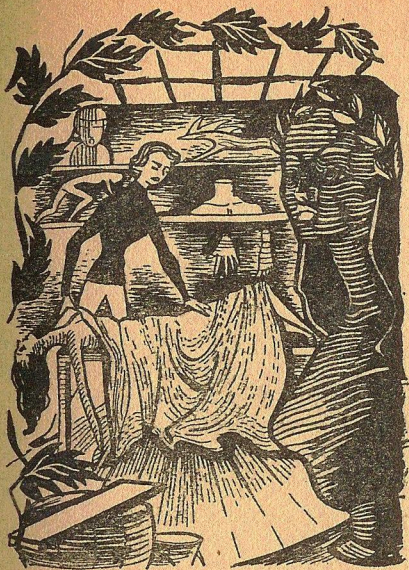
It was an extremely painful session for both of us. Paul was quite brazen about the whole thing. He reiterated his request for a divorce, and I had to refuse him. For his own sake, I simply could not let him throw away everything we had accomplished.

I tried, as gently as I could, to make him understand that it was only out of consideration for him that I didn't take my outraged pride to a lawyer and have his name and hers plastered across the newspapers.

He only replied bitterly that he didn't care how much plastering I did, he was in love with her and wanted to marry her.

It was a bitter pill to swallow, I can tell you. There wasn't much left except to agree. Sad at heart, I told Paul that if he was determined to throw away everything we had built together, I would agree to a divorce. But not immediately. I begged him to wait for one year. I told him that we would send Eloise away and continue living together for one year, and if they still wanted each other at the end of that time, I wouldn't stand in their way.

I was quite convinced that a year of separation would see my husband safely back to sanity. He had to agree of course, because he knew that if he did not I should refuse to divorce



him altogether and that would be the end of it.

At breakfast next morning I told Eloise what we had decided to do. She was aghast at my "cruelty" as she called it. She began weeping violently, and Paul jumped up from his place and went to comfort her. I told him it would be better if he would take his car and leave the house for the rest of the day. It would be easier for Eloise to get her packing done, and I myself would drive her to the station.

They stared into each other's eyes searching for an answer, a promise—to last a year. Then Paul snatched his coat from the back of his chair and left the house. We heard his car drive away a few minutes later. I finished my coffee, and told Eloise we'd better get started with her packing. She

shoved her chair back and ran sobbing from the room. A little later I went upstairs and found her packing and stayed for a while to help. There were some odds and ends that I wanted to clear up in my studio, so after a while I went downstairs and told her to look for me there when she was ready to leave.

She came down in about half an hour. She looked very young and lovely. Her eyes were a bit red, but she had applied her make-up skilfully and it wasn't too noticeable. She held out a letter and asked me to give it to Paul when he came home.

I took the letter and tossed it on to my work-bench. Then I walked over to her and took her by the throat and strangled her. She struggled a bit. She certainly didn't want to die, but my hands are very strong. Stronger than most men's. My work has given me a grip like steel. It was all over in a few minutes. Then I ripped off her clothes and went to work.

When Paul came home that evening I told him that I had a lovely surprise for him, but he didn't show a great deal of interest.

I said no more about it until I was ready to show him. Then I took him to my studio, and gave the sheet a twitch and it fell to the floor. He turned quite grey. Well, it *was* life-like. He went up to it and ran his hands over the plaster, white and smooth as her own warm body had been when I encased it.

"Why, Fay—it's beautiful," he stammered, "*beautiful*. So life-like."

Well, it should be, shouldn't it?

BOO TO A GOOSE

JOAN FLEMING

“**H**AIN WOULD I KISS,” Mr. Chaffinch said, “my Julia’s dainty leg, which is as smooth and hairless as an egg.” Herrick.” And so saying he bent and kissed

the pretty leg of Mrs. Leslie Lark, bare above her red bobby-sox and covered with a gentle chicken-colored down.

“Poitry!” she exclaimed. “Well, I never! But Rosie’s the name.”

“Rosie!” Mr. Chaffinch repeated, charmed. “It is really Rosie?”

“Reely and truly.”

“How delightful! I expect you think I’m a bit of a one, don’t you, Rosie?”

Rosie had heard that he was very much of a one, and had therefore been attracted to him, for she was, indeed, something of a one herself.

“I’d call you fresh,” Rosie temperized.

Fresh. Mr. Chaffinch considered the adjective which, in fact, suited him as little as his name; he was a lean, scissor-like type with the deeply lined face of a libertine. He had a spurious courtesy about him, but, as he bowed over a woman’s hand, his thoughts were clearly far from chivalrous. His taste ran to married women rather than to young girls. Mr. Chaffinch had made a pass, as they say, at most of the attractive married women in his county, and his roving glance was wandering even

farther afield when it chanced upon the newest arrival in his own village, the bride of little Leslie Lark, the piano tuner, who had lived in Mr. Chaffinch’s village with his widowed mother as long as Mr. Chaffinch could remember, which was quite a long time.

And what a bride! When old Mrs. Lark had died, Leslie was well into his forties, and everyone had predicted a wholesale kicking over the traces; but even the most fanciful predictions had been surpassed in Rosie.

Mr. Lark was employed by a firm in a neighbouring town; he left home punctually every morning shortly after eight o’clock in his small Morris Minor and did not return until the evening, and everyone wondered whether the bride would be lonely left to herself the whole day.

But not for long. Several times a week Rosie could be seen tripping along from the Lark cottage in the High Street, round to the left, up Church Street to Mr. Chaffinch’s house, which was next door to the church. Rosie, it became known, was “doing for” Mr. Chaffinch, and what Mr. Chaffinch was doing for Rosie was speculated upon at length.

Presently Rosie was seen no more going down the High Street and turning into Church Street, and conjecture was as to whether or not Rosie had been dismissed from Mr. Chaffinch’s employ. Soon, however, the

sinister fact came to light that Rosie was taking a short-cut to Mr. Chaffinch's house; she scrambled through a hole in the fence of her back garden, and made her way across the orchard, through the door at the end of Mr. Chaffinch's walled garden, and down his garden path to his house. Thus no one knew exactly what time she went and what time she returned; neither did they know how often she went.

"It's a shame," everyone agreed indignantly, but though Leslie Lark was well-liked and a friend of all, or perhaps because of it, no one cared to tell him what was going on. Besides, no one could be sure that anything much was going on, for in some country places it is not supposed that sex rears its ugly head until after closing-time.

Fresh! The adjective stayed with Mr. Chaffinch and displeased him. To fancy oneself as a Lothario and to be designated "fresh" was a little grieving. He would take the earliest opportunity of showing Rosie that he was something more than fresh.

And that opportunity arose very shortly; Mr. Lark went away for a week. It was not surprising; once or twice a year, perhaps, he went to one of his firm's more distant branches to replace staff ill or on holiday.

He took his young wife tenderly in his arms. "Now, be a good girl, Rosie, won't you?"

Rosie hugged him warmly. "Of course."

"I'd like it better if you weren't working for that old basket, Chaf-

finch. He's not got a good name round these parts."

Rosie pointed out that it was far better that she should be employed even for an hour or two during the day; being busy kept her from feeling lonely. "I know how to look after myself, don't you fret, love," Rosie told him.

But Mr. Leslie Lark looked far from satisfied as he packed himself and his canvas-grip into his Morris Minor and drove off with a wave and a wistful look back.

"Not on your life," Rosie said firmly, beginning as she meant to go on.

But Mr. Chaffinch made short-shrift of her protests.

"You certainly have a way with you," Rosie said ruefully. "I'll come, then, but I'll leave the light on in our front room. I wouldn't like anyone to know."

"Do as you please about that. But taking your short-cut across the orchard makes you quite safe. You could stay all night, nobody could possibly find out."

"That I shan't do," Rosie declared just as firmly as before.

"We'll see," Mr. Chaffinch said, with a charming smile.

Mr. Chaffinch had a television set. There was a fascinating programme being shown after supper, so fascinating, in fact, that Rosie was not able to start clearing away the meal until she had seen it to the end. It was eleven-thirty before she finished washing-up and tidying away.

"You're not going, of course," Mr.

Chaffinch told her. "I shan't need a hot-water bottle tonight," he added, with another of his famous smiles.

Rosie looked out of the door, there was a biting wind and it was beginning to rain. It was also dark and, as Leslie had taken their electric torch with him, she had no means of lighting her path across the orchard.

"You seem to forget I have a husband, Mr. Chaffinch," she said severely.

"No, indeed," Mr. Chaffinch answered politely. "Small and frail though he is, I haven't forgotten that little fact."

"He may be a bit on the short side," Rosie said, "but Leslie's a very fine man, let me tell you. He's deep, is Leslie. Doesn't say a lot, but it's all here." She tapped her forehead.

"You surprise me," Mr. Chaffinch said. He was beginning to get a little annoyed. Leslie Lark was such an insignificant creature to stand between himself and a night with Rosie in his bed.

"I'm proud of Leslie," Rosie went on. "Make no mistake about it, I love him very, very much."

"You've a funny way of showing it," Mr. Chaffinch observed nastily.

That settled it. "Well, I'll be off," Rosie replied coldly.

But now Mr. Chaffinch began to panic. Was it possible that he wasn't going to get his own way, for once?

Rosie stood firm. Nothing, she said, would induce her to stay. Mr. Chaffinch found all his usual methods had failed him. As a last resort, he appealed to her motherly instinct. He said he was lonely, that he became

nervous when he was alone. Rosie suggested that he find himself a wife, and Mr. Chaffinch said that that thought made him even more nervous.

Rosie, on the crest of her wave of independence, tied her scarf round her head, wrapped herself into her coat and ran for it.

Mr. Chaffinch, defeated, went to bed, but not to sleep. He was worried: was he losing his grip; had old age caught up on him at last? "Rosie," he moaned, tossing and rolling over as though in pain. "Rosie, my beauty!"

And then he froze. He lay quite still, but his heart pounded away in great bounds that shook his whole body. The organ in the church was being played. Or else—Mr. Chaffinch was going mad.

The thin, eerie sound faded away, and Mr. Chaffinch allowed himself to breathe; but no sooner had he taken a few deep breaths than it started again, a thin, high wail like the cry of a restless spirit shut for ever from paradise. This died away like a fog patch blown aside by a light breeze, and was soon replaced by yet another spirit screaming its wraith-like way after the last.

The church was a stone's throw from Mr. Chaffinch's house; opposite was a big barn and beyond the church were fields. Mr. Chaffinch wondered whether anyone else could hear the noise, and realized that it was not possible. Shaking, he crawled from his bed and, lifting aside one of his curtains, he looked out of the window.

The church was in darkness.

Mr. Chaffinch went downstairs to the telephone.

Naturally they thought at the post office that he was mad, bringing them down in the dead of night to call up the police because he thought he heard someone in the church. The inspector at the police-station didn't like it either. The sergeant was making two cups of cocoa; he had to take the kettle off the gas-ring and go out on his bicycle, down to the church to see what was up.

And, of course, there was nothing. The place was in darkness, not a sound, the door locked and the key in its usual hiding-place under a loose stone in the wall of the porch, everything in perfect order.

He reported his findings to Mr. Chaffinch, who was standing shivering in his hall with his Jaeger dressing-gown hanging about him like a becalmed flag.

"He didn't like it at all," the sergeant reported to his inspector. "He never said a word of thanks, nor nothing; he went off grumbling back to his bed. Do you reckon he's going a bit cranky?"

Mr. Chaffinch was cowed. "Rosie," he begged, "stay with me tonight."

"You're not going on about that, are you? What's wrong with you this morning?"

"If you'd only stayed with me last night, you'd have heard it too." And Mr. Chaffinch told her what happened to him after she had left.

"Imagination," Rosie declared.

"That doesn't relieve my mind at all," Mr. Chaffinch pointed out. "It

will be a nice look-out if I'm going to start imagining things."

"You've a very strong imagination," Rosie said tartly.

There was no doubt about it that Mr. Chaffinch was upset. Rosie went about her work unknissed, unhugged and Mr. Chaffinch stood at his bedroom window and looked across at the church for a very long time, brooding.

"How long did it go on for?" Rosie asked.

"Seemed like hours."

"Well, if it starts again tonight look at your watch. Time it."

Mr. Chaffinch wondered what good that would do.

There was no question of Rosie staying the next night. Mr. Chaffinch was too worried to be charming. The fascination which Rosie had felt he possessed was being replaced by an unattractive querulousness.

He stayed up late, and at midnight he went up to his bedroom and pushed aside the curtain. It was a fine night, but very dark, there being no moon, even behind the clouds. Slowly, listening acutely, he got ready for bed.

It didn't start until twenty minutes past twelve and continued for exactly ten minutes. After the first minute or two, however, Mr. Chaffinch was again on the telephone.

"Look," the inspector said kindly, "you're near enough the church, sir; why don't you go straight in, surprise them, whoever it is."

Mr. Chaffinch swallowed. It was unthinkable. He would no more have gone across the churchyard and into

the church in the small hours of a winter's morning, whether the organ was playing mysteriously or not, than he would have stepped blind-folded off the end of Brighton pier.

"I don't believe in tampering with the supernatural," he replied stiffly.

"Well then, sir, let 'em be. If it's spirits, they won't do any harm," the inspector said whimsically.

Mr. Chaffinch banged down the receiver. What a fool the man was, he'd a good mind to report him to the Chief Constable.

The next day Mr. Chaffinch went up to London to consult an ear, nose and throat specialist about his "head noises." The specialist could find no cause for the complaint whatsoever. He syringed Mr. Chaffinch's ears and told him to take a holiday, unaware of the fact that Mr. Chaffinch's life was one long holiday.

Back home Mr. Chaffinch paced up and down. Then he made his decision; he rang up the Police Headquarters of the nearest town and asked for a police car with a C.I.D. man to be sent. He had reason to believe that thieves were after the church plate. There was no question of playful dallying with Rosie tonight, he was anxious to get rid of the girl before the police car arrived at ten o'clock. The detectives listened politely to his story. They parked their car in Mr. Chaffinch's small drive and hid themselves in the churchyard. And, of course, nothing happened at all. Mr. Chaffinch felt very ashamed, and after midnight he felt obliged to ask them in to have some of his precious whisky.

"There's no need for you to worry, sir. There's been no interference of any kind so far as it is possible to tell. Who is going to go into the church and start playing the organ round midnight on a cold winter's night? We've talked to the verger; he thinks the lot of us are crazy. Besides—there's been a spot of bother about the organ, hasn't there? The vicar's got the idea he wants to start a fund to modernize it, but the Church Council say there's more important things to be done first. That's right, isn't it? Well, this is an old-fashioned organ with hand-operated bellows. The choir take it in turn to pump the handle up and down on a Sunday, isn't that so? Well, then——"

Mr. Chaffinch's heart seemed to turn right over.

"—well, it stands to reason there's no one been playing it. It would take two men, or a man and a boy. The whole idea is—is quite without any foundation."

Supernatural, that's what it was. When the officers of the C.I.D. had left, Mr. Chaffinch, despite the whisky he had consumed, sat and shivered—until the organ started up again.

That was Wednesday night.

On Friday night, some time after midnight, he took eleven tablets of phenobarbitone—and died.

"Suicide," they said, "whilst the balance of his mind was disturbed."

Leslie Lark was always very quiet, thus it could not be said that he was any quieter than usual. Rosie was quiet, too, for she was doing a lot

of thinking. At last she had to say something; she chose night-time, when it was dark and they lay, hand in hand.

"He was nervous, poor chap. His nerves must have been terrible. I reckon if I'd stayed, like he asked, right at the beginning of last week, he might have been all right."

Leslie cleared his throat. "How do you mean, stay, Rosie?"

"After the TV and after I'd washed-up and cleared away, he said he didn't like being alone."

"Would you have stayed, Rosie?"

"Not like I thought he meant. But if I'd thought he'd got an attack of nerves or anything—of course I'd have stayed. I'd have sat up all night in an arm-chair."

There was a very long pause. Rosie could not see Leslie's face, but he sounded very curious when he said:

"I reckon I've killed him, Rosie."

"So it was you, was it?"

"I came back. I couldn't bear to stay away from you, so I drove back. All that long way: sixty-four miles. I saw the light on, but you weren't there, Rosie. I reckoned you'd be along with that old basket. I went along and stood outside the house, but I didn't dare to go and fetch you away like I'd have done if I'd had the guts."

Rosie turned to him and gathered him into her arms.

"So I went into the church and made all the noise I could. I was that angry——"

Poor little man! Rosie wept.

"You came back every night?"

"The third night he'd got the police

car along; then I realized I'd upset him, so I laid low until after they'd gone. I couldn't slosh him in the face, and that, it seemed to me, was the only way I could get my own back. So I made a job of it and did it the five nights. I got a few hours' sleep going back, stopped off the main road outside an all-night café. The driving's easy that time of night."

"You must be dead, Leslie."

"I'm not but he is, and it looks like I'm a murderer."

"Not you," Rosie said stoutly. "It was his conscience killed him. Honour the dead and all that, but he was a nasty old man when all's said and done."

But not all was said. Before they went to sleep Rosie remembered something.

"How could you have played the organ? It takes a man and a boy."

"Not if you know anything. You can pump it full and then run round and play for nearly a minute so long as you don't waste the wind playing chords. I played for hours like that when I was a kid. I reckon I'd have liked to be an organist, but it didn't happen. Yes, you can make quite a job of it if you let the notes die down before you start pumping again. Horrible noise it makes. Turn anyone's stomach it would."

"Poor old Chaffinch," Rosie murmured. "Thought his past had caught up with him; couldn't stick it out."

"I only meant to give him a turn," Leslie said.

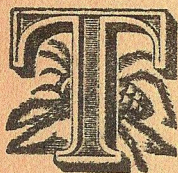
"Which only goes to show . . ."

Rosie said comfortably.

ATHENÆUM STRIP-TEASE

DONALD O. J. MESSENGER

Illustrated by W. E. Jones



HERE WAS THAT unforgettable salty, fishy smell about the fog rolling in from the Atlantic and smothering Boston.

It had the certain pungency which stings consciousness into a vague feeling that barriers of time and space are not so rigid after all—that those dead ships that have assembled storm after storm in their Sable Island graveyard, and the fishing fleet netting into the mysterious, unknown depths around the Grand Banks, are somehow pressing close against the momentary “here”; while the vivid past is separated only by thin, palpitating moments from the present “now.”

The physical smell, the clammy caress of the thick air, and the sub-conscious stimulation they aroused, carried the mind of Malcolm MacDonald, Halifax shipping man, in two directions at once—in both space and time.

As clearly as if he sat in a plane circling in the sunny vastness above the billowing mass drifting in, with only the pyramidal top of the Customs House tower piercing its surface, he looked to the East and to the West. Eastward, beyond his own comfortable home overlooking the north-west arm in Halifax—probably

fog-shrouded itself today, he thought—he gazed on England. In that same dissolving of barriers it seemed close to this New England in which he now stood, a little undecided what to do next, with his 14-year-old son Angus.

He visualized his branch office in Bristol, and pictured one of his cargo vessels even now riding the in-flowing tide of the Avon beneath the sea walls, with their cave where once African slaves awaited transshipment on their way to America. His mind's eye looked higher at the Suspension Bridge, and he thought of a period of school-days spent in Clifton.

The memory of them suddenly brought him into conscious attention to the simultaneous pull of his thoughts in the opposite direction—to the very near West, to Cambridge just across the Charles River from Boston, specifically to the Harvard of his college years.

Those two youthful view-points, Clifton and Harvard, merged all at once into one, and for some unexplainable reason fastened on a single impression. Mr. MacDonald, with his strict Presbyterian background and present active membership in the United Church of Canada, found with a mild twinge of respectable shame, and yet a thrill of remembered expectancy which he could not down, that he was momentarily experienc-

ing once more the feeling of boyish curiosity about sex. Nothing vulgar, of course, he assured himself truthfully enough, but an eager adventurous longing to find out just exactly what these mysteries were that gave such magnetic pull to Venus, Aphrodite and the other ancient goddesses who had been hovering alluringly in the background of classical studies.

It was a composite position in which he found the thought of his youth. It lay somewhere between pre-teenage years at Clifton and the proudly sophisticated stand of Harvard days. It was, in fact, it suddenly struck him, the exact point of development reached by the boy standing beside him outside North Station.

For a moment he felt sure he had broken through into the boy's own world. At last, perhaps, they could begin now to be real comrades in adventure. This was an ardently hoped-for state of affairs which had bafflingly eluded him throughout such planned efforts in this direction as hunting and fishing trips when the two had slept together under the stars, watching for meteors shooting across the infinity of space, reaching out from their double sleeping-bag to feel the cool, fresh dew on grass and leaves.



Mr. MacDonald sometimes sincerely longed to shed his neat, dark business suits and Homburg hat, and all the cherished "standing in life" which they symbolized, and to share some of the experiences of his son's own youth. If only he could feel again through Angus the keen yearnings, the vigorous young joys, the "first-time" adventures, and even the sometimes bitter misunderstandings, resentments, rebellions and frustrations

—with their not-too-delayed resolutions. Perhaps he could even blunt the sharpness of some of these temporary woes with wisdom gained in mature experience.

In the matter of this curiosity about sex, too often today, he told himself with a momentary contraction of his

bushy eyebrows beneath that symbolic Homburg, a word used as a synonym for love, he could at least smooth the way around certain pitfalls.

Flashing through his mind came the thought of his offspring's reception of an "eminently sane and wholesome" book expounding the facts of life for boys. Blushing slightly, he had handed it to Angus after coming across a lurid pocket paper edition folded neatly within an algebra workbook. He had left this volume undis-

turbed, making no reference to his discovery. Typically, he had adopted what he felt, with a touch of pompous satisfaction, was the modern, constructive approach to the problem which his wisdom dictated.

Angus had received the book casually, glancing unperturbed at the title page and index, and remarking, "Birds and bees stuff, eh? Sure, I'll be glad to read it. Thanks."

That was back in June, three months ago. It had been an early scorcher of a day and the boy had set up his pup tent on the lawn, planning to sleep in it with a cousin coming over from the Annapolis Valley for the night and following day.

There had been laughter as the moonlight fell on the canvas after bed-time, and the circular glow of a flashlight had occasionally showed on it from the inside of the tent. In the morning the two were still asleep when Mr. MacDonald left early for his office. But through the open flap, he caught sight of the innocuous volume lying inside. And then that evening, when he came home, Angus had greeted him with a faintly puckish grin.

Now, looking down at him—not so far down either, he had been growing so fast through the summer—despite the veiling of the street lights by the thickening fog, he caught sight of that same elusive grin, friendly, yet provocative enough to be vaguely disquieting.

"What'll we do now, Father?" the boy inquired. "You showed me all your old stamping grounds around Cambridge and Boston yesterday.

The plane's grounded for sure. We've got our berths on the Gull instead, and it doesn't pull out for an hour or so."

"Well, what would you like best to do, son? Maybe see a film at the Lancaster across the road there? Seems to have something in Cinemascope, but I can't read the neon sign in this fog."

"Oh, we can see a movie any time at home. There ought to be something to see here that we couldn't in Halifax." Angus paused, looking up at his father quizzically, then went on with the quickened breath coming from a decision made, "When we were in that famous old Athenæum yesterday, with gentlemen in wing-collars and ladies in black lace prowling between all those bookshelves and bits of statuary—or sipping those three-cent cups of tea and nibbling on one-cent crackers—you suddenly laughed and said something about another Athenæum down towards North Station, being a horse of a very different colour. What goes on in that one, anyway? Maybe we'd have time to pay it a visit."

Now Angus was perfectly well aware that his father had been thinking, with some qualms of conscience perhaps, of the Howard Athenæum, better known to successive generations of Harvard boys, and to Boston in general, as the "Old Howard." Old it was indeed for the New World. Once a church, it had been converted half a century or more ago into a centre for the arts, particularly Shakespearean drama. But that era had long since gone as well.

Not so long before this Boston visit, Angus had left his bedroom door ajar at home so as to eavesdrop on the sometimes ribald reminiscences exchanged when a couple of his sire's old Harvard classmates had come to spend a night, and his mother had gone to a theatre to leave them entirely unhampered.

He had gathered that this Howard Athenæum, although owned, it was widely rumoured, by a proper little old lady on Beacon Hill, had changed its emphasis from the Immortal Bard to a type of programme in which the immoral was not barred enough always, according to censorial officials who occasionally closed it down temporarily in protest. It had become, in fact, the most notorious Boston shrine of "burlesque," that peculiarly American development of the Thespian arts in which "strip-tease" queens, at intervals in the course of the song, dance and low-comedy entertainment, aroused the delight of anticipation in far from tongue-tied male audiences.

At first shocked at this suggestion for spending a final hour or two in the city which likes to believe itself the intellectual hub of the universe, Angus's father did not know quite what to say. The prospect was not unpleasing, to tell the truth. But the impinging upon one another of two ideas usually confined in such totally different water-tight compartments of his mind, as the one devoted to the upbringing of his son and heir and the other holding records of his own cherished escapades and youthful improprieties, called for a little realign-

ment of his thinking, an orientation from a different base.

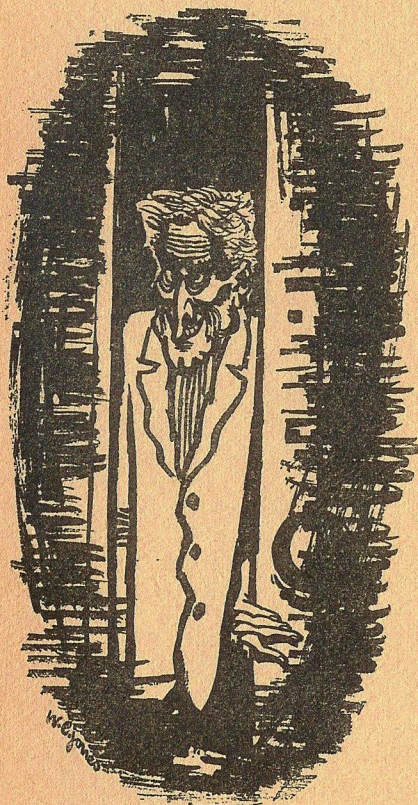
The silence of the fog, drifting in more heavily every minute, was unbroken by anything but his sharp intake of breath, which, because the air had picked up a faintly sulphurous content in passing the Monsanto chemical plant across the Mystic River, resulted in a truly involuntary cough. Angus, however, incorrectly interpreted this as a sign of "stuffy" indecision.

Having observed that his father was noticeably upset by his interest in a display of pocket books with arrestingly suggestive cover designs, on a news-stand inside the station, with filial discernment the boy applied a goad.

"Of course," he said, "we could just sit and read in the waiting-room until they open up the sleeper and we can go to bed. It looked as though there were some pretty good books on the news-stand. I could start one off and finish it on the train tomorrow."

Here was a choice of two evils—or, after all, would the Old Howard be an evil under the circumstances? Would not the vulgar display of near-nudity serve, perhaps, to disabuse the mind of Angus of what was undoubtedly mainly the fascination of the unknown, the lure of the forbidden, the magnetic pull with which certain things are invested by a boy's own imagination? It might avoid a possible preoccupation which sometimes becomes so embedded as to persist mesmerically even after marriage has made a commonplace of the physical experiences involved.

Mentally answering his own question, the conscientious parent recalled the story of a psychiatrist who had taken each of his three sons as they attained the ripe and especially imaginatively experimental age of a round dozen years to the Trocadero Burlesque Theatre in Philadelphia, to develop the familiarity which breeds healthy contempt, he had said, for otherwise glamorously forbidden fruits.



Here was a chance to follow this professional example of paternal solicitude for dawning adolescence. Yes, he would do it. Angus and he would share the experience together. It would forge a new bond between them.

With a momentary introspective twinge of conscience, this devotedly active member of his church believed he recognized undue alacrity in his readiness to accept his own arguments. But he brushed these qualms aside with the wishful and probably correct realization that it was the far beckoning of his own youth which attracted him through associations with the place, rather than any desire for the crude public display of female flesh.

"All right, son. Let's go!" he said brusquely.

Plunging into the murky night, as the faintest suggestion of a stirring breeze began to slide the grey blanket visibly past the dimmed street lights, Mr. MacDonald began to meditate aloud on the strange Bostonian links between the puritanical and the frankly pagan.

The Old Howard, with its ancient, yet modern pointing towards gratification of the universal longing for intimate contact with the very source of life, beauty, joy and companionship, was far from being the only erstwhile church—in which more spiritual conceptions of the same eternal search had been presented originally—that had yielded to pagan influences and far different uses. There was the Latin Quarter, established as a night-club, in one of them,

and there was that other old place of worship with the classically pillared front, standing in the shadow of the Bradford Hotel, in use at various times as a ballroom and another night-club. There was something Hellenic about that one—a form borrowed from a pagan era by the strict New England Church, and now returned to it for uses distinctly bearing the imprint of the touch of Pan.

In between the Old Howard's own two periods, he explained to the not too interested Angus, the intellectually lofty name of "Howard Athenæum" had been bestowed upon it. Shakespeare's balance of interest between the pagan and the Christian had literally held the stage. As a matter of fact, he put in parenthetically, he understood there was a movement afoot to purchase the place, said by experts to be the most perfect example in America of the Shakespearean stage type, and to turn it into a museum of theatre arts.

In a few more minutes they arrived at Scollay Square and looked across it at the big cinema bearing its name. But its electric sign was dark. As they crossed the street Mr. MacDonald saw that the paint was peeling around the rows of unlit bulbs over the entrance. The foyer itself was boarded up and a news vendor had set up his piles of papers and magazines in front of it, with copies of *Variety* heading the display.

Just around the corner, on its own short, dark little street, was the Old Howard. At last there it was. But, thought the father, it must be getting late, for the big, old-fashioned arc-

lamp style lights, hanging like giant bubbles beneath queer conical shades attached to brackets on the face of the old, grey-stone church, were not lit. However, the glow of a street light, filtering mistily through the fog-laden air, revealed the familiar sign, "Always something doing from 9 a.m. to 11 p.m.," and it certainly was not eleven o'clock yet.

The door stood open, and the face of a little old man peered out at them. It was a wrinkled face, but as its owner beckoned them in, it was lighted by something of the urge of Pan in a sly smile that suddenly crossed it. The fellow vaguely reminded Mr. MacDonald of the wizened guardian of the stage-door in the old days.

"You're a bit late for the show," said the man in a voice that somehow gave an impression of some sort of inner hunger. "The box-office closed long ago and the ushers have left. But there's plenty of room. Follow me!"

He shone a flashlight on the floor, and the two MacDonalds followed the moving disc of light until it rested on two vacant aisle seats. The air inside was heavy and dank as in a crypt. The fog had managed to fill the whole building, it seemed, even to be concentrated there. Their guide had switched off his torch the moment they were seated, and had slipped noiselessly away.

A far-away rumble of thunder mingled with the indescribable murmur that helps to give the feeling of massed humanity, crowding close, yet completely hidden in the dark-

ness. A sighing breath as if a great animal crouched, waiting for satisfaction of its aroused appetite, gave the hair on the nape of Mr. MacDonald's neck the sensation of rising.

Something moved on the stage. Through the central parting of black curtains came a girl, walking in traditional strip-tease style with long brazen steps, yet with a seductively smooth, gliding gait.

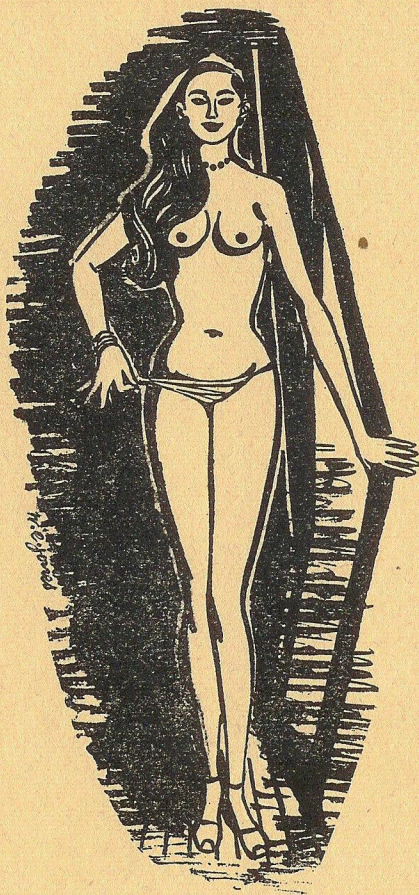
She strolled back and forth mincingly. A hand stole up to unloose one shoulder-strap. Another turn across the stage and back to the centre. Down went the other strap. A few more leisurely, yet vitally spring paces, a serpentine wriggle and down fell the outer dress to the floor.

Stepping out of it and shaking her long hair loose over bare shoulders, the girl went on with the wordless routine. Remaining garments were shed, one by one, between occasional

scurryings in mock modesty, behind the curtain, and shyly provocative reappearances between its parted folds.

As the act progressed in the usual style, Mr. MacDonald became aware of what struck him uncomfortably as a distinctly unusual concentration of the gaze of the gradually emerging performer, upon him and his son. Glancing sideways at Angus he felt sure the boy was even more keenly conscious of this. He was sitting on the edge of his seat, leaning forward slightly, with his lips parted. And even in the shrouding darkness and fog, he glimpsed a sparkle in his son's eyes.

At last there was nothing left but the proverbial G-string. The girl was comely enough, in all conscience, the father thought to himself—too alluringly youthful and alive, with a certain clean-cut surface freshness, to be on display in a place like this—more



suit to be frozen into marble and to join the Greek sculpture in the Museum of Fine Arts. But those Greeks had no false modesty, nothing they would temptingly half hide. Perhaps this girl, underneath it all, had something of their bravely, wholesomely unashamed spirit.

But this train of thought was broken by her expression as she slipped back on the stage. There was a sensuous curve to her lips, moist, Mr. MacDonald could see even at that distance, that suggested that all this was more than routine "show business" for her. As one hand slipped down to her waist to release the final beaded trifle that held back complete nudity, the other reached out directly towards them with a beckoning gesture, an invitation more than reflected in her heavily lashed eyes.

Then, just as the G-string was loosened, the lights were blacked out to preserve the ultimate illusion of mystery, with its fascination so much greater than complete, matter-of-fact exposure.

In the absolute darkness Mr. MacDonald was conscious of movement at his side. Gradually there crept into his mind an indefinable sense of being alone.

"Angus!" he whispered.

Silence pressed close around him, though there was a hushed suggestion of surreptitious brushing past folds of velvet on the stage, while outside thunder rolled nearer, shaking a loose board somewhere beneath the roof.

He reached out to his son's seat.

It was empty.

His fingers stretched unbelievably farther, seeking a reassuring contact with shoulder, arm or knee.

There was nothing.

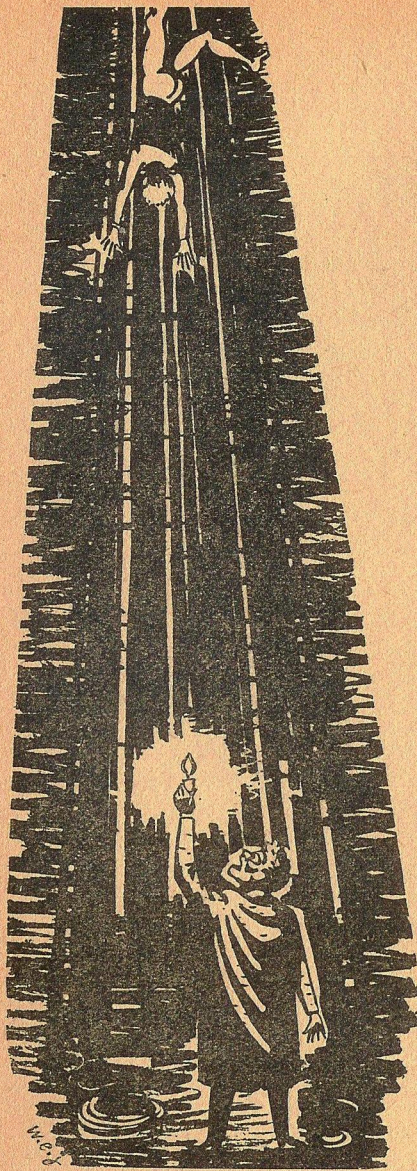
The blackout continued. What was the matter with the stage manager. Where was the next act?

Suddenly in the pitch darkness there was a muffled scream-like sound which might have been the spring or hinges of the stage-door, blown open by a gust heralding the storm. It followed a dull thud, which otherwise might very well have been the slamming of the same door. But after a peculiar whirring as of a rope racing over a pulley came one more thud, less muffled than the first and sounding right across the full width of the stage.

Then the curtain loomed into faint visibility again, in a purplish glow like the light used to bring out fluorescent effects. The folds parted. A hand slid through—an arm—a naked thigh—the rest of the whole form of the girl. Nude? More than that. Not only had the G-string gone, but, Mr. MacDonald realized with a tingling of the spine that made him catch his breath, so had the skin.

The strip-tease had gone a step farther. As the grisly figure moved with the same lecherous swaying of the hips, it resembled nothing so much as one of those muscular charts encountered in patent-medicine advertisements found in old-fashioned farmer's almanacs.

With little tripping steps, the girl—for she was still recognizable as a girl from her breasts to her general curving feminine figure—glided coyly out



of sight behind the curtain again.

The eerie lighting remained, and Mr. MacDonald's close-cropped greying hair rose as his scalp prickled in expectation of what must come next.

Once again the folds of the curtain swayed, parting first at the level of the face. It came into view—a grinning skull, followed by the whole ghastly skeleton, moving in a shuddering silence infinitely more harrowing than any rattling of bones could have been.

Shatteringly came a close, sharp crack of lightning. Its flash burst into the theatre through the entrance doors, blown creakingly open by a gust of wind a moment before.

In the momentary glare Mr. MacDonald saw with terror clutching at his throat that he was completely alone amid rows of empty seats.

His immediate impulse was to flee through the open doors, now outlined by the light of a street lamp, its brightness increased since the storm had broken up the fog. He looked round at the doors for a second—long enough to read a sign tacked to one of them, which he had not noticed on the way in. It read: "Closed—Go to the Casino."

Suddenly he remembered reading several months before, with a little sigh of regret at the passing of another landmark of his youth, that the famous Old Howard, having been shut down once more by censors and police authorities, would open no more. It was awaiting demolition, unless that plan to make it into a museum of theatre arts went through.

At the same instant he remembered his son.

"Angus!" he shouted into the complete darkness ahead of him.

Fumblingly he pulled a cigarette-lighter out of his pocket and began to stumble down the aisle while making unsuccessful attempts to light it. Just as he bumped into the rail of the orchestra pit the light came.

Running up the steps at one side of the proscenium and reaching the stage, he raced to the wings breathlessly. His foot caught in a loosely trailing rope, uncoiled from the rack to which lines for raising and lowering back-drops and other flats were secured. He fell on his knees and dropped the lighter.

But it had not gone out. Grabbing it again, he struggled to his feet, shaking off a turn of the rope coil which, somehow, had found its way over one shoulder.

"Angus!" he called again.

A door slammed, and he thought he heard a cackling laugh beyond it, a laugh which brought back vividly the strange expression of the old man who had ushered them into their seats.

What was that, caught on a nail in the wall on the other side of the row of taut ropes reaching up into the echoing void overhead? He stepped nearer and held the flickering flame close.

It was a torn piece of Angus's trousers and a scrap of his shirt. On the floor below it, lying across two heavy sandbags, which had evidently broken loose from the line through which they counterbalanced a heavy piece of scenery, were the rest of the boy's lower garments.

Slowly his father grasped the picture. A stumbling into another rope coiled in place on the rack—a rope that slipped off and over the youthful body, at the same time jerking the line free from its fastening. Partly rotted sandbags that had broken loose from that line so that the weight of the scenery whipped it upwards, instantly tightening the looped coil and catapulting what it encircled directly upwards.

With a struggle Mr. MacDonald raised his face and held the tiny flame aloft.

Far above something white with the whiteness of naked human flesh hung, turning slowly.



Keep Innocency, and take heed unto the thing that is right: for that shall bring a man peace at the last.

THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER.

THE LITTLE MAN'S DIARY

JOHN LUDLOW

These things only happened in films or crime stories, they couldn't happen in real life, not to people like her, Effie Fielden told herself. None of this was real, and yet there was the diary on the carpet, covered with the untidy scrawl.

IT HAD ALL BEGUN about a fortnight before, when the little man started to use the late bus. Effie was a sympathetic soul, and he was obviously worried about something or other as he scribbled in his little book every time the bus stopped to set down a fare. She spoke to him as she got ready to leave.

"This bus gets more crowded every night, doesn't it?"

He did not speak in reply, but smiled nervously at her, half startled, as if his thoughts had been far away.

She did not speak again, although he was there most nights and she often caught him looking secretly at her. Tonight he had got off at the same stop as Effie, but had gone before she could get her bulk down from the top deck and return the little book he had dropped.

Her husband, Sid, had looked askance when she had dropped it on the table with her hat and handbag before relaxing in a chair with a sigh. Sid was no longer in love with her, she had known that for some time. There was someone else, some slip of a girl. There always was. She also knew that it wouldn't last. It never did. He always came back to her. After all, she was a good wife. She worked each day to pay off the mort-

gage on the flat and the shop underneath, and there weren't many women who would do that.

Sid paused as he slicked back his thick dark hair to nod towards the book and ask:

"What's that?"

She smiled. "Something that funny little man I was telling you about dropped on the bus. I'll give it back tomorrow. It's his diary, I think."

He grunted. "Tomorrow never comes."

The words were not supposed to have any particular meaning. It was Sid's device for allowing a slow mind to catch up with the conversation and consider what had been said.

"Will you be late?"

He didn't relish the question, and that convinced her it was a girl.

"Got to see a man about a tricky bit of business. I should be in about eleven, maybe earlier, but don't wait up."

When he had gone, Effie made herself a fresh pot of tea and kicked her street shoes into a corner. She settled herself in an easy chair and wriggled her toes towards the fire. Why couldn't men settle down like women? She wished Sid would put on weight; perhaps that would end his gadding about.

Later when there was nothing on

the wireless she thought worth-while, she cast about for something to pass the time. Her choice finalized on the diary. She wondered what the little man was always writing. Having to move annoyed her, but she fetched the book and settled down again.

Inside the cover, in smudged pencil, he had written: "This diary belongs to Henry Pitt. . ."

She smiled. It seemed so childish, and it was perfect. All Henries ought to look like him. How did the old song go?

"Every one was an 'Enery, she wouldn't have a Willie or a Sam. . ."

She hummed the tune.

The first few pages were uninteresting. His spelling was bad. Frequently she found similar entries.

"He did not speke today. . . ."

"I have been good. . . ."

"It has been a good week."

Effie wondered who "he" was.

Impatiently she turned the pages until she came to the present month—October.

The first entry for October was on the third: "He grumbled last night. I cood not sleep."

That amused her. She could readily imagine the little man being scolded, perhaps for absent-mindedly trumping his partner's ace.

October 5th was a strange entry: "He is with me all the time. My head feels like birsting. I wish I were home again. . . ."

She pondered on the meaning. It lent a new aspect to the little man. A doubt cloud began to form in the recesses of her mind. She read on.

October 8th: "He will not let me rest."

October 9th: "I am glad I ran away from the little boy."

October 11th: "I must shut him up. A lady spoke to me on the bus. She is fat but nise. I must not kill."

It was her. Effie felt her back grow clammy and cold in spite of the room's warmth. She wished there was a phone in the flat or at least that there were neighbours.

Panic started to blossom as she read:

October 12th: "I like her, but he hates and says folow and kill."

The entries for October 13th and 14th were illegible. They might have been made by a four-year-old child. October 15th stood out for her like letters of fire.

"I must kill her to have peece. Why dont they come."

Effie read the remaining entries in a rush:

October 16th: "Went to church. He laughed all the time."

October 17th: "Followed her home. She lives up some stairs over a shop."

October 18th: "Why don't they find me? He says I must kill her on Thirsday. Her husband goes out at nite."

October 19th: "I ran away from a polisman. Waited all nite outside her howse."

The last entry seemed to leap at her from the page.

"Waited all day by the shop. He says I can use her skarf."

She screamed and flung the book across the room.

Her first impulse was to break a window and shout for help. But she shrank from the flapping curtains. Supposing there was no one else in the street but him?

She rushed to the wall calendar. The leaves had not been torn off since August. She snatched them away and let them flutter to the carpet. It was Thursday, October 20th. The confirmation of what she already knew snapped her self-control.

The lighted street, that was the answer. She would rush out, and he would be afraid to touch her with people passing. She started across the room, but the thought came:

"Supposing he is waiting, perhaps standing inside the street door at the end of the passageway?"

Then the solution came. It was so simple she found herself crying. Lock the door. A little man could not break down a thick door.

Before she could move, she heard the street-door scrape open. The

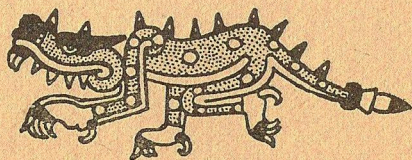
sound froze her to the spot. Her muscles were paralysed with fear, and she could not move although every nerve screamed for action.

Her ears strained for footsteps on the concrete steps to the flat door. There were none. Slowly the tension relaxed, and she broke out anew in perspiration. It must be the wind. She took one step forward before she heard the electric-light switch at the foot of the stairs snapped on. It was him. He must be hesitating, standing down there undecided.

There were just enough precious seconds left in which to make herself safe. Faster than she had ever moved before, she flung herself across the room. Just one twist of the wrist and she was safe. She reached the door as he began to climb the stairs. He was crying.

Frantically her fingers groped round the lock, and then she began to scream.

The key was on the outside.



INTERVIEW

PHYLLIS SHERRY

Some people won't go near the reptile house, but poor Mary Terris was infested by the most slimy, sluggish Things imaginable.



HY, HELLO, THERE! Yes, come right in, won't you? Please close the door! Thank you.

I'm Mary Terris. I don't seem to . . . Oh. You write for a magazine and you'd like a story about me? Well, isn't that nice. Let's see, now. How would you like a little vignette of an incident that happened to me many years ago? In fact, I couldn't have been more than eight at the time. Well. . . .

This occurred at the pleasant summer cottage my parents rented each year for the summer months. Our little family consisted of Mother—sweet, a good cook and charming; Willie, my younger brother—and a little terror, I might say; Father, a physician who seemed to practice more during the summer months around the country than he did in the city. And me, of course, a skinny, freckled little girl. We all managed to have perfect summers as far back as I can remember.

The cottage was old-fashioned but comfortable. Of course, to a child, size of rooms, furniture, space, seem so much larger than they actually are. However, the really great thing about

the cottage was the view. It was barely a hundred feet from the most beautiful fresh-water lake imaginable, set in a nest of green hills with one distant blue mountain at the far end. The lake was almost always blue, clear but lonely. Ours was the only house for miles. But all this picturesque scenery was deceptive when you got right down to it. Most of the lush greenery around the lake was poison ivy or poison oak, and the bank of the lake, instead of being sandy or pebbly, was soft, slimy dark earth, just made to develop the prolific green foliage which hid the sharp rocks on the narrow pathway to the lake from the cottage.

The lake itself was clear and fresh, and a perfect breeding-place for those most horrible of water creatures, the bloodsuckers—leeches. Oh, do they bother you, too? Yes, dreadful. Well, it seemed I had a particular kind of very thin skin or else extremely pungent blood. Whatever it was, we all could swim and splash in the lake together, but invariably it was I who came out with the slimy, cold Things on my back, legs—wherever my young girl's body was exposed in the meagre bathing-suit I was rapidly growing out of. These horrible snake-like worms fastened their needle-sharp stingers into me in every avail-

able place, one large creature actually penetrating my woollen suit. These Things came in all sizes, from tiny worm-like threads hardly an inch long to snakes as much as seven inches long and possibly an inch thick.

Father could skilfully pull the leeches from me without leaving their poisonous stingers under my skin, while Willie, with his normal boy's interest, watched fascinatedly. But outside of the horror of the Things on my person, I was not squeamish in any degree. At that age a child accepts, even though it does not quite understand why it is chosen for a particular unpleasantness, and enjoys what happy times are offered with outstretched arms and eagerness.

My happiest memories that summer were those rare occasions when Father didn't have to remove a single slimy black Thing from any part of me.

One beautiful July afternoon the whole family trooped down to the lake; Willie and I in small one-piece suits, Father in longish trunks, and Mother, who had a good figure, looking frightful in a baggy-skirt affair, the style in those days. We all carried our own bathing-caps, towels and robes. The sky looked the bluer that day for a few cotton clouds which were perfectly mirrored in the clear water of the lake. It was the most delightful swim and romp of the summer. Afterwards I started to give Willie a chase up the path to the house, when suddenly he screamed and pointed dramatically at my ankle. I thought he was joking,

as usual, and ran on. Suddenly I tripped on a stone and paused to get my balance. I looked down and saw a foot-long black snake (so I thought) fastened to the middle of my instep and twined around under my foot. Then I screamed! Apparently I had run some distance with it still on me, even squashing it under my foot as I ran. Father rushed to the house for a knife, cut the Thing from my instep and proceeded to chop it up. Then, to my ultimate horror, the pieces began to move! Blindly, each chopped segment started to crawl in different directions. Mother picked me up, big girl though I was, and carried me sobbing hysterically up to the house. Later they told me Father and Willie burnt the Things and buried the ashes. It was slight comfort, though, and it was a full week before I could force myself down the narrow path to the shore where it had happened.

Not long afterwards came our last happy rendezvous at the lake. The day was hot, still. The lake was an inviting azure blue with hardly a ripple. Father carried all our robes; Mother, the picnic-basket; Willie, our bathing-caps, and I clutched a thermos of lemonade. Willie and I raced ahead, each anxious to be first in the water. Willie handed me my bathing-cap, and we whooped with joy as we ran splashing into the cold water of the lake.

And then it happened. The horrible thing that was the end of everything. We had had a delightful romp and swim. I started out of the water a little ahead of the others, pulling

off my cap as I reached the bank. And then I saw them! *White* blood-suckers, *white* worms, slimy, crawling on the dark wet bank after me! And some were ON me, along my body, down my suit. I shrieked with terror, and blindly started to run. One fell from my hair across my eyes. I felt the cold clamminess of one on my back where I couldn't reach it. With desperate hands I tore at my suit, my nails taking strips of skin also. As I threw down the suit I saw one white thing slither towards my heel, groping blindly. I ran up the path at full speed, never feeling the sharp stones cutting my bare feet. Screaming without a stop, running stark naked, trickles of blood moving down my body, feeling just like Them—screaming, running, until I reached the house. I was still screaming when

they finally broke down the door of the closet I had locked myself in and tried to take me out.

Well. And so you are writing a magazine article on mental institutions. Really, this is more of a sanatorium, you know. And I am not actually a *patient*. I can leave whenever I want to. In fact, they all beg me to. But I feel safe here. You see, the Things can't get in to me here, with this heavy iron door. Of course, they keep telling me and telling me that Willie had mischievously filled my bathing-cap that morning with cold spaghetti left over from lunch. But who in his right mind would believe such a cock-and-bull story? WE know better.

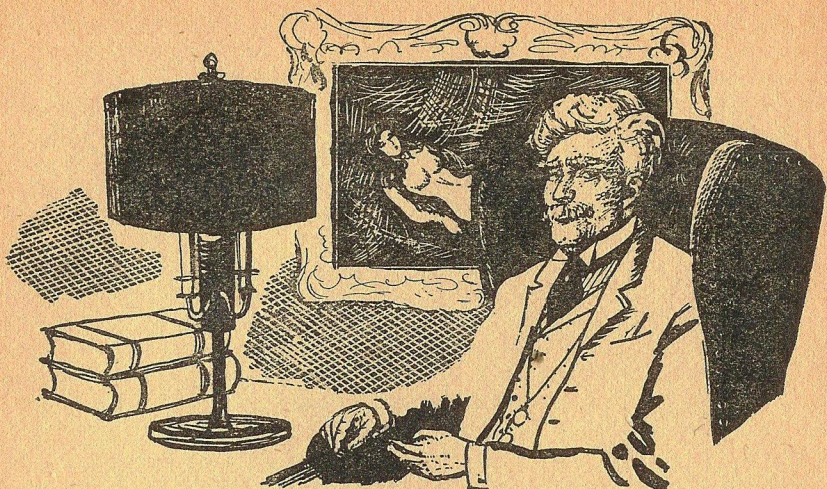
Oh. Must you go? Well, good-bye now. PLEASE close that door behind you—*quite quickly*!



Optima quæque dies miseris mortalibus ævi Prima fugit: subeunt morbi tristisque senectus Et labor, et duræ rapit inclementia mortis.

It is ever the brightest day of life that is first to bid adieu to our hapless mortality: disease and gloomy eld steal upon us, and anon suffering, and the ruthless tyranny of Death, sweep us away.

VIRGIL (70–19 B.C.): *Georgics*, iii. 8.



UNCLE ARNOLD INTERVENES

HENSON EDGLEY

Illustrated by James Cleaver

I TRIED TO concentrate on what Ambrose was saying, for it was important to make a good impression; but for me the girl had filled the room since my first sight of her. She was startling—sleeping drapeless on a bank of crimson velvet and almost frighteningly lovely. But it was not her loveliness that distracted me so much as the certainty that she was about to awake. Each second I looked for a stirring of her shapely limbs and soft breasts, and each second I was amazed that they were still motionless. Above all, her eyes held me. They were closed, but so near to

opening that I watched for the first fluttering of their lashes. The lids were going to lift, and she would reproach my staring.

Unconscious of the crisis Ambrose talked on, berating the contemporary stage and deploring the insensibility of everyone concerned in it.

"There's no purpose in their plays, no strength," he repeated. "I don't know one actor or one playwright nowadays who can make a drama leap from its background and live by its own force."

Again I tried to rivet my attention on him. He was half buried in a huge chair so that I saw little more than his head, but it was his head that mat-

tered. The shock of white hair was a halo against the dark cover, the pale face was dominated by fiercely jutting eyebrows and by a vast moustache stained with nicotine. His mouth was a tantalizing secret, and I must heed the words that poured from it.

What colour would her eyes be? At least hazel, even brown from the rich warmth of her complexion. In that knowledge, I felt, I should find the answer to some fantastically important problem.

"The drama . . . technique . . . the stage. . . ."

His words flowed over me in a swift stream, submerging me as I grasped at them. I would be disgraced eternally if he should discover my inattention. Until that day I had seen him only at first nights or in one of the galleries, lording it like a prelate. Never, I supposed, should I have gained the privilege of admission to his suite if my letter of introduction had not recalled the phrase "the Last of the Critics," of which some wit was delivered years ago. It titillated his ancient vanity to know it was not forgotten.

I realized he was staring at me icily, and turned to excuse my ill-manners.

"I'm awfully sorry, sir," I said. "Just for a moment——"

"A lovely devil, isn't she?" he asked; then more tartly, "Who am I to blame you for preferring her attractions to my own?"

"It isn't that, I assure you. It's . . . it's . . . Well, she's extraordinary, isn't she? Ever since I came in I've had

the feeling she would wake up and be angry. It must be her eyes."

"The eyes. . . . Yes, the eyes," Ambrose muttered, so slowly and softly that I felt I had been indelicate in remarking on them.

"Who painted her?" I asked in an attempt at recovery.

He lit another of his infernal little Balkan cigarettes, and I watched apprehensively. Three or four puffs and the glowing tip receded into the splendour of his moustache, and I awaited the inevitable conflagration. Then the burning end disappeared and a cloud of acrid smoke drifted through the maze as from a volcanic vent.

"Julian," he said; so abruptly that I started in surprise. He lay back in his chair, his own eyes closed as though he were making a momentous decision, and again I had the sensation of trespassing where no angel would intrude. I had, too, the odd conviction that, even through his closed lids, he was watching me intently. "Never heard of him, I suppose," he murmured.

"I don't think so," I admitted after brief reflection. "I'm afraid I'm not well up in painters."

"Long before your time. He's been dead nearly forty years. You think she's going to open her eyes, eh?"

"Exactly!" I replied fervently, thankful for his understanding.

"Yet I dare say you'd be surprised if she did," he went on blandly.

"Well, naturally! After all, she's only a painting and——"

At that he sat upright and looked at me mischievously.

"She did, once."

"What!" I, too, jerked upright and stared at him, then laughed uneasily as I recognized the sureness of his dramatic touch. "I see. Of course you mean the model."

"Model be damned!" he barked. "I mean just what I say. That woman, that thing of canvas and colour, opened her eyes."

He sat forward in the chair that was too big for him, for all the world like a paunched and hairy gnome, his right hand twittering as he gesticulated with his podgy white fingers. "Before you were born," he said.

In his youth Ambrose had a studio in Hampstead, and put paint on canvas when the mood was in him. A mere dabbler in this as in most things, he inferred, till from sheer indolence he took to criticizing other men instead. One day he discovered he had a new neighbour, a furtive fellow who slipped in and out like a shadow and worked from morning to night. A matter for investigation, obviously, and a waylaid errand-boy supplying a pretext, he tapped on his neighbour's door. So he met Julian.

"A long, lean fellow in his early twenties," Ambrose explained, and extending his expressive fingers and thumb he somehow made me see a lamp-post of a youth, thin-faced, angular, stooping.

Those fools of errand-boys, leaving parcels at the wrong doors! But Julian grateful was not Julian cordial. He had only half opened the door and now was in a hurry to shut it again, and Ambrose, prying past

his lanky frame, saw only a high easel and a host of ears outlined on canvas.

Persistent Ambrose and reluctant Julian, pretexts need but a nimble brain. One day it would be eyes on the canvas, then hands and lips and ankles. Taking the body to pieces and studying it inch by inch was a time-consuming business, but it was long before Ambrose crossed the threshold, and by then the dissecting stage was over. A whole head was on the easel, a good head, shapely with character and well coloured. This Julian could draw and paint, no possible doubt about that. He was human, too, despite his reticence, and shyly diffident: on tenterhooks while Ambrose sampled his wares, and pleased as a schoolboy when the judgment was kind; eager, famished almost, for a word of praise. He was learning over again, he said, gathering up the threads and trying to find his touch; and he pointed to the earlier studies, the noses and ears and feet, which stood against all four walls.

"A queer devil," said Ambrose reminiscently. "Mind you, I never knew him intimately, never got inside him in nearly twenty years, though I suppose I was the closest thing to a friend he ever had. And what he did tell me came piecemeal, a scrap here and a scrap there, and I had to sort them out for myself."

The main thing was that his work as an artist had been interrupted. He had always wanted to paint and took to it in earnest when he left school. His father could afford to give him his chance, but no more. Then, just as he was getting into his stride, his

father died, and what was more, died without a penny to leave behind him, so that was the end of painting. There was just one relative in the world, Uncle Arnold, and Uncle Arnold did not hold with art.

"Uncle Arnold didn't hold with art!" Ambrose vibrated with his scorn. "Uncle Arnold thought painters were immoral! A man who looked on the body of a woman was bound for perdition, and his nephew wasn't going to be damned if he could help it. Uncle Arnold didn't hold with art!"

Again Ambrose lit a cigarette, and again held me in suspense. The proud moustache unsinged, he twiddled his hand again and I saw Uncle Arnold. How he contrived these pictures by a mere crooking of the fingers was beyond me, but there was Uncle Arnold, white-haired and blue-eyed, short and stout, surprisingly like Ambrose himself. An obdurate man. "Pig-headed" was Ambrose's word for him. Unfortunately, Uncle Arnold held the money-bags, and held them tightly. He had made a fortune out of selling hardware, and retired with it to a villa near Clapham Common, where a housekeeper ministered to his elemental needs.

Young Julian's future was neatly mapped out. He would go into trade and live respectably, and if he followed in Uncle's footsteps he, too, would retire in time with a comfortable pile. Moreover, he was Uncle Arnold's heir, and one day he would have the fruits of Uncle Arnold's frugality—so long as he stuck to trade. If he tried again to paint, he

would not have a penny—ever.

"A Philistine! Bloated with pots and pans and shovels, he let an artist beg for a crust. He deserved the end that came to him." Ambrose was virtuous with indignation.

"What happened to him, then?" I asked.

"So there was that poor young devil of a Julian," Ambrose went on, ignoring my question, "hurled into a dark office and dumped on a stool to ink his fingers and scrawl in unmentionable books, all for a miserly pittance."

He was a failure, of course, that was only to be expected. He could paint, and he knew it; but he could do nothing else. So he went down from each shabby hole to an even shabbier, till he got to the very bottom. It was no use appealing to Uncle, he had tried that a dozen times and knew the answer by heart. "I don't hold with this painting. Stick to honest trade, my boy, and you'll have my money when I'm gone. But I don't expect to die for a long time yet."

Ambrose chuckled wickedly. "He didn't expect to die for a long time!" His fingers stretched lazily, and I pictured a long, gaunt shape in mackintosh and woollen gloves outside the villa in Clapham, screwing up its courage for one last plea to Uncle: to Uncle all alone in the house, for only one window was lit.

Then Julian turned up in Hampstead, rented a studio, and began to make up for lost time.

"But what about Uncle Arnold?" I asked. "What happened to him?"

Ambrose's left eye closed slowly in

a massive wink and a ribald grin creased his face, but his voice was bland as the purring of a kitten.

"That," he replied, "was just what the police kept trying to find out. All they knew was that someone had strangled the hardware merchant, and left him lying on his own hearth-rug with his eyes popping out of his head."

"Strangled! Then Julian——"

Ambrose held up an admonitory finger.

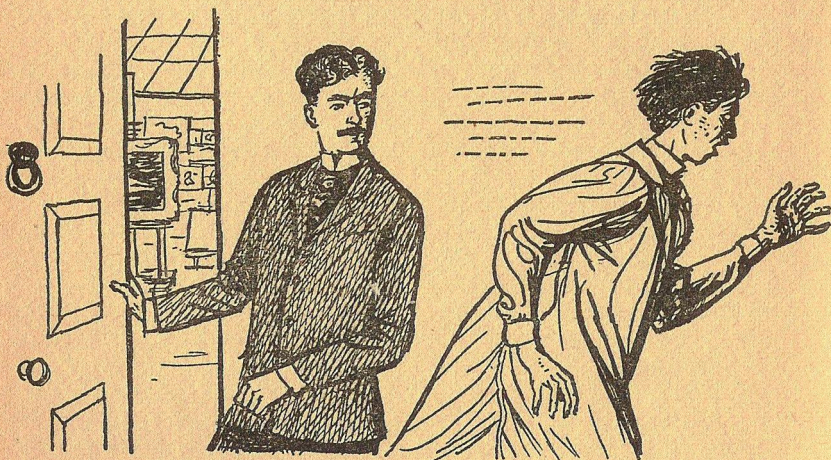
"The elementary conclusion. Too obvious for a man of discernment to leap at it. But if Julian had strangled him, I for one wouldn't have blamed him. Didn't hold with painting! I only hope that Uncle writhed among the ghosts of his saucepans when he saw his nephew painting for dear life in Hampstead."

And paint for dear life he did, morning, noon and night, day after day, week after week, for months and

years. Ambrose watched his talent rise—a fantastic climbing, climbing, for Julian was never satisfied. He reached for the unreachable, toiling towards a goal too far ahead. Five years and he was good; ten, and the critic was ready to call him great. But Julian knew where he wanted to go, whither some compulsion drove him. He would make his subjects live as painted flesh had never lived, would give them urgency; and he groped for words that might express it. Insurgence, he would say. He would make them insurgent.

Looking at the girl on her crimson couch, I knew what insurgence was. I could have sworn that her limbs trembled and her eyelids fluttered, that her lips parted ever so slightly.

In the end he achieved it suddenly. He painted a sitting woman, and painted her gloriously. When he had finished her, she was about to leave her seat and step from the canvas.



Insurgent. Next day he was less pleased. With the paint dry he was worried about her eyes. The colour was wrong. They were too blue; more blue, he felt, than he had made them. He touched them up, but still he was not satisfied, and he put her aside. A grey-eyed man next, who lived when he was done. Ambrose felt uneasily that he was going to talk. But his eyes were not properly grey. Decidedly there was a tinge of blue in them, a blueness that increased with the days.

It must be the medium, said Julian, something wrong with the paint or canvas. So he threw them away, tubes of paint, brushes and canvas. Ambrose found them heaped in a corner of the studio, ready for the dust-cart, and Julian sorting out a new delivery from the colourman. He was ready to start again.

A girl with hazel eyes to begin with, and she lived as even the others had not lived. She almost breathed her vitality. Her eyes were not hazel when they dried, but blue, emphatically blue. And they were too prominent, staring almost.

It must be the light, Julian decided, some trick of the north light, though he knew the light had not changed in his fifteen years there. He would find another studio. He would beat this thing yet.

In another studio he painted a Spanish woman, a languorous beauty with olive skin and raven hair, and the eyes of her were deeply brown. The eyes he painted last, and he was not alone with them. "Come and watch me," he begged of Ambrose.

"Mix the colours if you like, but don't let me make a mistake." Ambrose stood at his side as he painted, scrutinized the tubes of pigment, approved the blend on the palette, saw it laid on the canvas. Brown eyes, deep and smouldering. Next morning they went together to take the cover from her, and stood dismayed. The Spanish eyes were blue, grotesquely blue: aged eyes, full of malevolence and gloating, that bulged from the Spanish face as though they had been pressed from their sockets.

Silently Julian walked from the studio. There was fear on his face, as though he read in the mystery a sinister and inescapable meaning. He had been working too hard, of course. He had not rested for years, and now his nerve was gone. Ambrose said so, and Ambrose was guide and friend. But Ambrose had not been working too hard, and in his sight, too, the eyes were blue.

Julian went away. He tramped the Black Forest, wandered through France and the Pyrenees, hidden from the world for a year. He came back healthier than he had ever been, and eager to work again, to face the curse that had fallen on him. But he was finished, and he knew it. No longer could he paint eyes, an open face.

"It was damnable, you know," said Ambrose. "He had greatness in him, and he should have made a fortune too. But what woman would want to be painted with blue eyes that bulged and leered?"

To circumvent the spell he painted a woman in meditation, with head

bent and downcast eyes, and there it seemed he triumphed. She was magnificent, and her eyes were hidden. But his very mastery beat him. So perfect was his skill that she was all but alive on the canvas. Always she was insurgent, always about to raise her head and look at him. And when she did he would see the eyes he had not given her. Then, tortured by the longing to know, he burned her.

"Then," said Ambrose harshly, pointing his finger at the naked girl who faced me, "he made her—that fiend. It was the last round, and he feared her all the time."

I watched the splendid creature as he spoke, and even now I swear that her lips curved mockingly while he told of her creation.

"He worked as he had never worked before, and with every stroke she came more terribly to life. He finished her, and she lay as she lies now, all but flesh and blood and in the instant of waking. And while the paint was moist he went away. Where, I do not know, or anything of what he did. To Sussex perhaps, for they said he had been seen there.

"He came back then, and I saw the

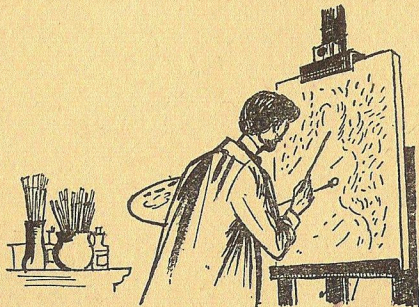
long leanness of him striding ahead as I neared the studio. The door stood open, but before I reached it I heard his voice. A squeal it was, a searing screech that shuddered through the house, and Julian ran from the room as though all the devils of Hell were after him. I think he saw nothing as he fled. I could not hope to overtake him."

Then Ambrose went into the studio. The dust-sheet from the easel was crumpled on the floor, and the girl lay on her velvet bed.

But she slept no longer. Her eyes were open: eyes that had never been painted: blue staring eyes, bulging as though a strangling hand had squeezed them from their orbits: hideous, malignant eyes that leered and gloated: eyes full of obscene things, of hatred and vengeance.

"And that," said Ambrose softly, "was the strangest thing of all—that they could express anything—so plainly were they dead eyes, dead nigh a score of years."

He lay back and lit another cigarette, and blew a cloud of smoke through his formidable moustache.



WATCH IN THE WILDERNESS

MICHAEL JACOT



THE WIND HAD dropped its howl in the spruce which surrounded the tiny camp. The bush was still, and the blue waters of Tazin Lake lapped lazily at the log dock we built the month we made the strike.

The hot sun was throwing cool shadows among the red rocks, and the great blue ravens which had pestered the camp from dawn strolled with ecclesiastical dignity looking for food around the cold ashes thrown from the cookhouse stove.

Fuchot stepped out of the shadows quite suddenly, about fifty yards to my left. I'd been waiting for him since dawn. I was the last person he was expecting to find. He looked sharply up towards the lake, his small eyes screwing up against the sun.

Fuchot was a big barrel-shaped man, with a looping walk and thick arms. His face was peppered with wrinkles from successive years of being in the open. I watched him place his rifle and geiger on the rocks, and sit on his haunches while he rolled a cigarette. In the year he'd worked with my young brother Gus and me. I'd never heard him grumble. Nothing was too difficult for him, and once he'd made his mind up, he had an almost frightening way of sticking to it. He wasn't a clever man but he was clever enough to know it.

I let him puff away at the cigarette. My heart was hammering away so that I thought he must hear it. He puffed the last of its smoke into the crisp air and ground the butt with his heel. He began to walk towards me. I drew inside the tent. I couldn't see him. I counted the paces. I'd calculated it would take him eleven to reach the tent flap. On ten I stepped out, my hand on the gun in my pocket.

At first he didn't seem to see me. Maybe it was the sun, but more likely his slow deliberate mind. Then he stopped dead.

"When did you get in?" he said slowly, his thin lips hardly moving.

"Mike flew me in the float-plane from Uranium city at dawn. I've been waiting for you."

His right hand was fingering his rifle. I wouldn't let him know yet that I knew about Gus. I wanted him to talk. "Where've you been?"

"Up on the claims."

"Where's Gus?"

"How the hell should I know. He was here this morning." He looked me in the face.

"Why didn't he go out with you?"

"Wanted to stay here, I guess."

I took a step forward and drew the gun. It was my first mistake. He was too near. I felt the butt of his rifle hit the pit of my stomach, and an angry burst of burning pain flashed into my cheek as he hit me with his right fist. My shot went wild. His

right leg came up against mine. He twisted his body. I poised myself in my half-stupor to take the blow. It belted me off my feet. By the time I'd got up again, he was running for the bush. I fired, but at that distance a revolver was almost useless. I cursed my foolishness and sat on the floor of the tent.

Mike, the pilot, was coming back to pick me up on Friday—in two days. He was my only hope. Uranium City was thirty miles away. I had to wait. I couldn't walk out now that Gus, my brother, was lying dead in his bunk. I had to wait.

Gus was 23 and studying engineering at Saskatoon. I'd taken him on as my engineer. In the two summers he'd been with me he'd learned more about uranium oxide than anyone I knew. We'd cleaned up \$10,000 on one claim alone. That was what had taken me away to Edmonton. I'd put some of it in trust for him to finish at college.

We hired Fuchot to help us prove our claims.

I looked across at Gus on the bed behind me. I'd found him in the bush not a hundred feet from the camp. He had been shot cleanly in the back of the head. I kept thinking about him. Small, unimportant things kept coming to me. His hat was on the tent floor. It looked sort of strange there alone. I threw it on his bed. Gus had been a quiet, nervous boy.

I knew why Fuchot had killed him. I went through his pockets and found a neat little map showing some new claims. I knew by the clear way they were marked that they were

good. I figured Fuchot wanted them. It was easy enough.

If I'd come back when I was supposed to, Gus's body would have been at the deep blue bottom of Tazin Lake, and no one could prove that he hadn't drowned.

I sat around all morning by the tent flap, watching and waiting. One hundred times I took out the map and examined it.

As I could see it, there were two things Fuchot could do. He could walk out fast, record the claims and deny that he knew anything about us. That would let me out to fight him, and sooner or later I'd get even.

Or he could kill me, and get rid of both bodies in the lake. It was far too deep to dredge. He could claim we'd gone out on the lake and disappeared. This would mean that he couldn't record for a time because it would arouse suspicion. But he was in no hurry.

By three o'clock my thirst was almost unbearable. It was very hot in the tent. I rummaged about in vain for something to eat. I knew there was food in the cookhouse tent five yards away. I'd seen it when I arrived. I decided I'd try to get to it. With my gun in my right hand I crawled flat on my face about a yard out of the tent. I moved slowly, for I was still fairly sure that he was watching me. East of me was thick bush. I tried hard to see if he was in it, scanning the undergrowth until my eyes ached. After a while I began to move again. I edged forward inch by inch. The sides of the tent had been logged up to prevent bears getting in. At the

front corner I paused again. I couldn't see any movement in the bush, so I ran the last two paces into the tent.

Keeping my gun in my hand and my back to the huge provision box, I ate a hurried meal of biscuits and tinned fruit. Then I filled my pockets and wondered what to do next.

The trip to the tent had given me confidence. Fuchot wouldn't expect me to move out of camp. He knew he had the upper hand. I might as well risk a look at the claims, even stake them, if Fuchot hadn't already done so. I looked at the map again. Gus had marked them about a mile to the north, across a river which flowed into Tazin Lake.

I stood at the tent door and called, "Fuchot!" I was answered by a couple of pigeons fluttering panic-stricken from the nearest poplar.

"Fuchot," I called again. "Take a shot at me. Show me you've got the guts to do it!"

I waited. My words seemed to lose themselves. I stalked across the open ground, my muscles ready to crumble into a quick drop. Nothing happened. When I reached the cover of the trees, I waited again to get my breath and then make my way east across the narrow neck of the tiny peninsula and on to the mainland. The walk to the river was easy. I knew it well. The land rose to a couple of hundred feet and then fell suddenly to the water. I kept to the cover. On the other side of the river the land sloped gently upwards, thickly covered with trees. I drank greedily from the river, and found a

shallow creek for crossing. The banks were carpeted with flowers, and rich grass grew in abundance. It took me only a minute or so to cross. I travelled up for about five minutes, stepping lightly and keeping my eyes on the bush ahead.

Suddenly I came upon a giant boulder. On one side of it a jagged wall of rock fell clean down the hillside for twenty feet. I presumed it was the end of a fault. The tell-tale stains of uranium oxide were on it, and even from where I stood I could see the grey ash-like ribbon of a pitch-blende vein. This must be it. I started to run towards it. But something made me stop.

Very faintly I could hear the sound of an axe. It came from farther up the hill. I stood perfectly still and pin-pointed the spot.

I moved towards it, my gun in hand. Then suddenly it stopped.

The sun filtered through the trees and glared from the bare rock. Ahead of me was a clearing. I stopped. At the far end of it was a rock about three feet high and two feet across. Fuchot was sitting against it with his back to me. I couldn't tell at this distance whether or not he was asleep. I began to creep across the clearing. To my left I saw that he had lopped off the top of a tree and was using the trunk as a staking-post. He had already sliced off one side for marking.

From ten yards away I shouted, "Get up, Fuchot. Get up! You won't get away this time!" He didn't move, so I stood up. A thin chilling sensation went down my spine. The per-

spiration welled up into my hair and my lips became dry.

It wasn't Fuchot. It was his hat, stuck on the end of an axe.

I flung myself on the ground as Fuchot's first shot hit the tree behind me. I let him have another try, but he was obviously over-anxious. It hit the rock. Then I made a run for it. I was in the bush before he got in another shot. All I heard was his laugh. It was the only sound in the whole bush, and if I heard it today I think I'd still feel my stomach turn over. I fired back at him, but I had no idea where he was. I ran for camp, fast.

Several times on my way back I thought I heard him behind me. Twice I thought I saw his shadow. But each time the shadow seemed to still itself like a statue.

I reached camp about six. And it seemed I'd beaten Fuchot to it. I collected some bread and cheese and a bottle of water. The logs at the tent sides were ample protection from behind. I dragged Gus's tin trunk into the doorway. I was safe so long as I didn't have to go out. I only had to keep awake. Fuchot could only come at me one way. That was slightly east of the tent flap.

I made myself comfortable for a long sleepless vigil, praying that the drone of Mike's plane would come sooner than I expected. I had a whole night, a day and a night ahead. Already I was dizzy tired. The sun was still beating down. It would stay in the heavens most of the night. I estimated there would be about one hour

only of complete darkness at this time of year.

I had been expecting Fuchot to tell me he was around, but he came so soon that I was taken by surprise. I couldn't see him. He called, "When's Mike coming to pick you up?"

The shock of hearing his clear voice through the trees numbed me. Otherwise I might have answered him. It was the last thing I wanted him to know.

"It doesn't matter much to me, anyway," he went on; "sooner or later you're going to fall asleep. That's when I'll get you. I'll be here all night, watching you."

"You're fighting a loosing game, Fuchot," I said. "Mike's coming back. You'll have him to deal with soon."

"I'll have finished with you by then. Both of you will be at the bottom of the lake. I'll be walking my way to Uranium City."

I knew that he was lying. He couldn't possibly tell if I was asleep. I had arranged a chink between the edge of the tin trunk and the end of the log side of the tent. I could see the whole eastern part of the camp from it, from one side of the peninsula to the other. Behind the box I was hidden except from the lake.

I lived my life ten times during those first few hours. It was the only way I knew to keep awake. Thoughts of Gus stayed in my head all night.

The lake soon became very still. I could see the reflection of the spruces clearly etched in its waters. Occasionally a bass would leap and break the stillness. The mosquitoes were almost

unbearable. I brushed them off my face, where they lay in a black mass. I craved for a cigarette.

The bush-crows began to circle up to meet the sun, draining its last rays like vampires. Only the tree-tops stuck out in the light now, like dark sentinels above a calm of mist. It was still very hot and the sweat ran in rivulets down my neck. It welled up into my hair and stung my eyes.

As the huge ball of a sun slipped finally behind the northern hills, I saw Fuchot. His head bobbed up quite near the water. He must have gone for a drink. It bobbed down quickly, like a hen.

Complete silence and darkness had now fallen. It was a time before I grew accustomed to it. My leadened eyes fluttered at the black silhouettes. I tried to rest them by cupping my hand first over one and then over the other. At sunset there is always almost complete silence in the bush. But in minutes the stillness is broken by the insistent noises of insects and frogs.

It became suddenly much cooler. I could hear Fuchot moving about, sometimes near, sometimes far. Once I even thought I heard him humming. I could see all sorts of things I never knew were there, and not infrequently the small bright eyes of animals. The moon was up now, casting its silent shadows softly among the trees. For the first time I became lonely. I felt sick, knowing that I had only myself to rely on.

The world seemed a thousand miles away. Our room in Toronto (with the ceaseless jazz-record player in the

room next to it), and the old, dour Scots landlady, Mrs. McRae, who wore boots and a permanent night-cap; the noise of the subway, and the neon signs; the quiet Sunday streets, and the little acacia tree on the neat lawn, which I would watch from my window, were permanently etched in my memory.

About 3.30, the sun began to top the trees again, and crisp light flooded the bush. I still couldn't quite make out where Fuchot was hidden. I punched a hole in the top of a tin of peaches with my knife and drank the juice.

As the sun rose it hit the corner of the tent, and the glare almost forced me to shut my eyes. The peaches had temporarily satisfied the hunger which had been a nagging stimulation all night. My hands were heavy, my legs numb and my mind and body seemingly separated. I became really sleepy.

I could only have closed my eyes for a second or more. But in that time I was in a heavy sleep. I awoke with a start.

Fuchot's stubbled face was looking over the tin trunk at me. His eyes were staring and his cheeks flushed. Beads of perspiration stood out on his brow. His breath was uneven and hurried.

I seemed to have surprised him, more than he surprised me. I took advantage and jumped him fast.

He reeled back and lifted his rifle. The shot hit the earth at my feet. I jumped forward and held the rifle off me. Then, letting go suddenly, I swung back with my right and drove

home into the stomach. I aimed it to finish somewhere behind him. It had weight and it travelled. Fuchot crumpled, dropped the rifle and staggered back.

I came at him again, but I was too fast. I hadn't hurt him as much as I thought. As I stepped up he uncurled himself and brought his huge chest in close to mine.

I never saw his right hand start out, for it only moved about six inches. It caught me in the ribs, and I could feel its power right down to my feet. My chin went down; I wanted to screw myself into a ball to stop the pain in my ribs. In the half second after he hit I saw him turn his right shoulder to me. The sweat glistened on his skin and his muscles stood out like taut rubber. The right shoulder meant a left was coming. I tucked my chin down and covered with my elbows. Another punch like that last might have finished me.

I saw it coming. It was a long looping swing, but even so I was too late. It caught me on the neck and almost lifted me off my feet. A last flick of my head managed to sway away some of the power. I was fighting mad now. I didn't wait for him to come in again. Obviously he thought he'd finished me.

I jabbed out my left as if to hit him. His eyes flicked out to it, leaving his head unguarded. My right which followed came from the shoulder. I felt it sink into the side of his face, up under the jaw. I kept it going. His head jerked back and seemed to loll on his shoulders, I hit him with

a left and then another right. He sagged.

I bent to pick up my gun, which I had left beside me on the tent floor. It was a mistake. Like an unleashed wild animal he was on me. I felt his teeth sink into my back and a savage knee come up into the pit of my stomach. A hammer of blows thundered about my head. The world grew grey and then gradually black. I fought it with all my might.

As a last hope before passing out, I forced myself to fall backwards on top of him. He hit the ground under me with a smash that would have knocked most men cold. I took a deep breath and another, hoping to clear my aching head. A thick red band seemed caught around my eyes. But suddenly it cleared. I could feel Fuchot trying to get up from underneath me. I turned over and faced him to try to pin him down. He curled his right leg up underneath and flung me upwards. A sickening feeling came into my stomach. I caught him to me with my left and hit him again and again with my right. He didn't seem to feel the blows.

Suddenly he was away from me, circling his body in a hoop and his fists working. One eye was completely closed and there was blood streaming from his face. I stood with my feet placed near his rifle and circled with him. My left ear was cut and numb. My right ribs ached so that a mere movement brought a searing burn right down my side.

I didn't know whether to wait for him to come in or to follow him. I

didn't want to lose control of the rifle.

Suddenly he sprang. The power in his great legs flung him through the air a good six feet. I felt his body crash against me like a ton weight. My strength was going. I knew that I had to hit him hard, soon, before it was too late. I took my time and waited for an opening. When it came, I drew back my right elbow, keeping the arm close into the side of my body. I transferred my weight to my left foot. I let drive. It had all the strength in me. It caught him on the side of the chin. I felt it go on and keep on going. I saw his mouth open and his eyes go glassy. I brought in a left to the stomach and his hands fell to his sides. Then a right again to the body. And a left to the heart. I was so dazed that I hardly saw him fall. I closed my eyes as soon as I heard him hit the ground. My head was reeling.

At first I thought he was dead. Blood ran down the side of his face, and a pool of it lay in his eye-socket. His hair was matted against the side of his grey, tired face. His other eye was open and staring. His hands were twitching. I picked up my gun and stood over him.

The sun was very hot. We seemed to have scared the animals. I didn't dare sit down, for I knew that I'd probably pass out.

Fuchot turned slowly to look at me out of one eye. There was a pathetic defiance in his face, like a child after punishment.

His lips opened and he said softly,

"Why don't you kill me and get it over!"

"There are a lot of things I want straightened up before I kill you," I said. "Sit up. Have a drink." I threw him my water-bottle. He drank greedily and lay back on the moss.

I waited a second, then I asked, "Why did you kill Gus?"

He never moved a muscle. I didn't think he heard me. I said it again.

"I heard you," he said slowly.

Then he looked at me. "You might as well know. On Monday I was up north, and I hit something really good." He was speaking with difficulty. "A little work with the pick and I had cleared a sizable tract. It was unbelievable. The yellow stain, the black pitch. It went on and on. You saw some of it today. I haven't cleaned it all out yet. It may be a mile long, this vein. Maybe two. And every bit of it is at least a foot wide. It's a second Eldorado."

He paused. His head went back and he screwed up his eyes against the sun. "I came back and told Gus. He made a map of the claim."

He paused. "That find is mine. It's something I've dreamed about all my life."

I tossed him a cigarette. He lit it and lay back. His lips were still trembling. Suddenly he turned his head, "If I don't have it, no one will."

After a bit he said, "I've been in jails, lived in doss-houses, slept in the bush. For years I carried a stomach which flapped at my backbone. I've been kicked into the gutter, despised and hated. And d'you know what has kept me going?"

He paused again. The cigarette seemed to be easing his pain. "I'll tell you. I've had a dream. I dreamt that someday I'd be as rich as this.

"Early next morning Gus tried to follow me. I never thought he might do it. Gus had been a pal to me. I liked him. Then I realized that he was just like one of the rest. I shot him, that's all."

For a moment we sat in silence.

"I'm not going to shoot you," I said.

He sat up on his elbow quickly.

"You're going back in the plane with me tomorrow morning."

He suddenly leapt up and flung himself at me weakly, probably hoping that I'd fire at him. I brought his rifle-butt down hard on his head. He fell like a log.

Fuchot was unconscious for half an hour. I tied his hands and feet and stuck him in the shade while I made some grub.

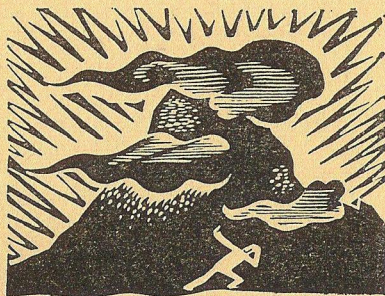
That afternoon and night were the worst I've ever spent. Fuchot cursed, pleaded and wept for me to take his life. I tried to feed him with a spoon, but he spat it out at me. Just after

6 a.m. I heard the insistent hum of a plane. Here was Mike at last. As it drew nearer, Fuchot suddenly became strangely resigned and quiet.

I ran down to the jetty to help Mike come in. It didn't take long to explain to him. I was away about ten minutes. We both hurried up to the camp. Fuchot was gone. The jagged ends of the rope lay under the tree. There was blood on them, and one of the tin cans I'd opened lay nearby. Somehow he must have wriggled round and scraped the thin rope on the tin.

Mike and I decided that the only thing to do was to leave him. We smashed up the camp, put a hole in the raft, and sank all the tins of food. Then we put Gus in the plane.

As we took off, I looked back and saw Fuchot. He was standing on the camp site. Mike said, "He'll eventually try to walk out. The Mounties'll get him. One way or the other, he's out of luck." He circled back to look at Fuchot's face. His eyes were wide and staring. He was laughing and shaking his fist. It was a sight I shall never forget.



DON'S DELIGHT

BERNARD CROFT

Haunted places appear often enough and naturally enough in our pages. But here is something different—a haunted wine. In this new story the Rev. Bernard Croft moves back to England from Provence (see "Afternoon at Avignon" in LONDON MYSTERY MAGAZINE No. 23)—though something of the warm south comes into this story, too. Many readers will recognize in its setting a thinly disguised Oxford.

PROFESSOR MCCLINTOCH and Professor Trentham had been close friends for many years. Once every week in term they met to take wine together.

On a certain October evening, when the leaves were beginning to spread over the pavements and clog the gutters, and when the early autumn mists were beginning to flit through the quiet streets after sunset and there was a nip in the air of an early morning, the squat and sturdy figure of Professor Trentham turned out of the fine wrought-iron gates of St. Mark's College and walked with steady, plodding steps in the direction of Wolsey.

Dinner in hall that night had been of indifferent quality, and in Professor Trentham's opinion the talk had matched the food. He had not been sorry to get away from high table, collect a light coat from his rooms and start out on his visit to his friend whom he had not yet seen since term and the new academic year began.

On this particular evening he set forth with more than usual pleasur-

able expectation, for a cryptic message had been delivered to him earlier in the day saying that Professor McClintoch would look forward to seeing him that evening at the usual time, when he would have something special for his tasting and delight.

Surely, Professor Trentham had said to himself on reading the note, he cannot have discovered some new treasure in the world of wine. The two of them were getting on in years, and on many a long vacation had toured the wine countries together. The advice of one or the other of them was often sought by senior members of the university over the important matter of wines (only senior members could afford to drink wines these days, Professor Trentham reflected ruefully).

And yet, McClintoch had been visiting some obscure villages in Provence during August and September, and it was just possible that a hitherto unknown delight had been discovered by his learned connoisseur colleague. It would happen on just the one occasion when he himself had not been there to share in the discovery with his friend.

The clock in the great tower of Wolsey struck the half hour after eight. He crossed the quadrangle, deserted at this hour, and made for the flight of stone steps leading up to McClintoch's rooms. In a minute or two now he would know what pleasurable surprise was awaiting him.

"Come in, come in," called out the occupant of the rooms at the top of the stairs who was busy arranging glasses on the table in front of the fire; and a few minutes later the two men were seated in deep chairs, one on either side of the fireplace, exchanging news of their travels abroad.

All the time they were talking Trentham's mind was on the little mystery his friend was providing, but he knew the subject would not be broached until all other more conventional and trivial news had been exchanged between them.

Sitting there, they were physically and spiritually withdrawn from the bustle of modern life surging through the streets outside. It was the day and the hour of the week they both loved best. Whether they were in this room at Wolsey or in the somewhat more modest though no less comfortable room Professor Trentham occupied in St. Mark's, the atmosphere was right for good talk and good wine.

"But, of course, you missed the sun—and the wine," said Professor McClintoch, supplying the colophon to his friend's account of his Scandinavian holiday.

"Indeed yes," agreed Trentham; "whilst you, I gather, found both, as usual—and something perhaps un-

usual as far as the wine was concerned?"

The other smiled.

"Yes, and I will not keep you waiting any longer," he said, rising to his feet. "I have brought back something quite quite extraordinary.

"As I have told you—and, of course, as you expected," said Professor McClintoch as he poured out wine from the bottle which had been standing near by all the time they had been talking, "I ended up, as usual, at Avignon. But this, I think you will agree, is something much better than our favourite friend the *Tavel Rosé*; better even than our more precious friend the *Château-neuf-du-Pape* of 'forty-seven."

He carried the glass of wine over to where Trentham was sitting, rather in the manner of a priest treading delicately the sanctuary steps with the sacred chalice in his hands.

Professor Trentham waited until his friend was himself seated again with his wine-glass in his hands. Then both men raised their glasses in unspoken toast and sipped their wine. . . .

That night, back in St. Mark's, Professor Trentham had a strangely disturbed sleep.

He had left his friend's rooms in Wolsey shortly after eleven, by which time the two of them had disposed of a couple of bottles of the wine brought back from an obscure vineyard on the sun-scorched hills of Provence.

The wine undoubtedly was delicious, a wine that stood well the test of being taken without food, though

he could not help thinking how pleasant also it would have gone with a dish of Provençal *daubes*, the rosemary and garlic-scented *gigots* and *rôtis de porc* such as his friend had been enjoying once again and he himself had missed so sadly whilst on vacation in more northern climes.

His head, however, had been clear enough as he had descended the stone stairs and made his way back to his own rooms.

But in his sleep he had dreamed a most vivid dream—so vivid that on awakening from it every detail was still imprinted on his memory. There was a great house, in which apparently he was staying. Undoubtedly it was in Provence, in a countryside such as he knew well, though it would be idle to pretend that he could give it any exact location. There all around were the hot stony hill-sides, aromatic with thyme and lavender, noisy with the shrill cicadas among the olive trees under the hard bright light. There was the sight and the smell of the pine trees beyond which could just be glimpsed the blue water of the Mediterranean.

In front of the house was a vast formal garden of the kind commonly found adjoining the châteaux of central and southern France; but usually only to be seen at home fronting great houses whose architects had obviously been influenced by these same châteaux abroad, or laid down during that period when Capability Brown had been given a free hand with the English landscape.

And whilst walking in that garden in the cool of the evening he had

met, face to face, the most beautiful woman he had ever seen either in the flesh or on the canvasses of any of Europe's great galleries.

She had spoken to him—in what language he could not, on waking, say—and whilst talking with her the professor (now turned sixty) had seemed to shed the years of learning, the terms in residence at his university and the vacations spent in travel, until he was once again a young man with the blood, unprompted by wine, leaping in his veins. . . .

Then, just as he was about to embrace this lovely creature, along the avenue of cypresses came—Professor McClintoch; and she was gone.

A week later, Trentham made his way once again to the rooms of his friend in Wolsey. Again they drank together the red wine of his friend's discovery. And again, later that night, he was back again in his dreams in that garden, talking with the ravishing creature who came to him when he reached the same spot. And yet again he lost her at the approach of his friend.

His friend? By now he was amazed to discover that the impatience—nay, he had to admit it was something stronger than this—the exasperation, the anger, he felt towards the intruder in the garden was, unreasonably enough, carried into his waking hours. The man he had always thought of as his friend was now one who was responsible, time after time (for the dream followed every occasion on which he took the wine in those rooms at the top of the stairs

in Wolsey) for the flight of his fair one, the woman who came to him so willingly; whose coming immediately transformed him from the ageing, dried-up bachelor don to a lusty gallant—the man he might have been, some twenty or thirty years before.

And so it was that as the time of term-end drew near and the cold winds of winter had begun to blow through the streets and penetrate into the lecture-rooms he used and even up into his own private lodging, into the heart of Professor Trentham had crept a deep and bitter hatred for the man he had once called his friend.

He had for a time toyed with the idea of questioning (not directly of course but in some roundabout way) McClintoch as to whether the taking of the wine also brought him any similar dream of that house and garden—and of her. . . . Could it be that on the same nights when he—Trentham—was keeping tryst with his beloved (as she now was in so very real a sense to him), McClintoch was also being transported to the same spot. If so, did he, in his dream, come upon the two of them on that garden-walk and wake suddenly as the fair one took to flight? Or—agonizing thought—did he in his dream also share her charms?

But he could never bring himself to broach the subject. Only week by week could he hasten to partake of the wine which, an hour or two later, would yet again take him to her whose form and voice (though he could still not say in what language they conversed) now so disturbed his waking hours. . . .

In an old, thick greatcoat and with a muffler round his neck, Professor Trentham set out one evening in the last week of term to keep what would normally be the final meeting with Professor McClintoch before their ways parted for the Christmas vacation.

The porter in the lodge at Wolsey later testified that he had arrived about the usual hour, eight-thirty, and had made his way across the quadrangle to Professor McClintoch's rooms.

It was the servant attached to the don who lived in the rooms at the foot of the staircase who found the body of Trentham at the foot of the stone stairs, his neck broken.

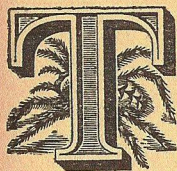
Knowing, as many knew, of their weekly meeting, he had rushed up to Professor McClintoch's lodging, pounded on the sported oak and shouted, "Professor McClintoch, Professor McClintoch, sir!"

Telling the story afterwards he said, "Getting no reply, I pushed open the door and there he was, standing by the fire, with a glass of wine raised in front of him. There was a smile on his face, and somehow he looked younger than usual—in fact, I couldn't help thinking, why he looks like a young undergraduate taking a drink before setting out to keep a date with his girl. . . ."

An accident, of course, they decided. The older school of dons will still take a glass too many on occasions; and, after all, those worn stairs can be dangerous for an old man not too steady on his feet.

REQUIEM WITH LITTLE BELLS

JOHN SIDNEY



HIS IS A STORY of murder and retribution in three acts.

Act I opens in a lonely gully in the rugged Kimberley Ranges in the far north of Western Australia on a late spring evening in 1886. Under the shadowy brown cliff, among the slender white "ghost" gums and paperbark trees, two gold-seekers pitch their tent. One man, a German called Frank Hornig, a big man with truculent moustaches and cold blue eyes, is mending harness and watching his mate at work.

Anthony Johnson, from Norway, is the mate, a simple, friendly man with immense shoulders. He is digging a hole because Hornig has said it is a likely place to find a pocket of alluvial gold. The hole measures six feet by three and is four feet deep.

Hornig polishes the little brass bells on a bridle, and as he does so he smiles slyly. This is Johnson's bridle and Hornig covets it. Hornig gets up and goes over to the digger.

"Good work!" he says. "Keep it up!"

The Norwegian goes on digging.

Ten minutes later, Hornig strolls up behind Johnson who is resting on his shovel.

"It's deep enough now!" he says and brains Johnson with the butt of his rifle. He pours in more savage blows.

Satisfied that the amiable Johnson is dead, he rolls the body in a sack, wraps it in a rug made of opossum skins, trundles it into the hole, and shovels in the earth, then disguises the grave with a carpet of grass.

Hornig has already played this fiendish first act several times. He has lured his victims into the lonely Australian bush before, and murdered and robbed them.

Almost smugly now, he breaks camp after rifling Johnson's possessions. He burns the things he doesn't want. Into the scrub he throws a pair of the Norwegian's boots which won't fit him.

He saddles his horse, fits it with Johnson's bridle, and the little bells are ringing as he rides off into the dusk, leading his second horse and the two that Johnson had owned.

Act II began when another gold fossicker, Jock McAlister, heard the requiem jingle of the little bells. They spoke to him, not of murder but of someone breaking camp. Curious, he went round in the morning, looked at the dead fire and then moved to one side. His boots sank into the soft ground.

"Ah!" he thought. "They've buried mining tools or food."

He poked a sapling down into the disturbed earth and exposed first a sack, then an opossum rug—and a man's foot.

McAlister beat it to the nearest

diggings and came back with Sub-Inspector Troy, Trooper Mallard and a black tracker. This last was an aborigine skilled in following the tracks of men and horses over all sorts of country. "The blacks could track the footprints of a fly over a mirror" is the tribute they pay to the black trackers in the Australian outback.

Big black-bearded Troy and Mallard dug up the unfortunate Johnson. They recovered his boots from the scrub. They got descriptions of the man last seen with Johnson. They stuffed the opossum skin shroud and the Norwegian's boots into a saddle on a pack-horse.

Act III begins a few days later. The murderous Hornig is a hundred miles away with another victim almost ready. He is a prospector called Doyle who has quarrelled with his mate and has gratefully accepted Hornig's offer of company.

But Sub-Inspector Troy and Trooper Mallard and the tracker overtake them; they have followed the tracks of Hornig's four horses.

Troy says, "I'm making inquiries about a man called Johnson who was last seen in your company."

Hornig is not disconcerted. Policemen are all fools, he thinks scornfully. They have asked questions about missing mates before, but they have never yet found a body. The routine is good, it is foolproof.

"We had a row," says Hornig blandly. "We agreed to separate."

Sub-Inspector Troy glances at the

pack-horse. Trooper Mallard smiles.

"I am arresting you for murder," says the Inspector. But he does not disclose anything about the discovery of the body.

"I am innocent," says Hornig, very much master of himself. "I shall sue you for wrongful arrest."

"We'll go into that when we get to Derby," says Troy shortly.

Derby is 230 miles away.

He puts the handcuffs on the German, who again protests that he is innocent of everything.

"Whoa there!" Troy calls sharply to the pack-horse which is restless.

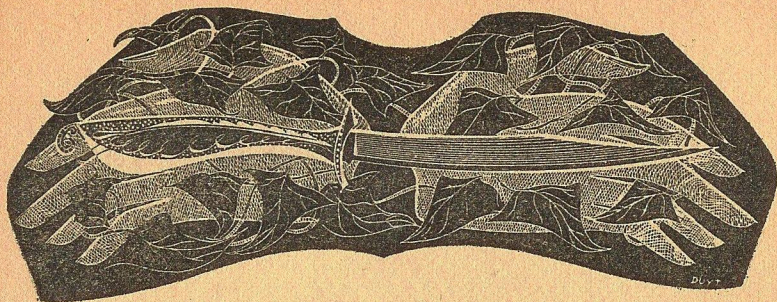
They ride on to Derby, Hornig smirking and taunting Troy.

Act III ends on a high note. In a few seconds Hornig was to experience the nastiest moment in his thoroughly nasty life.

The wind blew a prickly flower on to the highly strung pack-horse and it begins to plunge at the end of the lead-rope. The straps of the pack become loosened and articles fall out on to the ground—among them Johnson's boots and the opossum rug.

Hornig's face goes white and then ashen grey. There is no more bravado. Perhaps he could hear the bridle bells playing another tune as they rode on to Derby.

The dénouement is short. That evening, Hornig opened his veins with the buckle of his belt. But Troy and Mallard saved him with brandy for the gallows.



CROOKS IN BOOKS

A review of some recent crime, mystery and detective books.

ANTHONY SHAFFER

"DEATH OF A GODMOTHER," by John Rhode (*Geoffrey Bles*, 9s. 6d.).

The death here is of a fairy godmother bringing the gift of inspiration to John Rhode. Alas, he strangles her before the book is a page old, and from then on he just does the best he can with humble journey-man tools and a few seasoned clichés.

"ROGUES MURDER," by William Ard (*Hammond & Hammond*, 9s. 6d.).

This book was first published in the States under the title *A Private Party*. There's not much else worth recording about it, except that invitation should be by insensibility only.

"MURDER IS GRIM," by Samuel Rogers (*Hammond & Hammond*, 9s. 6d.).

Sex rears its ugly heads by the half-dozen in this recital of villainous life down on the farm. A luxurious farm,

true, but it seems the richer the soil the more flourishing the bestiality. Mr. Rogers has written a very satisfying book, successfully combining the worst in *Sons and Lovers*, with the best in the *Murder in the Red Barn*.

"A HANDFUL OF SILVER," by John Stephen Strange (*Crime Club*, 10s. 6d.).

This is, on the whole, a good book, in that it takes a man's search for his brother's betrayer (this time to the Gestapo in France) out of the realm of the cliché, and makes a fairly exciting thriller out of it. Less, however, can be said of the style, which alternates between the "Love? . . . it ends the same—to one ennui, to the other, pain . . ." school of writing; and the frankly incorrigible "Ah, Paris. An old, old city for ever young; a young, young city for ever old" type of thing.



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"Beautifully done. The atmosphere of both war-time and post-war Paris beautifully conveyed."—FRANCIS ILES, SUNDAY TIMES 10s. 6d.

ELIZABETH FERRARS

Enough to Kill a Horse

"A very ingenious detective novel" by "a woman writer of considerable talent."—CHRISTOPHER PYM 10s. 6d.

HARRY CARMICHAEL

Noose for a Lady

"Unusually well-written mystery with a surprising end."—DAILY MAIL

9s. 6d

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"DEATH RIDES A PAINTED HORSE," by Robert Patrick Wilmot (*Boardman*, 9s. 6d.).

Very very tough-mannered dope and murder chase with a coast-to-coast carnival background. As usual, everyone throws mud in the private eye until the last dozen pages.

"THEY ALL BLEED RED," by Richard Sted (*Boardman*, 9s. 6d.).

First-rate, speedy toughie fronting on the meat-marketing racket. If you don't know what a trocar is, here's your chance to learn.

"TWO ENDS TO THE TOWN," by John Bude (*Macdonald*, 9s. 6d.).

Mayhem struggles with religious mania at either end of Langbourne, the seedy, second-rate seaside resort which forms the background for John Bude's latest novel. The armies of Mr. Priestley and Mr. Greene battle doughtily to create a *tour de force*, but only succeed in creating *tour de worthiness*.

"THE DARK HOSTESS," by Sydney Horler (*Eyre & Spottiswoode*, 9s. 6d.).

With Mr. H. ripeness is all. Ripe villainy, ripe chastity, and ripe straight up-and-down Englishry. In regard to this offering it is enough to list the main *dramatis personæ*: Lady Lola Totness, Paul Glutzkai, Inspector Sylvanus Huntly, Jimmy Dartmouth, Jane Hartley, and "Crooky" Thomas. Sort them out for yourself. If you're not one hundred per cent. right and one hundred per cent. bored, you should be still on comic strips.

"THE ANATOMY OF CRIME," by Joseph F. Dinneen (*Cassell*, 10s. 6d.).

Fine, tightly packed, semi-fictional account of a successful bank robbery wherein the enormous sum of two and a half million dollars was lifted—and the difficulties in the way of bringing home a successful conviction.

"DEVIL IN THE SKY," by Muriel Bradley (*Hammond & Hammond*, 9s. 6d.).

This is an "accident-nobody-is-willing-to-talk-about" type of book. There's also a man tracking down his brother's murderer . . . and I don't know what else.

"THE BIG MONEY," by Harold Q. Masur (*Boardman*, 9s. 6d.).

New York, New York, it's a wonderful town.

The shamuses are up and the cops are down.

The stiffes they live in a hole in the ground.

New York, New York, it's a wonderful town.

Yes, this is another of them. Motive: greed. Murderer: least likely respectable party.

"SOLO FOR NO VOICES," by Wreford Paddon (*Boardman*, 9s. 6d.).

A creditable, if at times necessarily self-conscious, attempt to do for Liverpool what Mr. Spillane *et al.* have done for New York. The fact that Mr. Paddon doesn't really believe in the probability of his characters

does little to detract from the book's undoubted entertainment value.

"THE SHINING HEAD," by Joan Madeley (*Robert Hale*, 9s. 6d.).

Here the wide-open spaces of Canada have been filled with a plot so consummately average that it prompts the regretful reflection that the Mounties get their men far more certainly and oftener than some authors get a new idea. Maybe they search harder.

"THE MAN IN THE GREEN HAT," by Manning Coles (*Hodder & Stoughton*, 10s. 6d.).

T. Hambledon rampages round the well-known thriller territory of Northern Italy on the trail of war-time loot and the customary disappeared diplomat. (It's a wonder there are any left at the Foreign Office.) A *crime du paysan*.

"SKY HIGH," by Michael Gilbert (*Hodder & Stoughton*, 10s. 6d.).

Small beer for Mr. Gilbert, inadequately motivated and lacking in thrills. The only thing of interest is an ingenious method of blowing up a house, and that, except to Nihilists, is not worth 10s. 6d.

"WINE, WOMEN AND MURDER," by Desmond Martin (*Boardman*, 9s. 6d.).

Entertaining jolly-up with mystical Leninists cavorting round Mayfair pledged to subjugate Britain even more than she is at the moment. The heroic hero foils them, but it just goes to show what really goes on in the houses of the nobles.

"IT COULDN'T BE MURDER," by Robert B. Sinclair (*Boardman*, 9s. 6d.).

Good New York advertising agency background for this rich-blooded Long Island murder. Dodgy double crosses lead up to a nice finale, where for once the killer doesn't break down believing that he "might as well tell you all."

"DEATH HAS A DOUBLE," by Frank King (*Robert Hale*, 9s. 6d.).

Twins, no less. One a rotten egg; the other jolly-dee. Add a shameful bond between them and a tincture of hush hush, and there you are.

"THE SMUGGLERS," by Frederic Goldsmith (*W. H. Allen*, 8s. 6d.).

If all the books on European big-business gangs were laid end to end they would reach as far as renaissance Nazi Germany. This is a weakish link in the chain.

"NOOSE FOR A LADY," by Harry Carmichael (*Crime Club*, 9s. 6d.).

Professional island-bound whodunit, with rather over-emphasized least likely murderer, and glib, hysterical, really-no-need confession. Good blind-alleys along the route though.

"THE HAMMERSMITH MAGGOT," by William Mole (*Eyre & Spottiswoode*, 9s. 6d.).

A highly individual, carefully styled account of how an elusive murdering blackmailer is traced mainly by his stopping to admire a Roman bust. Shades of work-a-day Chesterton.

"THE SPEAKING EYE," by Clark Smith (*Hammond & Hammond*, 9s. 6d.).

An unusual accountant detective gives the lead into convincing fraud motives for murder. At any rate, they're more convincing than the account of London office life which Mr. Smith portrays.

"THE EVIL OF TIME," by Evelyn Berchman (*Eyre & Spottiswoode*, 9s. 6d.).

A very good thriller impregnated with a weird *Götterdämmerung* atmosphere. The main object of the exercise is, I'm afraid, once again the search for hidden Nazi loot; but it is saved from the routine by a splendid sense of the Nazi *mystique*.

"DEATH AT CHESTNUT HILL," by Charles Nicolai (*Hammond & Hammond*, 9s. 6d.).

Most everything is shot on the farm at Chestnut Hill, from goats to people. What is bad for the livestock is good for the reader, though his curiosity will hardly be satisfied by the thinnest motive for mayhem ever invented.

"DOUBLE IMAGE," by Roy Vickers (*Herbert Jenkins*, 9s. 6d.).

Another well-cooked savoury from Mr. Vickers—integrated, professional, jam-packed with smooth things, the smoothest being a baffling triangle of suspects, two guilty and one innocent—where all parties insist on proving the triangle equilateral.

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FRANCIS ILES, *Sunday Times*
(10/6 net)

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VERNON FANE, *The Sphere*
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CHRISTOPHER PYM,
Manchester Daily Dispatch
(10/6 net)

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THURMAN WARRINER

"Well up on the list of Musts for the connoisseur in crime fiction."

VERNON FANE,
The Sphere
(9/6 net)

HODDER AND STOUGHTON

"ENOUGH TO KILL A HORSE," by Elizabeth Ferrars (*Crime Club*, 10s. 6d.).

Yet another wealth-invaded dear little English village forms the background for the ever-so-nice question of who dosed the lobster patties with phenylthiourea (to some, odourless, tasteless, DEADLY!!!). With all this, however, Miss Ferrars has concocted her usual tasty pie, even if the dough has failed to rise as high as in *The Lying Voices*.

"THE MAN WHO DIDN'T FLY," by Margot Bennet (*Eyre & Spottiswoode*, 10s. 6d.).

Less witty than *Time to Change Hats*, though still superior Eng. Lit., Miss Bennett this time intrigues us with the riddle of finding out which of four men failed to fly to Ireland, and why. Original stuff.

"NEVER BET YOUR LIFE," by George Harmon Coxe (*Hammond & Hammond*, 9s. 6d.).

A slight case of greed and murder in Florida, competently mixed with a sting in the tail, but oddly prolix in moments of climax, and with a dust-jacket of inspired and ruinous revelation.

"POISON IN PARADISE," by Anne Hocking (*W. H. Allen*, 9s. 6d.).

Another, tidy, entertaining whodunit from Miss Hocking. This time the setting is a Pimlico pub, and its regulars make up the members of the traditional closed circle. The means to discovery are a little hackneyed—the

occupational hazards are getting increasingly difficult to avoid—but surely there is no excuse for an attempted murder and miraculous recovery which thus permits a proof-positive accusation.

"IS SHE DEAD TOO?", by Anthony Gilbert (*Crime Club*, 10s. 6d.).

Sinister happenings in dark rooms above a chemist's shop in a remote village, a scheming old woman terrified of cats and a desiccated, macabre chemist are the signposts along the vastly entertaining road of Mr. Gilbert's new book, leading alas to a cops and robbers ending.

"THE DAMNED LOVELY," by Jack Webb (*Boardman*, 9s. 6d.).

Another first-rate Father Shanley-Samuel Golden novel. The death of a rabbi in a corrupt, strike-bound Californian town triggers off a story of murderous vice, sharply etched and seen with compassion. Mr. Webb, despite a few tiresomely tough mannerisms, tells a better tale than practically anyone else in the game.

"DOUBLE MENACE," by Bernard Newman (*Robert Hale*, 9s. 6d.).

Another of Mr. Newman's neo-realistic spy thrillers, this time concerned with a Communist sabotage plot in Britain. He seeks also to show how a British Senator McCarthy could arise to start a reactionary police state based on the fear of the unknown. To gain an effective surprise ending, he makes clever use of the current dilemma of Liberalism in

Thrillers of the Month

MARGOT

BENNETT

THE MAN WHO DIDN'T FLY

(June Choice, 10/6 net)

"One of the brightest stars in the crime-fiction firmament . . . the characters are as brilliantly sketched as ever."

FRANCIS ILES
(Sunday Times)

"A beautifully simple and ingenious idea . . . the best detective story I've read this year."

JULIAN SYMONS
(Manchester Ev. News)



WILLIAM MOLE

The
Hammersmith Maggot

(July Choice, 9/6 net)

JACK FINNEY

(author of *Five against the House*)

The Body Snatchers

(September Choice, 10/6 net)

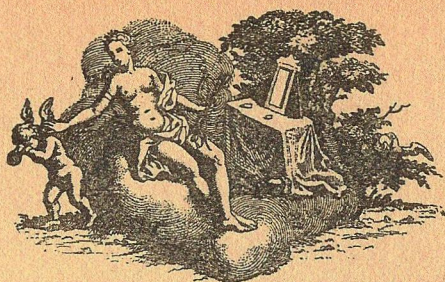
URSULA CURTISS

(author of *The Iron Cobweb*)

The Deadly Climate

(October Choice, 10/6 net)

EYRE & SPOTTISWOODE



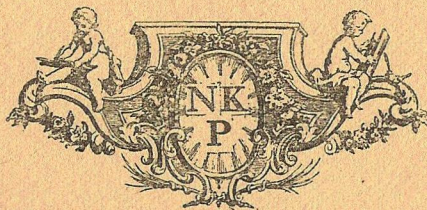
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the face of violent, unreasoning anti-Communism.

"THE NIGHTSHADE RING," by Lindsay Hardy (*Robert Hale*, 9s. 6d.).

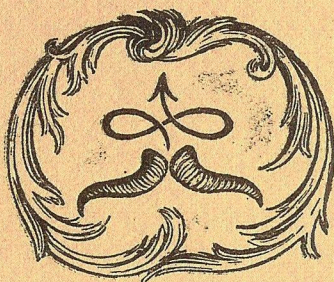
It's not just any tatty old nuclear physicist who disappears in this book. It's a backroom boy called Kesselring, who is working on something so exalted that not even the author can understand it. However, that's where the book's unusual features end. The search for him is conducted by the intrepid Englishman, about whom it seems age cannot wither nor custom stale his infinite similarity—and he is impeded from time to time by treacherous dames and egotistical bullet heads, but of course not really effectively.

"MURDER AMID PROOFS," by Marjorie Bremner (*Hodder & Stoughton*, 10s. 6d.).

Competent magazine office murder of prissy Edmund Vale, assistant to the managing editor. This is followed by a competent reconstruction, a competent second murder and a competent dénouement featuring a suspect who enjoys the correct amount of improbability.

"THE LIMPING GOOSE," by Frank Gruber (*Arthur Barker*, 10s. 6d.).

A reasonably good short story blown up into a novel. But what a pity the publishers have seen fit to betray the book's one gimmick with a carefully executed drawing on the front dust-cover.





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