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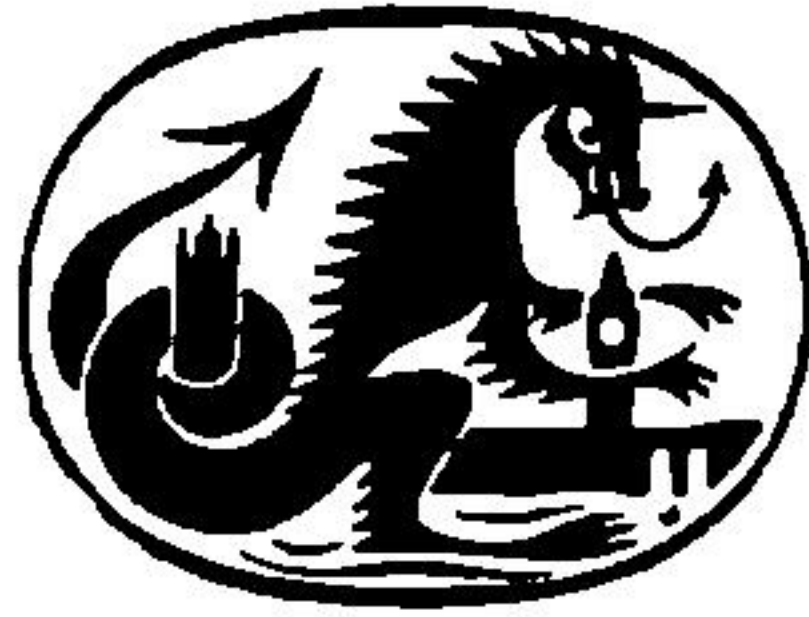
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THE LONDON MYSTERY MAGAZINE

In this issue LONDON MYSTERY MAGAZINE returns once again to the rigours of claustrophobia and incarceration.

As we sit here, imprisoned in our sleet-pounded office, with our spirit plummeting on skis down some snow-blanketed spur of the Bernese Oberland, or basking, gross and parboiled on a cruise a thousand miles up the Amazon, our mind turns a little spitefully perhaps (and why not?—the season of goodwill is past), to variations on Rousseau's favourite maxim: 'Man is born free, but is everywhere in chains.'

Sometimes these chains are physical realities, obeying natural laws:—a piece of rope, a pair of handcuffs, or, as in *The Steel Vault*, or *The Kindly Professor's 'kindness chamber'* where lurk the sickening jelloid, Nchefu—a simple room.

At other times man's never shifting atavism keeps him securely bound, a slave to dread. From Lapland to the Caribbean evil spirits range abroad, revenging, preying, possessing. There's no escape, either in the supposed sanctuary of dried herbs, and special liquids and polished stones in "A Little Less Than Kith," nor from the timeless, lonely imprisonment in *The Obeeah Man's tree*.

But perhaps the most terrifyingly claustrophobic worlds of all are the ones created by the disturbance of time as we know it.

Read the story of "A Room Called Zeluco"—a Louis Seize chamber furnished in the most debased taste, and somehow with a diabolical life of its own only waiting to be released—and you will never bring yourself to furnish an antique room as long as you live.

"An Eye To The Future" will surely teach you never again to even wish that you were elsewhere in time. Above all, mark well the lesson of "M.81 Ursa Major," before venturing to think that all the horrors of incarceration are on this earth. The limbo of outer space is the most damned prison of all.

Yes, dear readers, these are the problems we set before you—these and many more. Do not overlook the workings of inescapable fate in "The Ring." Do not forget that "Laughter Is A Pleasant Thing," and should not be kept locked up inside a man. Do not fail to visit the dread Salpêtrière asylum in Paris which holds the secret of "Fifty Missing Years."

But enough of this. We only hope that this selection will keep all our readers as happily captive as we believe them to have always been—and may we ask them to take special note of the good advice on pages 2 and 128. EDITOR.

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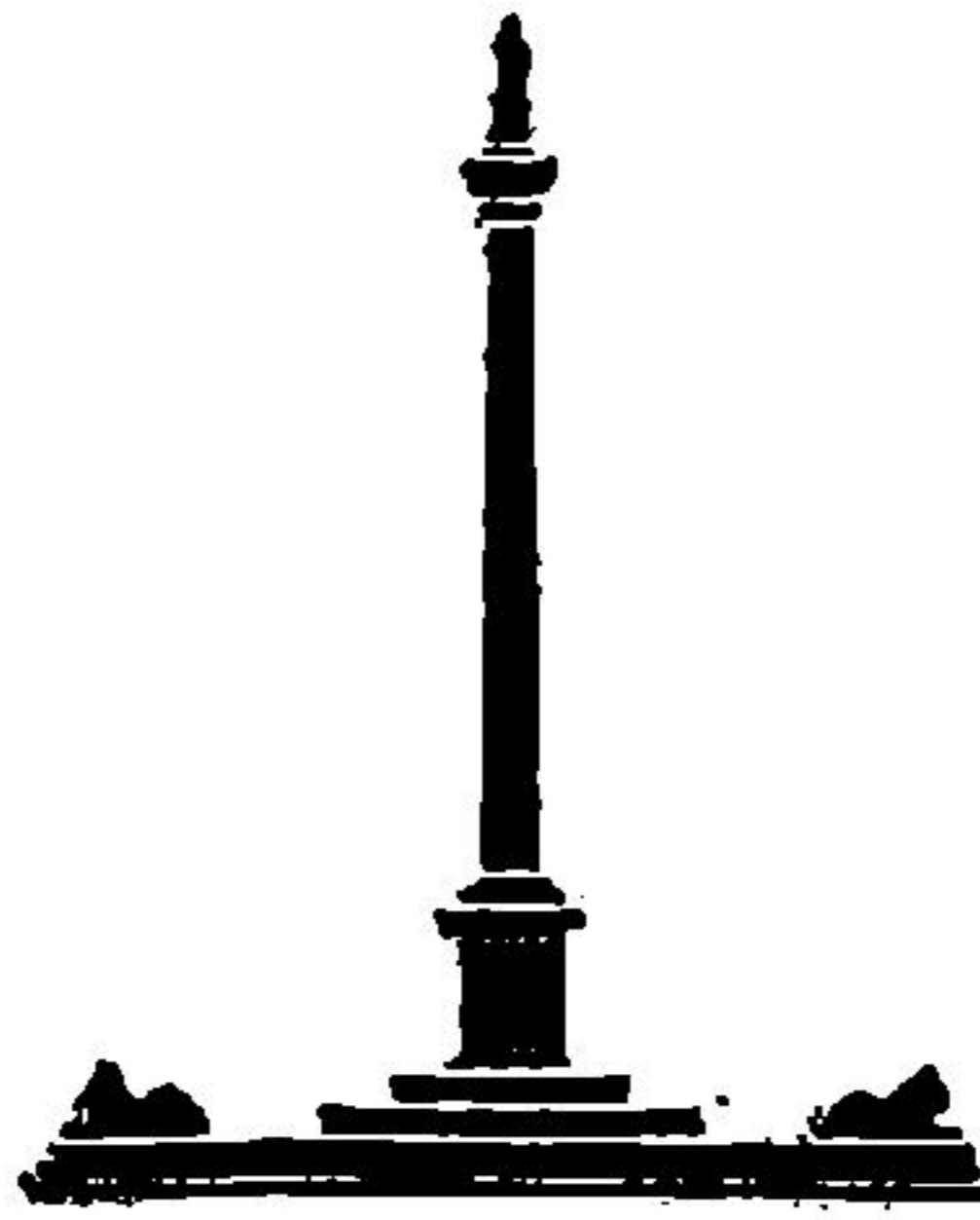
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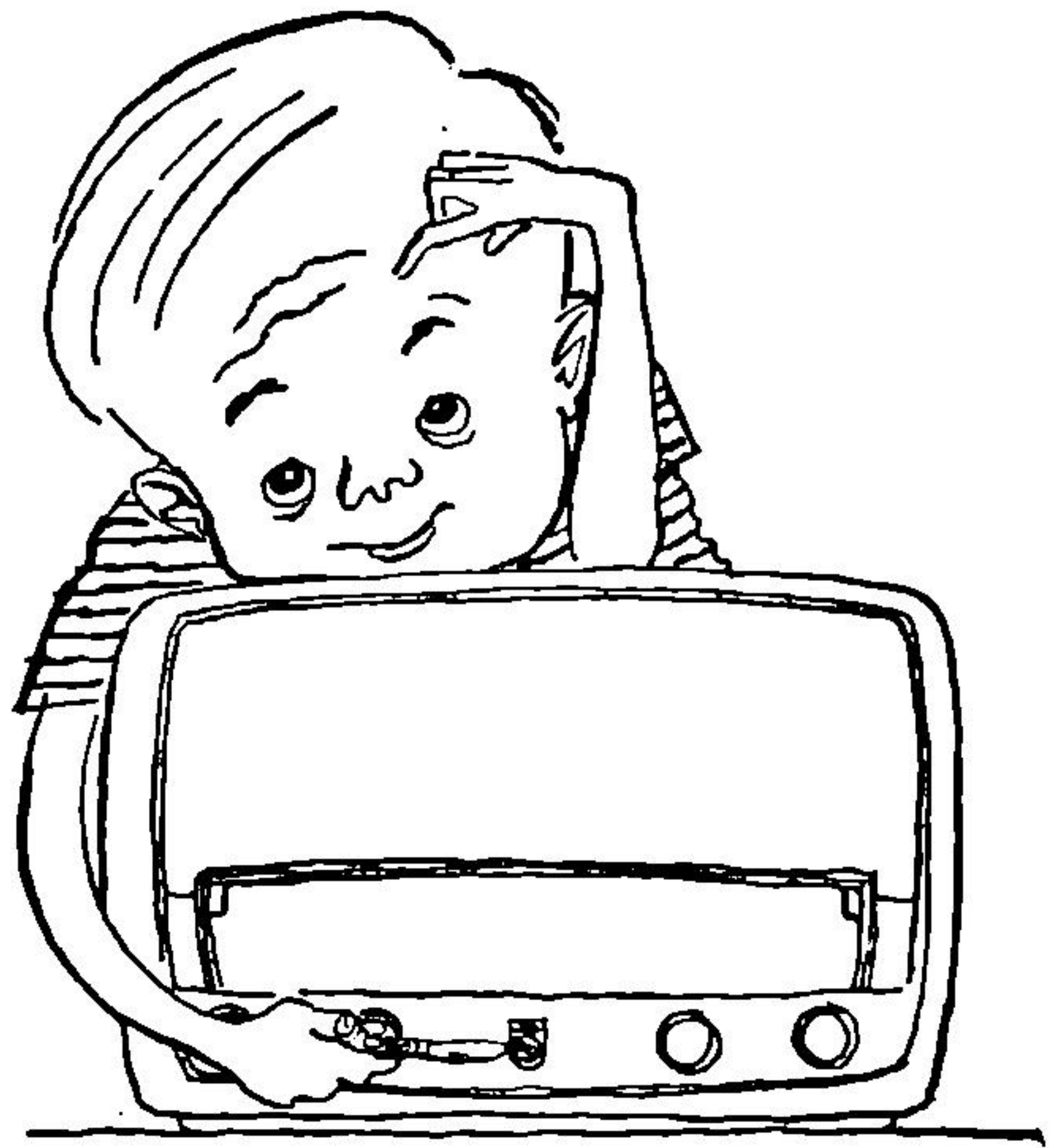
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have
this
shield?



- ' Good gracious, no! The idea! '
' *Why? What's it for?* '
' It's the Philips symbol.'
' *I thought symbols were things you bashed together.* '
' That's "cymbals". This is a "symbol". '
' *Well, what's it there for?* '
' It shows the set is dependable.'
' *WHY does it show it's dependable?* '
' It just does. You'll find it on all Philips things.
It means you can trust them.'
' *WHY can you trust them?* '
' Because they're that sort of people.'
' *WHY are they that sort of people?* '
' Because . . . because . . . Peter, I think you'd
better get on with your homework.'

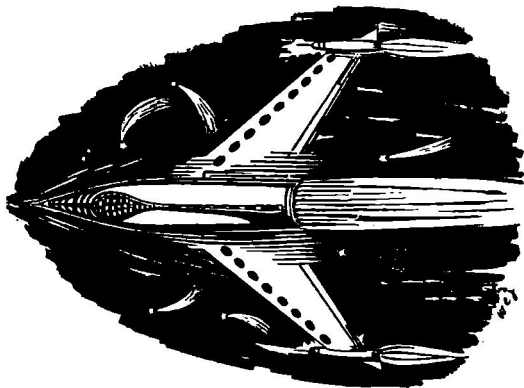
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(P36H)



M. 81: URSA MAJOR

EDMUND COOPER

Illustrated by W. E. Jones

"Motion does not tire anybody. With the earth as our vehicle we are travelling at 20 miles a second round the sun; the sun carries us at 12 miles a second through the galactic system; the galactic system bears us at 250 miles a second amid the spiral nebulae. . . . If motion could tire, we ought to be dead tired."

SIR ARTHUR EDDINGTON, *The Nature of the Physical World.*

IT WAS TWENTY hours, ship's time, after firing-point. A million miles astern, the earth shone coldly like a small green moon. On the navigation deck of the *Santa Maria*, a profound silence was disturbed only by the steady but discreet ping of the radio probe.

Captain Mauris leaned back on his contour-berth and waited patiently for his soul to catch up with his body. His sensations at the beginning of each deep voyage were invariably the same. His body had learned to adapt to a force of 10 G and to a stellar acceleration whose graph was a mad

ascending curve; but his spirit, while hardly weak, retained the old subconscious reluctance. It didn't much care for the big jump. It would hang tenaciously on to the illusion that Captain Mauris would presently wake up to find himself at home in bed.

Which was the dream—earth or space? After twenty hours of space-flight in planetary drive (which nowadays the younger men humorously called first gear) Captain Mauris was not too sure of the answer.

He sighed, and took refuge in the monumental assumption of Descartes: *I think, therefore I exist.*

Then he began to wonder if the same could be said of his boat-load of physicists.

Ever since the dim distant days of the twentieth century, when the scientific caste system had been formalized, physicists had tended to become less and less human; and now they were hardly more than semi-substantial extrapolations of their own theories. . . . A sad comment on the sort of civilization that allowed robots to take charge of global production, while turning the best human brains into second-rate electronic calculators.

The captain's private soliloquy was interrupted by Phylo, the first officer, climbing down from the astrodome.

"Dead on," said Phylo. "Heading straight for *Zeta* of the Great Bear. When do we change gear, Captain?"

Mauris gave him a sour look. "While I command the *Santa Maria*, Mr. Phylo, we will not change gear."

"Sorry, sir. When do we switch to stellar drive, then?"

"I think," replied the captain, "that I will shortly inquire if the physicists are still alive; and if so, when they will be prepared to take the bump."

Phylo laughed. "I hope you're disappointed, sir."

"Meaning what?"

"I hope they're still kicking. I should hate to have to return to earth and explain why we knocked off six top S.F.P.s."

"The world," said Captain Mauris soberly, "might even smell somewhat sweeter for the loss of a few space-frame physicists. Man is becoming just a little too clever."

"I wonder why you volunteered for the trip, then," said Phylo slyly. "A voyage with S.F.P. men for unspecified experimental purposes hardly promises to be uneventful. Besides, there's the triple-danger money—just like the old days when they first tried out the stellar drive."

"The triple-danger money itself is as good a reason as any," came the non-committal reply. "I expect neither of us will have any difficulty finding a use for it."

"Assuming," said Phylo dryly, "that we survive whatever tricks the S.F.P.s are cooking up."

Mauris regarded his first officer coolly. "It is my firm intention to survive," he said.

Phylo gazed through the plastiglass anti-glare dome at a swarm of hard, unwinking suns. Finally, without looking at Mauris, he said softly: "I think there's a more valid reason, sir."

"Do you, now!" The captain's tone was not encouraging.

Phylo took a deep breath and ploughed on. "They told me you were the first skipper to successfully use the stellar drive."

"A slight exaggeration," said Mauris with a thin smile. "I was merely the first captain to return and collect his pay-envelope. . . . However, proceed."

"I notice," said Phylo uneasily, "that there's a parallel set of gears—I mean dual-controls—on the main panel."

"Well?"

"I don't understand the calibrations on the dials under the lighto-

meter. Nor do I understand why the second bank of meters should have all their throw-in switches locked and sealed."

"An interesting little mystery," observed Mauris. "As you have obviously given some thought to it, what conclusions do you draw?"

"Well, sir," said Phylo hesitantly, "bearing in mind that the *Santa Maria* has a cargo of S.F.P.s, a skipper who successfully tested the stellar drive, a set of new instruments, and the fact that we are under sealed orders, I think there's only one possible conclusion."

"I should be interested to hear it," said Mauris with irony.

"There have been rumours," continued Phylo, "of a galactic drive. My guess is that the *Santa Maria* has been fitted out for a trial run. . . . What do you think, sir?"

"I think," replied Mauris, glancing at the bulkhead electrochron, "that I shall shortly break the seal and discover what the Fates have in store for us. . . . I'll tell you this, though—I don't think we shall be experimenting with a galactic drive."

"Why not, sir?"

"Because," said Mauris with the ghost of a smile, "the *United Space Corporation* has already developed it—as a logical extension of the stellar drive. It's still on the secret list, of course. But I had the interesting experience of being a paid observer on the test jump."

Phylo's voice was filled with awe. "Would it be indiscreet to inquire what distance you logged?"

"I think, in view of our position,"

said the captain, "that it will do no harm to give you the facts. . . . We—er—had a little jaunt round *Beta Centauri*."

"Godalmighty!"

"A matter of seven hundred light-years for the round trip," added Mauris complacently. "We accomplished it in three hours twenty-seven minutes, ship's time—starting and finishing in the neighbourhood of Pluto's orbit."

"Were there any—any casualties?"

"All of us," said Captain Mauris soberly. "We couldn't stop laughing for two days. . . . But I forgot. There was one serious casualty: Egon, the navigator. His star-maps were damn near useless, of course. He swore we'd never get home. And when we finally hit the System, the relief was too much for him. . . . He was the only one who didn't stop laughing. And from what I hear, he's still enjoying himself."

Phylo couldn't decide whether or not Mauris was having a private joke. After a moment or two he said, in a matter-of-fact voice: "I wonder what the hell is going to happen on this trip, then?"

"Probably," said Captain Mauris, "we shall cease to exist."

Four hours later, in the privacy of his cabin, the captain of the *Santa Maria* broke the seal on a slim envelope and read his instructions. The final paragraph gave him a certain grim amusement.

While the normal articles of space-travel obtain for this experimental voyage, he read, the programme sanc-

tioned by the Field Testing Executive of the United Space Corporation clearly necessitates a fluid definition of the Safety Clause. However, if the Master should satisfy himself and the authorized scientists concerned that the danger factor is sufficient to render the ship's safe return as improbable, therefore neutralizing the validity of the experiment, he is entitled to cancel the test programme and return immediately to base. A Court of Inquiry would then evaluate the circumstances leading to such a decision.

"Why the devil," said Captain Mauris to himself, "do they use a lot of big words to tell me that I'm merely acting wet-nurse for a bunch of S.F.P.s?"

At that moment there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," called Mauris.

It was Kobler, chief of the S.F.P. team. He was a thin, pasty-faced man of perhaps forty. His mouth looked as if it would split if he tried to smile.

Mauris motioned him into a chair, and reached for two glasses and the decanter. As he poured the drinks, Kobler glanced at the ship's articles lying on the desk.

"I see you've been studying the scriptures," said the physicist. "Are you satisfied?"

"No. From the point of view of getting a clear-cut definition of responsibility, it's as woolly as hell."

"I shouldn't worry, if I were you," said Kobler, sipping his whisky. "If anything goes wrong, you'll probably have a megasecond in which to think

a last beautiful thought."

"That," retorted Mauris thinly, "is why I would have liked sufficient power to overrule you people—just in case I happened to anticipate the hypothetically fatal megasecond."

"Sorry," said Kobler, "but I'm the boss-man. That's the way it has to be for this sort of thing. You'd better resign yourself to praying for my spiritual guidance."

"I don't know why you people need a space-captain," said Mauris testily. "You could have programmed the *Santa Maria* to take you to dissolution point under her own steam."

Kobler smiled, but his face didn't crack. "Even a space-captain has his uses. . . . How did you enjoy the hop round *Beta Centauri*?"

"So that was why they wanted me to go. I wondered about it."

"You were lucky," said Kobler. "They wouldn't let me go because some idiot mathematician suggested that the ship might surface too near a sun, or something damn silly like that. . . . It seems that my brain was considered too valuable to be fried."

"Mine evidently wasn't," observed the captain.

"You, my friend, are unique," said Kobler dryly. "You are a veteran of the stellar drive and the galactic jump. We regard you as a curio, a kind of talisman."

"I'm flattered," said Mauris. "And now, I think, we had better discuss ways and means."

"You know the destination?"

Mauris inclined his head towards the papers on the desk. "According to the *Field Testing Executive*," he

said calmly, "it is *Messier 81*."

"What do you think of it?" asked Kobler smugly.

"I think it might be—interesting," said Captain Mauris with sarcasm. "I don't think I've ever visited a spiral nebula before."

Kobler grinned. "One million six hundred thousand light-years," he said. "Quite a little hop, isn't it?"

"How long do you think it will take?"

The physicist's grin broadened. "I don't know—probably just that hypothetically fatal megasecond."

Mauris restrained himself with an effort. "I'd appreciate a brief exposition of the theory," he said. "It might be useful."

Kobler helped himself to more whisky, leaned back in his chair and regarded the ceiling. "You understand, of course, that matter is a form of locked-up energy?"

"Yes."

"Good. I now have news for you. Energy is simply a form of locked-up space. . . . Considered against the orthodox notion of an expanding cosmos, the conversion of energy is a one-way traffic only. We lose a lot of matter and we get a lot of space. . . . Very discouraging, really. One hates to think of things reaching an equilibrium. Besides, I never did like orthodoxy."

"You wouldn't be throwing overboard the first and second laws of thermodynamics, would you?" interrupted the captain mildly.

Kobler admired his own fingernails. "Child's play," he said. "Entropy and the first and second laws

are all washed up. I have established a certain coefficient which, in practice, will allow us to adopt the charming habit of energy. It will allow us to *submerge* in space. An interesting trick, but we shall be able to do even better. We shall be able to select a non-spatial point where we can become energy again. Which, in effect, means that we can knock the main-spring out of time; since, by becoming virtually non-existent, we escape the temporal regression. . . . That, in a modified fashion, is why you were able to hop round *Beta Centauri* and swallow seven hundred light-years. . . . And of the three hours twenty-seven minutes it took, you spent most of the time surfacing so that Egon could panic over his star-maps."

"That is true," said Mauris. "But we were functioning in a known energy pattern. By making the new target M.81, you are postulating a jump clean out of the local energy system."

"Not *out* of, but *through*," corrected the physicist. "On the *Beta Centauri* trip you were still slightly limited by a temporal regression. This time the deceleration will be so sharp as to make a total breakthrough. We shall make a neat hole in our own space frame and enter sub-space. We shall become a pattern of space on the frame of sub-space. Then we shall localize our return breakthrough when a pretty little instrument that I have programmed for M.81 recognizes the surface-energy pattern."

"Suppose the programming fails?"

Kobler laughed. "As it is the first

true cosmometer, there is the possibility. But you can take it from me that it is theoretically perfect."

Mauris made an impolite noise, signifying his general scepticism; but Kobler ignored it and continued his train of thought.

"Space has a very definite direction," he announced. "Its vortices are the galactic leaks. In some respects, we can regard the sub-echoes of nebulae as stepping-stones. In the extra-galactic jump, it is chiefly a question of defining the direction-deceleration crisis—or, in plain language, of making the right hole at the right time. . . . So far as I can see, everything is predictable—except the human reaction."

"It makes for a nice philosophical problem," observed Mauris.

"What does?"

"Whether or not we can be conscious of our own non-existence."

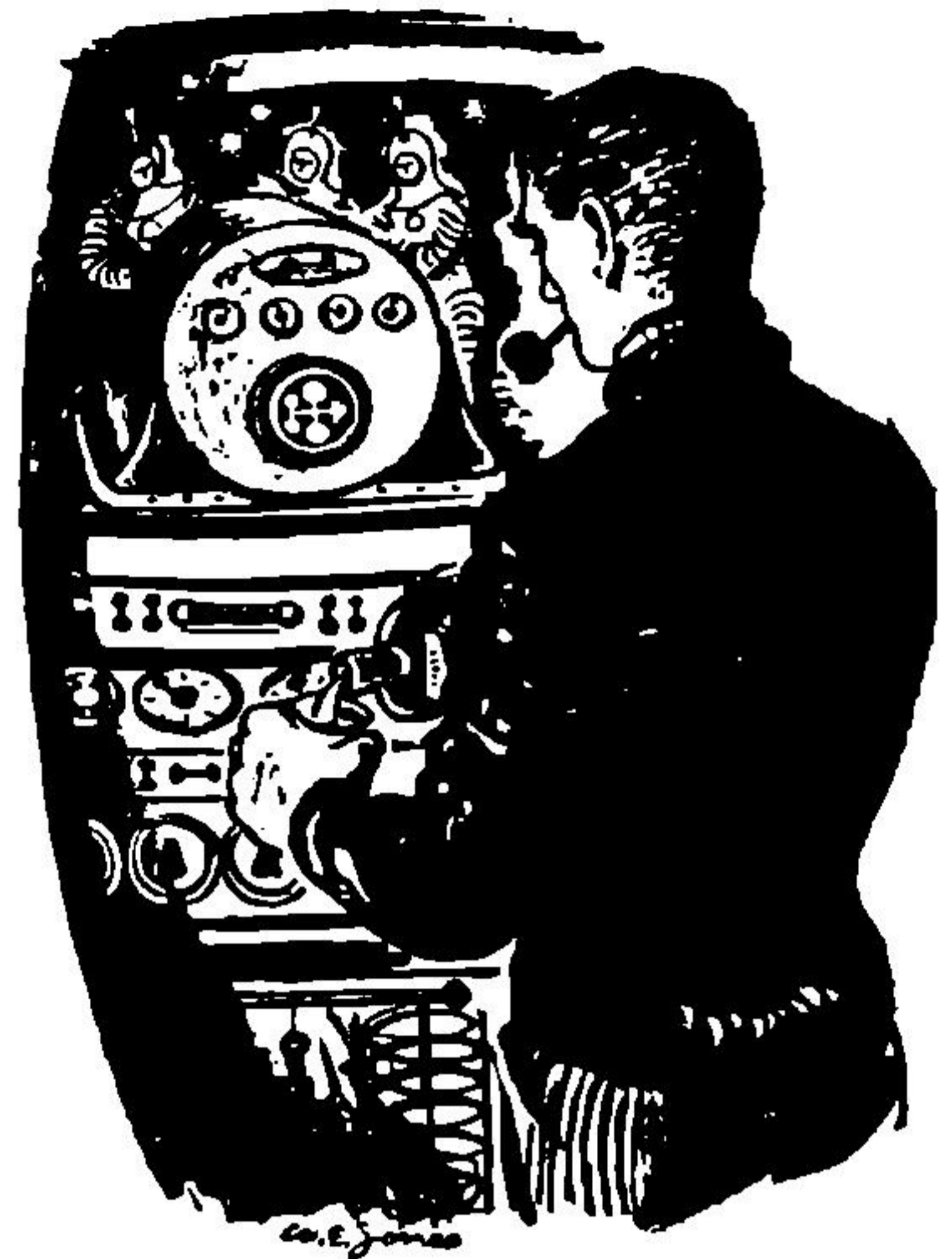
Kobler gave him a look of respect. "That's the crux of the matter," he admitted. "You see, the *Santa Maria* and all aboard will cease to be a system of molecular organizations."

"Conversely," said the captain in a matter-of-fact voice, "it will become the abstract memory of an energy pattern which will be re-synthesized out of space—when and if your infallible cosmometer correlates the pattern of M.81 with that of its own environment."

Kobler sat up. "I didn't know you were a physicist."

"I'm not," retorted Mauris dryly. "But I'll tell you something else, too. It's going to be damn cold!"

Pluto's orbit was a hundred million



miles astern, and the *Santa Maria* had achieved a satisfactory clearance of the System. For the last ten hours she had voyaged under her stellar drive. Through the dark plastiglass port-holes, men occasionally stared at the long star-torn silence of total night.

The navigation deck was a scene of activity and tension, for deceleration point was rapidly approaching. Under Kobler's direction, a fat copper cylinder—the outward and visible shell of an inward and delicate cosmometer—had been battened to the deck in front of the main control panel; and the second bank of switches, with their mysterious calibrations, had now been unsealed.

Of all the personnel, Captain Mauris was the most calm. He was busy breaking several regulations.

It was his duty as Master of the ship to present at all times an aspect

of confidence. With the aid of a bottle of Scotch and a somewhat prehistoric corncob pipe, he was fulfilling this obligation admirably. He was also sweating, for he had discarded his uniform jacket in favour of two old polo-necked jerseys. . . . Doubtless the *Field Testing Executive* would strongly disapprove, but then the F.T.E. were millions of miles away.

Having taken what he considered to be a sufficiency of spirit, the captain was now engaged in chewing glucose tablets. Phylo watched him with silent awe.

Eventually, Kobler looked up from his cosmometer. "Nine minutes to go, Captain," he said formally.

Mauris glanced at the bulkhead electrochron and nodded. "Five hundred seconds," he said pleasantly, "and then sixteen hundred thousand light-years. . . . Science is quite wonderful."

Kobler was nettled. "What are you eating—nerve pills?"

"Glucose," said Mauris affably. "I've been dieting on whisky and glucose."

"Why?"

"Because I intend to keep both warm and energetic."

"There should not be any drop in temperature," said Kobler. "In any case, the thermostat will fix that."

"The non-existent thermostat," corrected Mauris gently. "But I was not thinking of coldness that can be measured in degrees centigrade."

"There is no other," said Kobler authoritatively. "Neither is there any

need to keep your strength up. There will be no fatigue."

"Nor was I thinking in terms of physical fatigue."

Kobler shrugged. "Every man to his own superstitions."

Captain Mauris smiled. "Would it be indiscreet to suggest that yours are non-Euclidean?"

Kobler turned away in disgust and spoke to one of his aides. "Get everyone in their contour-berths and switch the auto-announcer on. We might as well let the brain take over."

Captain Mauris made a last attempt to be helpful. "It is well known," he said placidly, "that smooth motion never made anybody tired. But I am not so sure about smooth stillness. It may be very fatiguing. . . . Perhaps it may even be possible for a non-existent man to be too tired to maintain his non-existent bodily heat. . . . Would you care for some glucose?"

Kobler did not turn round, but his shoulders shook convulsively. Captain Mauris interpreted the movement as one of silent laughter.

"One minute to deceleration-point," boomed the auto-announcer.

Men with strained faces lay strapped on their contour-berths awaiting the indefinable shock of total stillness. They stared with unseeing eyes at their neighbours; at the bulkhead; at the fat, ominous, copper cylinder. Phylo's lips were quivering; Captain Mauris, in spite of his light-hearted precautions, felt a strange icy finger probing his heart; even Kobler's massive confidence wavered as the

critical moment drew near.

"Forty-five seconds," said that damnably calm automatic voice. "Thirty seconds . . . fifteen seconds . . . ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one—zero!"

And then there was nothing—no lurch, no pressure, no sudden stress. Only a great vacancy; a sensation of utter darkness; a sharp instantaneous dream of un-being. . . . And then only the bare memory of the dream.

In the dimensions of physical space, the *Santa Maria* and all aboard her had ceased to exist. There was no wreckage: there were no survivors. For what had existed in the apparent reality of space-time was now as if it had never been. . . .

Captain Mauris was alone. He was alone because there was nothing else. He was alone with the illusion of his own existence. The stillness had settled like a slow inward frost.

His premonition was justified. In a vacancy of non-sensation, there was yet the overwhelming weight of a curious fatigue—as if, at the moment of deceleration, the material cosmos had suddenly become too tired to hold together. As if Mauris himself must support the tiredness of a phantom universe.

"So this is what it's like to be dead," he mumbled in a sleepy voice. He heard the sound reverberating, as in an empty room. . . . The echoes died—and then he heard the *other* voice!

"*Captain Mauris! Captain Mauris! Soon you will be too tired to be dead, too cold to be an illusion. For you are condemned to be reborn.*"

It was a woman's voice, low, musical—drifting without urgency through the deep canyons of un-being.

Mauris listened, appalled. It was a voice he recognized—the voice of a woman he might have married; a familiar voice, belonging to one he had never known.

"Who are you?" he called desperately, hearing the words echo on a wall of blackness.

There was laughter tumbling through the emptiness of stars.

"*Mary Smith,*" said the voice, "*Betty Jones and Pearl White. Marie-Antoinette, Cleopatra, Helen of Troy.*"

"I am mad!" cried Captain Mauris. "The stars are dark, and still there is something left to dream."

"*You are unborn,*" said the voice gently. "*Have patience.*"

Captain Mauris tried to move and could not; for there was nothing to move, no location to be changed.

"Who am I?" he shouted wildly.

"*Captain Mauris.*"

"There is no Captain Mauris," he yelled savagely. "He is unborn, therefore he has never lived!"

"*You are learning,*" came the answer softly. "*You are learning that it is necessary to wait.*"

"Who am I?" he demanded urgently.

The laughter came like an invisible tide, sweeping him on its crest.

"*Punchinello,*" said the voice gaily, "*Prometheus, Simple Simon, Alexander the Great.*"

"Who am I?" he called insistently.

"*You are no one. . . . Who knows?*"

Perhaps you will become the first man. Perhaps you are waiting to be Adam."

"Then you are——"

Again the dark surge of laughter.

"I am the echo of a rib that has yet to sing."

"The rib is nowhere," said Mauris, drowsy with the effort of words. "It belongs to me, and I am unborn. . . . Nowhere."

"Limbo," whispered the voice.

"Nowhere," mumbled Mauris.

"Limbo," insisted the voice.

"No . . . where," repeated Mauris weakly, fighting the cold fatigue of stillness, the weight of unbeing.

He could feel the laughter gathering, and knew that it would drown him. Desperation fought against the blind weariness sucking him into the heaving tide of sound. He tried to remember what it was like to pray.

"Oh God," he whispered, "if I cannot die, let me become alive. Let there be light!"

Once more the laughter struck. And the whirlpool opened.

There were no stars yet, but the light came like a pallid finger, probing the interior of the stricken ship. Captain Mauris looked about him at dim shapes, while fear plucked its familiar music from his taut nerves.

There was something desperately wrong. Suddenly he understood. Everything had been reversed.

The copper cylinder, which had been bolted to the deck on the port side of the main control panel, now lay on the starboard side, its smooth fiery surface crumpled like paper.

Below it, on the deck, lay beads of still liquid copper rain.

The starboard electrochron, with its numerals reversed, now lay on the port side, above the gaping hole where the lightometer had been.

Captain Mauris turned his head to look at Kobler; but Phylo's berth now lay there in place of the physicist's. The captain knew without moving that his first officer was dead. Phylo stared at the deckhead, his features locked in a permanently vacant smile.

Glancing round at the S.F.P. chief,



in Phylo's old place, Captain Mauris saw that Kobler's body was entirely relaxed. Judging from his expression, thought Mauris, he had been trying *in extremis* to discover his error.

The navigation deck of the *Santa Maria* was a mausoleum—through the looking-glass. Everything—even, as Mauris discovered, the parting in his own hair—had been reversed. He knew, without feeling the necessity to confirm it by exploration, that he was the last man alive.

"Poor devils," said Captain Mauris aloud. "Poor devils, they couldn't take the stillness. It made them too tired—dead tired!"

With ponderous, heavy movements, like a drunken man, he undid the straps of his contour-berth and struggled wearily to his feet. He went across to Kobler, feeling for his pulse with a forlorn hope.

"Dead tired," repeated Mauris slowly. He felt neither regret nor satisfaction. There was no joy in knowing that he had the final word, that Kobler would never laugh that one away.

Presently he pulled himself together and made a cautious tour of the ship. He was as methodical as if it was a monthly routine inspection, and checked everything from the conditioner to the recycling plant. The ship, he noted ironically, was in perfect condition—but for two small details: the planetary and stellar drives were completely wrecked. Apart from the fact that the landing retard and auxiliary brake rockets were intact, the *Santa Maria* was at the mercy of normal gravity fields.

There were only two reasonable possibilities. She might coast merrily in the void for ever, or drop eventually into a sun. The alternative was too improbable for consideration; for the chances of falling into the gravity field of an hospitable planet were several billion billion to one.

Finally, Captain Mauris was confronted with the task he had been subconsciously shirking. He could avoid it no longer. He climbed up into the astrodome and looked at the stars.

He did not need star-charts to tell him that this was not the home galaxy. As he gazed at the sharp, unfamiliar patterns, an already tight band seemed to constrict round his heart. . . . Perhaps Kobler had succeeded. Perhaps the galaxy M.81 had been entered by a terrene ship for the first time. . . . Much good it would do the *United Space Corporation*!

It was really very funny! Probably, sixteen hundred thousand light-years away, on a speck of cosmic dust, the *Field Testing Executive* had already set up their officious Court of Inquiry to consider possible reasons for the loss of their experimental ship.

Then suddenly he realized that if the *Santa Maria* had indeed reached M.81, the planet Earth was not only sixteen hundred thousand light-years away, it was also sixteen hundred thousand light-years ago.

He had a sudden image of the *Field Testing Executive* with ape-like faces, sitting and jabbering pompously around a mud pool in some

prehistoric steamy jungle. . . . And Mauris laughed.

He laughed loudly, raucously. He laughed until he cried—until weariness, in a sudden triumph, toppled him senseless on the deck. And there he lay, sleeping like a child whose nightmares materialize only when he is awake.

He never knew how long he slept. Eventually he was awakened by a sharp, agonizing pain. With an effort he recognized it as hunger. He staggered along to the mess-deck and operated the food-delivery controls. A minute and a half later he pulled a nicely roasted chicken, complete with tomatoes and green peas, from the electronic cooker. He ate ravenously, and followed it up with cheese and biscuits, coffee and liqueur brandy. Then he took the old corn-cob pipe from his pocket and lit up. Presently Captain Mauris was feeling almost human.

He spent the rest of the "day" launching dead bodies into space. One after another, Kobler, Phylo and the rest went sailing smoothly out into the starry darkness. Presently, the *Santa Maria* was surrounded by a slowly dispersing shoal of corpses.

At last, when all that unwelcome furniture had been jettisoned, the captain went back to the navigation deck and made the ship accelerate for three seconds on her auxiliary rockets, thus leaving the shoal behind. Having accomplished this disagreeable task, Mauris felt much better.

But as he clambered into the astro-dome for a further check on the unfamiliar star positions, it dawned on him that he had probably looked on a human face for the last time.

Nine "days" later, by the ship's electrochron, Captain Mauris became convinced that he would not have to wait much longer. The star on the port bow had grown to the size of a penny. Presently it would grow to the size of a football. Presently the *Santa Maria* and her captain would reach the end of their journey—in the purification of celestial fire.

Meanwhile, the condemned man continued to eat hearty breakfasts, and settled down to enjoy, in his last days, what he had never yet experienced throughout his life—a period of sustained leisure.

He spent more and more time in the ship's library, projecting the micro-films of books he had never had the time to read. Intuitively, he went to the old writers, ranging at a leisurely pace through fiction and non-fiction, from Plato to Dickens, from Homer to H. G. Wells.

By the eighteenth day, Captain Mauris was confused, disappointed, excited and afraid. The now brilliantly blinding sun had changed its position to the starboard quarter. Its place on the port bow had been taken by what seemed to be a green marble. Captain Mauris knew it was not another sun, and tried desperately not to allow himself to hope that it might be a habitable planet. Better to die by falling into an alien sun than survive, a castaway, on an

unknown planet in some alien galaxy. . . . His reason said so, but his emotions remained unconvinced.

It was then, for no reason at all, that he suddenly remembered the voice and the dreamlike laughter he had experienced in the total darkness, the absolute stillness, of the galactic jump.

And Captain Mauris had a premonition.

On the twenty-fifth day, the possibility became a certainty. The *Santa Maria* was falling towards the green planet.

There were two courses of action. He could either allow the ship to continue her free fall until she vapourized on hitting the atmosphere—if any—or exploded on ground impact; or else he could apply the auxiliary-brake rockets and the landing retard, thus making a bid for survival.

He was afraid in the very core of his being. He was afraid to make up his mind.

For some hours, Mauris tried to seek consolation and enlightenment in a bottle of brandy. He did not find it. Then, at last, he was drawn to the navigation deck as by a magnet.

He climbed into the astrodome and regarded the green planet. It was expanding rapidly, almost visibly. With trembling fingers, Captain Mauris adjusted the manual telescope. He gazed through it at a startlingly close panorama of oceans, continents and islands. He stared hypnotically for a while, and felt the beads of cold moisture grow on his forehead.

Eventually he came down, and went to drink more brandy. It solved nothing, because he was still sober enough to face the choice.

Suddenly he could stand it no more. He lurched unsteadily to the navigation deck, reached the control panel and threw in three switches simultaneously. Reflex-radar, altimeter and positioning gyro were immediately synchronized with the auto-pilot. Whether the reversed instruments functioned correctly or not, Mauris neither knew nor cared. He had rid himself of an intolerable weight. He had made a decision.

There was a brief eternity of silence. Then he felt a sharp surge as the motors produced a field of double gravity, piling up on the ship's own synthetic 1/3 G force.

Mauris collapsed sideways and slithered to the bulkhead, where he lay groaning heavily. The rocket burst lasted five seconds, crushing him with its relentless force. Abruptly it ended; he slithered painfully to the deck.

The second automatic power manoeuvre hit him before he could reach a contour-berth. A field of 5 G slammed him against the bulkhead. He lay there spread-eagled, unconscious.

The auto-pilot had positioned the ship accurately. The ship's attitude, controlled by the gyro-manipulator, had brought the green planet dead astern; and with rockets blazing the *Santa Maria* dropped backwards to that rapidly expanding surface. On the screens of the external visulators, the silvery shapes of mountains and

hills, of rivers and forests leaped into a growing reality. The fleecy shapes of clouds passed like fantastic birds.

But Captain Mauris lay inert against the bulkhead; the accelerating G force crushing his unconscious body to the hard metal.

He awoke with every muscle aching from the tremendous stress of ordinary physical deceleration; but he awoke with a sensation of profound peace.

He picked himself up and climbed into the astrodome. The stars were no longer sharp unwinking points against a backcloth of jet. They twinkled, dancing to the whim of atmosphere.

Looking down, Captain Mauris felt his heart thump violently. The *Santa Maria* had made a perfect automatic landing on what, in the semi-darkness, appeared to be smooth grassland. A few yards away, he thought he saw dimly the ripple of running water.

The *United Space Corporation* had laid down a cautious and definitive procedure for the exploration of strange planets. But, as Mauris told himself lightly, the *United Space Corporation* would not begin to exist even in its own galaxy for another sixteen hundred thousand light-years.

Throwing discretion aside, Captain Mauris made his way aft towards the air-lock. He seized a combination pressure suit and climbed into it impatiently. Then he entered the pressure chamber. He closed the door behind him and threw the switch. The needle remained steady, indicat-

ing that the external pressure, the planetary atmosphere, was at par.

Mauris was surprised. He began to feel that it was part of some obliging dream. He pressed a luminous button on the bulkhead, and the heavy door of the entry-port swung open. Slowly he climbed down. Through the misty half-light, he saw a countryside that might have belonged to the temperate zones of Earth.

Impulsively he released the safety valve on his pressure suit, tempting Fate for the last time. Nothing happened. With an audible laugh of triumph and amazement, he began to take off the headpiece. Presently he stepped out of the pressure suit, his oxygen cylinder unneeded.

Captain Mauris stood on an unknown planet and took in the unmistakable scents of summer. As he gazed about him he saw, over a patch of woodland, grey streaks of light pushing back the darkness, dulling the stars. And fifty yards away from the space-ship he discerned the edge of a stream whose quiet murmur seemed suddenly to communicate with his awakened sense of hearing.

Captain Mauris watched the landscape come quietly to life. Then he looked up at the sky.

"And darkness," said Mauris, as if to the fading stars, "darkness was upon the face of the deep."

He stood there, feeling the years roll back, feeling the vitality of youth drive back some secret winter. At length he turned to look at the space-

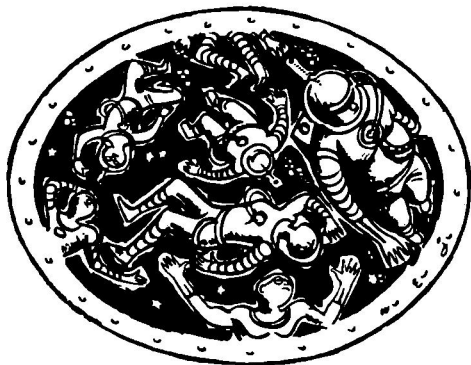
ship once more, to reassure himself of the reality of the journey. There was nothing to be seen.

But where the thin vein of water flowed quietly down to a rocky pool, there was a sudden movement, a gesture, a cry of welcome or recognition.

Surprised at his own calmness, he

began to walk towards the familiar figure, surrendering his eyes to the sheer beauty of those graceful limbs. . . . And from the direction that he would learn to call east, there rose the crimson edge of a new sun.

He remembered then, and suddenly understood the message of a woman's voice in a dream of absolute stillness.



I saw Eternity the other night,
Like a great ring of pure and endless light,
All calm, as it was bright;
And round beneath it, Time in hours, days, years,
Driv'n by the spheres
Like a vast shadow mov'd; in which the world
And all her train were hurl'd.

HENRY VAUGHAN (1622-1695): *The World*.



A ROOM CALLED ZELUCO

C. D. HERIOT

Illustrated by Anthony Baynes

Did Hilda start things when she named the North Room Zeluco, after the title of a forgotten novel by Dr. John Moore, whose principal character is totally evil, or was it just one of her obsessive ideas about interior decoration?

THE CLAVERINGS HAD enough money between them to indulge their hobbies, which were inclined to be diffused and expensive. At the time when they took Mallets, their interests were centred in what is known as interior decoration.

They had been married five years. There were no children. Hilda was not tall, but she had dark hair and snapping brown eyes in a pale face that more than recompensed her lack of height. She had instinctive good taste, reinforced by a careful educa-

tion. Charles had an anonymous appearance and was always willing to learn. Both were in the middle thirties, and no subject was entirely new to them.

Immediately after their marriage, they had lived in Kensington surrounded by sugar-stick Jacobean "pieces." Then they had moved to Hampstead and a milieu of limed oak and Czechoslovakian etceteras. In two years they had progressed to a starkly chromium-and-zebra flat in Mayfair. After that there seemed nothing else to do but to complete the circle, and so they took Mallets. This was a gaunt Early Georgian

building in Essex, with hardly any land attached to it. There were twelve rooms in addition to the usual offices, but—as Hilda told her friends—it wouldn't really be as enormous as it sounded after they had added a sufficiency of bathrooms, and besides, think of the perfectly lovely time they would have “doing” the inside. There was space for experiment, she said, and proceeded to experiment to the fullest extent of her energy and her bank balance.

Obviously one was limited to a certain degree by the Georgian shell; but one thanked God that it *was* Georgian and not anything hard-and-fast like Tudor or Queen Anne. Everything about it was eminently desirable, except the room that had been added on the north side. This, they were sure, was much later than the original building—in fact, it was so definitely Late Victorian that they had almost chosen the furniture for it, and they felt more irritation than surprise when an acquaintance who knew something about architecture told them flatly that it had not been erected later than Waterloo, and probably a few years earlier.

It was most annoying, but there it was. They would have to begin all over again. Charles, after a prolonged examination of the two tall windows and the old blue satin-stripe paper still in good preservation, suggested something on the lines of “Conversation Piece.” It must be recorded that Hilda snubbed him. Simply everybody, she informed him, was looping yellow curtains over elongated golden arrows. No, if Halliday had said it was

earlier than the Regency she would do the thing properly. It would take time. Meanwhile she would think hard, and they would poke about and perhaps see something—a candlestick, a picture, even a scrap of fabric that would strike a chord, supply a clue, and serve as a focus round which to build. Half the fun of a place like this was decorating accurately to period. It would be too horrid, she added, if people like Halliday came round afterwards and sneered in a nasty superior way.

She pursed her lips and frowned at the wallpaper.

“I rather like it,” she said, “only it is a little cold. I wonder why the last people chose such a colour for a north room. All the same, I really do think we'll let it stay. It's right, in a queer kind of way. Those stripes were terribly popular in George the Second's time—I mean all over that period from right before the Revolution. . . .”

The next step was the purchase of a Louis-Seize suite which they saw in a Little Shop They Sometimes Went To. Charles said mildly that it was a little early, wasn't it? But Hilda, who had fallen in love with the silvery gilt and the curiously damasked satin, said no, and besides, even if it were, people often furnished new rooms with old furniture, and there couldn't be so very many years difference. Charles said no more. He, too, liked the chairs and the fragile oval table, and the pattern of the satin interested him. It was such a very odd, inter-twisted sort of pattern; but he had no time to examine it closely. Hilda was

already hooting impatiently from the car because they would just have time to run to Axmissels and see if they still had that divine Aubusson-ish carpet.

Even at this stage Charles knew that the room would look most effective even if the details had gone astray a little. So he hurried obediently, and sure enough they found the most delightful smooth-surfaced carpet in sweet-pea colours with garlands all over it, and curvy things round the edge that they were in the habit of designating baroquery.

Now, whether it was the late afternoon light streaming coldly in from the tall uncurtained windows or whether the new furniture had been in store too long, both Charles and Hilda felt a curious disappointment as they gazed at the half-furnished room. Charles tried to evoke a delicate twiddly Rosencavalier atmosphere. Hilda, it must be confessed, was not sure yet whether she meant to capture the spirit of a Mme de Staël salon or a more intimate souvenir of Fontainebleau. The actual effect was what Hilda afterwards declared to be definitely Voltairean. She was partly right. The room laughed at them—not kindly. The empty chairs looked as if their occupants had retired abruptly to avoid a tiresome *rencontre*. Hilda rearranged the chairs—but that made no difference; and then she discovered what was the matter. The lack of curtains and, of course, the bare striped walls. After all, they couldn't expect a room to look right with only six chairs, a table and a carpet in it.

They both felt relieved.

Charles, who was always discovering such things, noticed that the interweaving pattern of the chair covers formed a series of grotesque faces like those in railway-carriage upholstery. Turnip-top crowned put out his tongue; then Heart-shaped winked, having lost his teeth. These two alternated so that wherever he looked a faded mauve mask met his eye—even those on the arms, that were set on sideways, had an uncomfortably direct stare. It would be a very disquieting pattern to sit on; but he pulled up his thoughts with a jerk and decided to keep these fancies to himself. Hilda did not always see these things as clearly as he did, and he felt that any prolonged explanation would not be worth the effort.

The North Room, as they called it, remained as it was for several weeks, because Hilda had decided that the next thing to do was to find curtains, and she was unable to find anything that she thought would be suitable.

At last, after trying the tempers of many shop assistants, she unearthed from the dimmest recess of a large furnishing store a bale of oyster-coloured brocade. Hilda was so pleased that her appreciation became an implied reproach to the man who was serving her for not showing it to her sooner. They had been at it for an hour and a half; the light was fading and she had seen so many hopeless patterns that the rich folds of the material seemed to spread like a quilt to soothe her nerves. It became an instant necessity. The immense parcel was placed with difficulty in the back

of the car, and she drove home instantly.

Charles, who had retired early from the search, was waiting for her with tea in the Jane Austen Room. But Hilda was beyond tea. Not until they had struggled with the parcel and draped extravagant yards over the backs of chairs did she relax her concentration. She was like a cat carrying its kittens back to the basket,

some, and after nearly a fortnight in bed he had to go to the south coast for a further fortnight because his doctor said that he needed a change, meaning that he needed a release from the continual changes that were going on all round him.

Hilda was really too busy to accompany him. Mallets was not nearly finished, and the North Room (by the way, they must find a more



Charles said. All the same, he had to agree that it was just right. Against the mauve-and-silver chairs it assumed a greenish-blue tinge. The high lights shone wet on the stiff folds. It would frame the windows with columns of misty moonlight, and transform the room into a tall retreat of frosty colour.

The next day Charles sneezed and developed a snivelling blend of head-cold and influenza. It was very tire-

amusing name for it) had occupied so much of their time that she felt she must hurry on with the rest of the house. She would have the painters in for the Prince Regent and the plasterers for the Charlotte and Caroline, and they would all be away and the house full of surprises for Charles when he returned. Then perhaps he might like to help her with the hall. She had thought it might be fun to have an Oriental touch like the

Pavilion, but there would be plenty of time to think about that later.

So Charles went south, weak and miserable, and read his wife's letters in the gloom of a sun parlour washed by autumnal rains. The painters and plasterers came and went, but he could glean no further information about them or the bedrooms they renovated. Hilda was well, the weather was vile and she hoped that he was better. She had decided to call the North Room Zeluco. And she must tell him that she had done this and bought that and arranged the other—the letters always ended in long descriptions of the North Room (he begged its pardon—Zeluco).

The name puzzled him. Zeluco—wasn't that the title of a novel by someone about a bad hat? It was a clumsy name, too; not a proper sort of title for a room. And what a room it sounded! Hilda must have spent every minute of her time on it. It was becoming an obsession. Never had she shown so much enthusiasm, and yet there was something about the tone of her letters that troubled him. Something almost deliberately understressed that was most unlike Hilda.

The prints worried him. She had written: "Oh, and I found a set of old prints that are so exactly in keeping with the spirit of the room that they will give you a thrill." What on earth did she mean? And there was the clock described as "really curious, I've never seen anything like it before." And the escritoire that she had bought because its satyr-masks were "exactly right." He hoped that she was not being literal. And then to call

the room by that odd name whose significance eluded him. No, Hilda was not herself, and he felt glad that only a few more days of his recuperation remained—for Charles was conscientious and obeyed his doctor's orders almost to the hour.

Hilda met him at the station, and she was the first surprise. She was a stranger to him, this taut woman with eyes, nevertheless, unfocused so that they looked at him with a lack of interest, of recognition, nearly—that no amount of nervous cordiality could recompense. She drove badly, who had always been exceptionally careful; and when they arrived she was in the hall before he had lifted his case from the back seat, and was waiting for him with an impatience that was evinced by the tone in which she said "Come on."

Only when he stood beside her and kissed her (their first embrace) did she relax. But abruptly her eagerness now changed to reluctance. On their way to Zeluco, she paused to show him a dozen details about the house, stopped dead to ask him about his holiday and, with her hand on the door, suddenly demanded if he had any aspirin. They went back to rummage in his case for some, and this time went straight down the corridor and entered.

His first impression was disquieting. The room was surely occupied. But that was absurd. All the same, he could not rid himself of the feeling that the owner had glided swiftly out of another door as they came in. But there was no other door—and why

had the word "owner" risen in his mind?

His second glance made him turn swiftly to stare at Hilda. She was standing behind him, gazing at nothing, her hands clasped in a strained attitude as if she were a soprano about to take an unsupported high note. Something was horribly wrong. It was as if Hilda's taste had gone rancid. The room was completely furnished in a debased Louis-Seize style. Everything in it harmonized in tones of grey-blue, mauve and faded pink and silver, but the careful attention to detail had given the room an individuality so powerful that his senses were clogged by it. The room was statically alive. It had been lived in, it was being lived in—living itself, now. There was a patch-box on one of the tables. Against a chair leant a delicate sword with a heavy silver tassel sprawled on the seat just as its owner might have left it. On the mantelpiece were coloured porcelain figurines, and the clock—a gold confusion under a shade. On the walls—good God!—hung the prints. There were six of them, illustrations from a late edition of *Justine et Juliette*. In one a gentleman in a cocked hat fed his mistress to his dogs out of an upper window. In another, two stilted ladies threw a third head-foremost into a volcano. The remainder depicted other and more erotic pleasant-ries.

He moved to the fireplace. Into focus came the ornaments—one, a Leda writhing with her swan; the other, Europa and the Bull, or it may have been Pasiphæ. The clock was a

rampant gilt obscenity of nymphs, satyrs and peeping shepherds.

"But, Hilda, I don't understand!" he cried.

She looked at him appealingly. "It's all complete, isn't it?" she said. "I've taken so much trouble and time to get things matching exactly. And now it's almost finished, isn't it?"

Then, with a return to her usual manner, "Do you know, I'm terribly tired." And she sat down on a mauve-and-silver chair, covering her face with her hands.

Charles said, "Look here, I think we'd better have lunch," which was the most normal remark he could think of, and led her out of the room. At the door she cast a worried glance round. "It just wants a few more little things—trinkets," she said drowsily, and allowed him to turn the lock and pocket the key.

During the next few days he watched her narrowly. She was certainly not normal. And at night she slept badly. Indeed, once he caught her clambering out of bed with her eyes wide open but "their senses shut." Somnambulism was a new thing for Hilda. She did not talk much about Zeluco, but he realized that her thoughts were ever upon it. If he went to the room, she followed him jealously, and stood like a caretaker near the door all the time he was there. He tried to persuade her to spend less time herself there and to complete the decoration of the rest of the house, but she smiled vaguely at him, hurtfully, and ignored his advice.

She sought for her trinkets, too,

and they were all only too much in keeping with the character of the room. Dealers came to know her and to save their "curious" pieces. There were fans painted with scenes shocking in every sense of the word; there was a quizzing-glass shaped like the lower part of a woman; there was even a musical-box ornamented with pastoral loves that tinkled out a tune, harmless in itself, but whose repulsively gross verses were engraved with illustrations inside the lid. Charles felt powerless. He had never attempted to control Hilda, and now she was in the grip of something with which a stronger will than his would be powerless to contend. He consulted their doctor, and indicated delicately a neurosis that was affecting his wife's health. She was doing too much, working too hard and so on. The doctor, who knew Hilda, prescribed a simple bromide, and assured Charles that his wife's constitution was extraordinarily strong. Charles, with the knowledge that, as chief witness, he was concealing important—indeed the only—evidence, began to experience neurotic symptoms himself. He dared not think what a psychologist might discover about his wife, and his smatterings of Freud only inflamed his imagination the more. Still, he did manage to make Hilda take her sedatives and see that she slept.

It was on one of the evenings that Hilda had gone early to bed that he first heard the sound. She had confessed that at last Zeluco was complete, and perhaps the knowledge that she could do no more had depressed her. She went upstairs about

nine, and an hour or so later he was about to follow her when the noise from the North Room caught his ear. He walked straight down the corridor from the hall and opened the door. Once again he was conscious of a sudden cessation of movement. The night was still and cloudless, and the reflected light from a moon nearly full gleamed sullenly from the dimly shining draperies. The room was a glacial aquarium, brimming with blue liquid in whose depths the coralline furniture grew immovably. The walls themselves seemed half translucent, and in their glimmering shadows lurked life—some unexpected submarine existence that might suddenly emerge and float purposefully from one darkness to another. Charles felt suddenly afraid. Everything was still and silent, but there had been that undefined noise, a noise that meant movement. The room was waiting, tense as a charged battery, for something to happen; something that might, as it were, act as a conductor and discharge its accumulated power in a flash of lightning, or—more horrible thought—transform this unnatural energy from static to kinetic, switch on the machine and cause the wheels of a mechanism as yet unknowable to revolve in a motion whose effect he could only guess. The room was dangerous, its equilibrium was unstable. He must get away from it, get Hilda away from it before it crushed them.

In a panic like a reflex action he fled, banging the door; and was met at the head of the stairs by a wide-eyed Hilda, who clung to him in her

old affectionate way and comforted him with her fear.

The very next morning a registered packet arrived from a Parisian dealer in bijoutry with whom Hilda had recently had dealings. They were at breakfast when it came, and Hilda, who had complained of a headache, opened it and after a half-anxious glance at Charles passed the little wooden box over to him in silence.

Inside was a gold snuff-box inlaid with brilliants and exquisitely chased. He pressed its lid. It flew open, disclosing a cedarwood interior browned by use, and inside the lid, on a tiny panel of ivory, was painted the Chastisement of Venus. The thing was miraculous. In a cavern, the lame, misshapen Hæphæstus was beating his wife with a brazen scourge in a position that seemed, to Charles at least, unnecessarily awkward. In the background, no bigger than a finger-nail, the discomfited lover was disentangling himself from a net, while cupids, complete in every member, made derisive gestures. The crafts-

manship was so fine that it delayed Charles's reaction. A closer examination, however, made him snap the lid and replace the box in its container.

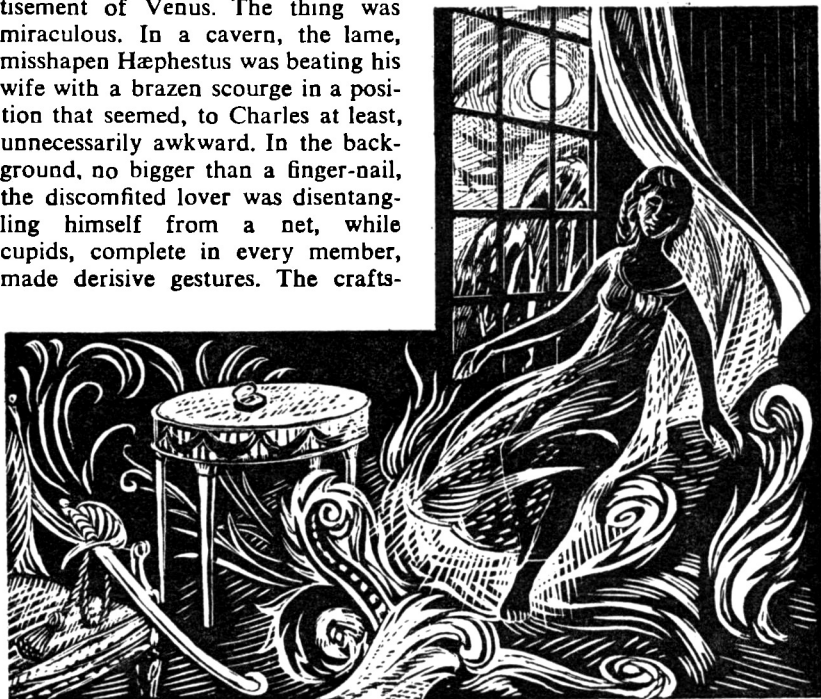
"You can't possibly keep this," he said.

"Why not?"

"Oh, Hilda—it's too beastly!"

"But it would be so right in Zeluco."

"Look here, Hilda, you've done enough to that room. I can't think why you wanted to do it up like that, but it's done and you ought to be satisfied. I've told you that I don't



like it, and that I quite frankly don't approve of a lot of the stuff you've bought. But this is really too much. It's"—he cast about for a telling phrase—"it's not like your usual taste—it's Bad Art!"

She seemed to be undergoing an internal struggle. At last she said, "All right. It seems a pity, but if you're so against it I'll send it back."

She rose and placed the snuff-box in her desk.

There was something too instantly submissive about her, Charles thought. At dinner he asked whether she had posted it, and was told that she would have to register it and that she had not had time to go to the village. Tomorrow, surely, would do.

That night the full moon shone milkily into their bedroom. Charles, who was not superstitious, but who, nevertheless, had a cautious mind, took care to draw the curtains carefully. Hilda had her bromide. They both read a chapter or two (he looked up from his *Persuasion* to note with some irritation that she was reading a book by Sacher-Masoch), and in an hour they were both asleep.

No dream forewarned him. He woke calmly from a deep sleep to hear a clock strike. His watch said two o'clock. The moon had risen high, and through a chink in the curtains he saw the glinting black and greyness of the garden. Only then did he notice that Hilda was not there. He rose at once and slipped on his dressing-gown. Though he knew where she had gone, he paused for a moment at the stairhead, listening to the silence flowing round him in a

deep tide, pressing on his eardrums. The tide pulsated, quivered, gained strength from his presence. The air divided like a series of curtains as he passed, shutting him off from the rest of the world and opening in front of him to reveal a shrine, a focus of mystery.

The door of Zeluco was open. From afar, its reflected greyness shone down the corridor like a foggy beam. Charles paused again at the door. Inside was the aquarium, cold and still, and near the table, like a nymph, stood his wife, her nightgown greenish white with ice shadows in the folds of the silk. Her hair was black and drowned in the half-light; her face was calm yet expectant. She was fast asleep.

He waited just outside the door. There was nothing else to do. It was her ceremony, not his. He was prevented from intruding, he could not now interrupt.

She had placed the snuff-box on the table near the sword and the quizzing-glass. How long she had stood there he could not guess, but he noticed now that her attitude betrayed fatigue. The throbbing silence that enwrapped them both beat more insistently. No air moved, but a vortex formed.

With dreadful clarity remembrance of his past fears returned to Charles—the room he had thought of as a battery waiting to be discharged, a machine waiting to be switched on. Now it had happened. The snuff-box was the switch, the discharging agent.

The room grew tall. The striped walls extended, the columnar curtains

grew like forest trees. Dwarfed in a tangle of curving silvery undergrowth, he saw the pale figure of his wife, and round her, round and round, faster and faster, spinning out from her and drawing life with it like a thread, nothingness revolved. The snuff-box glowed palely, but it was not important now. Its function was that of a catalyst. It remained unaffected, though by its agency this



frightful process was taking place. The soul of the room was being born.

A finger had been laid on a point in Charles's brain, paralysing movement and clarifying vision, so that he saw, unsurprisingly, the colourless outline quiver and advance into dimensional existence behind the table. He knew who it was: the Owner of the room. He understood how Hilda had vivified emptiness. It seemed simple and rational. He recognized the features of the figure—the drooping eyelids, the nose, the sucked-in mouth. They were those of the patterns on the chairs. He recognized the turn of the legs—like those of the table—the manner of walking, of approaching a woman, of moving round a table to a waiting whiteness, naked under a silken garment. These were familiarities—they were idiosyncrasies of the room. They were all drawn from the shapes and textures and essences of the furnishings.

There was a sound now. He heard it growing, intrusive, contrary to the silence that had upheld them all. Surging like a distant approach of water, it swept towards him, booming now in his ears, beating on his mind with a greater, fiercer intensity than that other tide. They were in collision now—the sound and the magical inverted cone of silence that spun his wife's vitality away. Their clash and struggle involved him. He would have wished to see more clearly, to have made sure of that other face approaching so surely with a smile that scorned persuasion.

He recognized the sound at last. It was a cool night-wind brushing the

trees outside. Suddenly it strengthened, seeming to press against the tall windows. Simultaneously, he saw Hilda sway as the Shape advanced, and at that moment a latch gave way to the pressure outside and a window crashed inward. A fresh, increasing rush of air burst into the room.

The spell was broken and he started forward. There was a blackness and then a *Walpurgisnacht* of sparks and images before his eyes. A falling column—that was Hilda—a room that wavered and spun; a tangle of silver woodwork—of curves and smoothed-out angles, and the weight of Hilda in his arms as he dragged her to the door.

At the end of the corridor he paused. Over his shoulder he saw the

room called Zeluco in frenzied motion, or so it seemed. The breeze that had saved them belled the curtains barrel-wise and flapped the carpet irritatedly at the corners. The sword had fallen with a light clatter to the floor, the lustres of the chandelier clashed ominously. The breeze had conquered: it was now determinedly putting the silence to rout. It must know, thought Charles, as he knew now—that they must themselves set the room in motion, must dissipate the stagnant, interreacting associations, must destroy this entity that they had so nearly brought into dangerous being, by separating its constituent parts and by winding back their lives round themselves and more securely round each other.



Away, away! to thy sad and silent home;
Pour bitter tears on its desolated hearth;
Watch the dim shades as like ghosts they go and come,
And complicate strange webs of melancholy mirth.
The leaves of wasted autumn woods shall float around thine head:
The blooms of dewy spring shall gleam beneath thy feet:
But thy soul or this world must fade in the frost that binds the dead,
Ere midnight's frown and morning's smile, ere thou and peace may meet.

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY (1792–1822).

LAUGHTER IS A PRECIOUS THING

D. MACER WRIGHT



DURING ALL MY six years at Meadows School I never once saw Filton laugh. We called him "Mug," an impolite but an apt name. Mug Filton had a strange, effortless way of inspiring us with fear; not fear of physical violence, for he had never been known to raise his hand against anyone. He raised neither his hand nor his voice, and displayed not the slightest suggestion of irritation or temper at even the grossest stupidities uttered by a boy wrestling with the profundities of Ovid. If he had shouted at us, thrown large india-rubbers or rapped our uncomprehending craniums with his knuckles, we should, no doubt, have felt for him that healthy disrespect with which all good schoolboys regard their masters. As it was we loathed him and feared him.

I suppose a schoolmaster who always reduces boys in his class to a state of fear and nervous tension is an extremely rare phenomenon. I am not pretending that Mug produced this effect on all his pupils, but nearly everyone hated him in varying degrees; and those unfortunate boys who, like myself, were particularly sensitive and easily hurt spent their time in Mug's classroom in an atmosphere painful in the extreme. For boys possessed of strongly imaginative tendencies, there can be periods during early adolescence when life

becomes a private hell. In after years one realizes how tremendously exaggerated one's troubles were, and that, in fact, such troubles existed only in imagination, and could, with the breadth of vision acquired in later years, easily have been overcome. Alas! a schoolboy has no breadth of vision, and if he is as I was, shy and sensitive, then he has little, if any, armour to put on against the arrows of such as Mug Filton.

I used to lie awake at night when the next day was to bring Mug. If I slept I had bad dreams.

We loathed Mug Filton, because his soft, expressionless voice cut like a lash. He wielded the whip of sarcasm with a master hand. Few things in a schoolboy's life hurt more than sarcasm. He humiliated us and made us feel small and foolish. Though under another master I subsequently became a Latin scholar above the average, in Mug's class my brain went dead. When I entered his room I walked into a fog of doubts and irresolutions. We hated his soft catlike tread, his soft white hands. We hated the mask-like face, always devoid of expression; the cold drab eyes, that were so empty, so lifeless.

We feared him because he never laughed.

One day I decided to kill Mug Filton. I swore I would kill him if I had to wait years. This is what happened.

My mother and my young sister had arranged to visit me one Saturday

afternoon, and I was to meet them for lunch at the Chantry Restaurant, that exquisite little Regency place which fits snugly into the shadow of the cathedral. You can sit in the bay-windows and watch the blackbirds in the cathedral close. I was bursting with excitement at the thought of seeing my mother and Jane, of the delicious lunch I knew we should have and the leisurely shopping expedition we had planned. It was near Christmas, and the shops would be decorated with fairy lights and Christmas-trees, and in Marchants, the big stores, a genial Father Christmas would be offering lucky dips from a huge box covered with holly, while up on the third floor would be displayed hundreds of yards of model railways with Hornby trains busily rushing over intricate points, and through splendid stations out into the hills and tunnels of the magnificently modelled countryside.

Then fate struck a cruel blow. Half-way through the morning our form was told that the last period, which was to have been geography, was cancelled owing to the indisposition of the master, and we were to take Latin instead. I somehow knew then that tragedy was not far away.

I muffed my declensions rather badly, not through ignorance but through nervousness, and Mug detained me at twelve o'clock when the morning ended. It was the first and last time I ever pleaded with him. I begged him to let me go, explaining that I had to meet my mother at one o'clock, and could not possibly be there on time if I stayed to do the

work he had set me. I would take nearly an hour, and it was a good half-hour's journey to the Chantry Restaurant. Mug was adamant. He looked at me with those bleak eyes, and told me that in this life we must pay for our mistakes and that if we were wise we would not then make them again.

"We must all make mistakes," he told me, "and it has been said that a man who never makes them never makes anything else; but of what use are they unless we suffer for them? It is only suffering that justifies mistakes, for then we have a sporting chance of remembering our suffering, and of giving that particular mistake a wide berth next time." A sombre creed. "In any case," Mug said, "what possible difference can half an hour make?"

What difference could it make! God, had the man never been a boy, never been young? Had he never known the tremendous importance of half an hour?

I sat down to my detention with a heavy heart. After what seemed an eternity of time, I finished the work and handed it to Mug, who had remained with me, correcting papers. He told me I could go, and I rushed along the corridor, out into the quadrangle and through the school gates. It was then nearly one o'clock. I ran panting and sweating across the fields, the shortest cut to the town, not daring to stop until an agonizing stitch in my side pulled me up, and I had to walk. I was sobbing with impatience and burning with the injustice of Mug.

At twenty minutes to two I arrived hot and dishevelled at the Chantry. Of my mother and Jane there was no sign. I stared despairingly round the restaurant. I was very near to tears. It was so impossible that they should not be there. My mother said they would be there waiting for me, and my mother always kept her word. Unthinkable that they should have got tired of waiting and wandered off somewhere. But they were not there. A strange desolation seemed to envelop me, a loneliness I had never known before. Then I fainted.

It was that day I swore to kill Mug Filton. My mother and Jane were not at the Chantry Restaurant because Jane was dead. At twenty-past one they had decided to come and meet me, for they guessed I had been detained, and they knew I always came by the field-path route. Jane, with the impetuosity of childhood, had dashed on ahead of mother, and running across the High Street had been knocked down by a car. She died on the way to hospital.

The chance to kill Mug Filton did not occur during the remainder of my school career. It did not occur for some years afterwards, which was really fortunate, for when I met Mug again I was a man and bore little resemblance to the boy who had left Meadows School. Hundreds of boys had passed before Mug since then, and I was tolerably certain he would not recognize me. However, to make quite sure I had grown a beard, and by then I had taken to spectacles. Though I did not see Mug, I never lost

touch with his whereabouts. I had planned several methods of killing him during those years, but had abandoned them for various reasons. They were mostly speedy methods, and I wanted him to die slowly.

Mug's hobby and abiding passion was botany, and it was through this that I decided to kill him. I, too, am an amateur botanist and an enthusiastic plant hunter. He was an incongruous mixture. Mug, who made us so afraid, gently touching a flower. Even then his pleasure was something remote in himself, something unapproachable, not to be shared. Even when he was looking at an exquisite specimen of some rare plant, Mug never smiled.

The opportunity to kill him came, like so many opportunities, suddenly and unexpectedly. I was on holiday, plant hunting in a moorland district which abounds with specimens of the greatest interest to amateur collectors. I was sitting in my hotel lounge one evening enjoying a whisky and studying Bentham and Hooker, when Mug Filton walked in. It struck me as having much in common with the spider and the fly. Plant hunters cannot resist each other, and Bentham and Hooker placed in a prominent position, a little play with some specimens I had, and my pocket lens, soon brought Mug apologetically but firmly to my table.

The rest was simple. Fortunately it was Mug's first visit to the district. I knew it intimately, and had a very sound knowledge of the local flora. Before we had finished our third whisky, Mug Filton had signed his

own death warrant. He had eagerly accepted my invitation of a trip to the moors on the following day.

Now, I know every inch of those moors. They are, as I have already mentioned, rich in plant life. They are also rich in quagmires, those dreadful, inescapable bogs which will suck a man down inexorably into the most ghastly death. If a man disappears into one of those bogs, he is never found. He is swallowed up, not by the earth but by foul, terrifying slime. He does not disappear quickly, but slowly, so slowly, with the bog tugging gently at his feet, and his arms beating the air in a frenzy, and his screams dying away into the emptiness, into the eternity of the moors. Then there is a last gurgle as his head disappears, the narrowing circle of filth closes over him with a faint plop as the bubble bursts. Then the unutterable silence which makes a mockery of his screams. No one sees, no one knows.

The tracts of moorland where these bogs occur are interspersed with footpaths, and anyone thoroughly acquainted with the place may walk in perfect safety over bog-infested country into which the stranger could not penetrate more than a few yards without stepping into a hideous death.

The next day Filton and I lunched at the hotel, and at two o'clock, armed with Bentham and Hooker and pocket lens, we left the hotel to pick up my car which was to take us to the edge of the moors. I left Mug at the corner of the High Street, as he wanted to look in at Corder's bookshop across the road. I remembered

I wanted a copy of Merrifield's *Flowering Trees and Shrubs*, and called to Mug asking him to look out for it. He turned round to answer me, and at that moment a large car swung out from behind a stationary vehicle, screamed on its brakes, skidded and shuddered to a standstill. But the driver had been taken completely unawares and he was going dangerously fast. Mug lay in the road, still and white, with blood oozing slowly out over the tarmac.

There were screams from women passers-by, a sudden hush of traffic, a sudden policeman and somebody shouting the word ambulance. In a matter of minutes the strident clang of the ambulance bell was heard, and Mug was carried swiftly and dispassionately into the vehicle and driven away. In the road lay a large pool of blood. A corporation cleaner appeared and washed it off.

Mug's injuries necessitated an operation, and it was some time before I was allowed to see him. When at last I stood by his bedside and saw the face grey and drawn with pain, and the faint beads of perspiration on his brow, I felt an overwhelming pity for the man I had wanted to kill. That night I prayed that Mug might live and become strong and sound in limb. I do not think I ever wanted anything so utterly as I wanted Mug to live. Remorse overtook me, and made my days agony and my nights terrible with dreams. My dreams were tragic in their confusion. I lived a thousand times the fears and humiliations of those schoolboy hours spent

in Mug's class; I saw my young sister's face distorted and unreal; I saw her lovely child's form smashed and broken. Sometimes the wheel of a giant lorry would be closing over my head. Always in my dreams there was fear, tragedy, horror. Then I would wake and be haunted by the face of Mug Filton as he lay in hospital, no longer forbidding, but sad and lonely and helpless.

I do not think there can be any human emotion more unbearable than remorse. It is the ultimate conclusion of all other emotions. It is a canker, a rust eating into the soul. It springs from fear, distrust, cruelty, sorrow, jealousy and lost hopes. It is so final, so absolute. One cannot compromise with remorse.

*The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.*

Mug became gradually stronger, and although it seemed certain that he would live and become quite sound, my remorse was unabated and was slowly killing me. I felt I was damned, and I knew the only possible way in which I could hope to free my soul and lift this annihilating weight was to confess everything to Mug.

The next time I visited him he was considerably better, and Sister gave me permission to wheel him in a chair

round the hospital gardens. I wheeled him out, away from the disinfectant and the suggestion of death that pervades every hospital, until we came to the rose garden. Here we stopped, and then in a flood of awful emotion I told him the whole miserable story. I had intended to be calm and coherent; but once I had started, the safety-valve burst, which for so long had imprisoned my feelings.

I told him of my schooldays, who I was and of how we loathed him. I told him how we feared him because he never laughed. "Oh God, why did you never even smile?" I told him how I had planned and schemed to kill him after my sister's death, of the inconceivably horrible death I had intended for him.

At last the flood-tide of my emotions ebbed away; I had told my story. I felt physically sick, tired and dreadfully weak.

Suddenly Mug began to shake as though he was afflicted by ague.

"Filton," I gasped, "what is the matter? Filton, for God's sake!" I shouted hoarsely. For he was shaking with silent laughter. Then he began to laugh aloud. His entire body shook and rocked and writhed in an uncontrollable fit of grotesque laughter. Peal after peal rang across the gardens, and I saw Sister hurrying along the gravel path with something in her hand that glinted in the sun. I suppose it was a hypodermic syringe; but it was not needed, for the laughter stopped abruptly, frighteningly. I looked at Filton. He was dead.



THE RING

G. VILLIERS

How Gerry House lost his mascot in the Afghan War and of its extraordinary reappearance in Calcutta years later

I WAS GLANCING down the obituary column in *The Times* when my eye caught the name of Schreiber, and I read the briefest announcement of his death, quite suddenly in New York two days ago—no cause stated—just the bare fact that Carl Schreiber had died suddenly in New York. But the name Carl Schreiber at once called to mind an amazing occurrence which happened one evening when I was dining with Robert Quarry in his flat in Calcutta, only about three months ago. Normally I am not much of a hand at dining out, but dining with Robert was not a normal experience, and invitations from that source were eagerly accepted. To begin with, the dinner itself was always first rate; then again he had the knack of collecting people who seemed to have complementary interests in their lives. Robert and I were old friends who during World War I had flown some hundreds of hours together as pilot and observer.

Another reason for the success of these dinners was undoubtedly Cooper—Robert's man-of-all-work—who certainly lived up to his title. He ran the entire flat as housemaid, valet and cook, and a first-class cook he was. True, the dinner parties were

always small ones, never for more than six people all told; but even so, to cook a perfect dinner and serve it up timed to a split second takes some doing.

But there was something else about this "Admirable Crichton" which I can only describe as his innate courtesy—I can find no other suitable epithet. When, for example, he relieved you of your hat and coat, you felt as if you were the object of an act of kindness. When he handed you your coffee and after-dinner cigar with just a soupçon of a bow, it was as though he were offering you a crown. He somehow made you feel that you were doing him an honour by accepting them from his hands. I have no idea how he acquired these characteristics—certainly not from his early life in the Army, but I sometimes wondered about his parentage!

On this particular evening there were only two guests beside myself, an American art dealer and collector named Carl Schreiber (whom I was told was a well-known expert) and Gerry House, who had been in the same squadron as Robert and I, but whom I hadn't seen since early 1919. Carl Schreiber was not given to talking much, but when he did speak it was very much to the point. I noticed that Gerry had changed quite a lot

in the intervening years; no doubt we all had, but somehow the change in him seemed to go deeper than this. Formerly he had been a rather outstanding personality, well-dressed, good-looking and full of high spirits. Not only that, but throughout his young life everything always appeared to go just right for him; not in any spectacular or haphazard way, but because it seemed that by some sort of inevitable law it had to.

Let me give but one example, and I choose this one because it has a bearing on what follows. After World War I he was demobilized, and returned to India, where he had been born. Early in 1919, when the Afghan War broke out, the authorities found themselves short of pilots with bombing experience. Gerry was asked whether he would care to volunteer, and did so. One day when out on a raid four of his cylinders cut out. He turned for home, but it was clear that he would never "make it." As he lost height, enemy snipers started taking pot-shots at him; finally, when only a few hundred feet from the ground, a Jazail bullet knocked his prop to pieces and he crash-landed. He was able to extricate himself from the wreckage, rather badly cut about and certainly badly shaken, but otherwise unhurt. Now comes the really interesting point to note: within a comparatively short time he was rescued by a detachment of our troops who were out foraging; but this was the only occasion throughout the whole campaign that our people had a foraging party anything like so far afield!

Gerry, however, didn't put it down

to luck, but credited everything to a ring which he wore. There didn't seem anything particularly odd about this fact; there are lots of superstitious people who like to invest some pet object with the properties of a mascot, but the ring in question meant far more to Gerry than this. After something had gone particularly well for him, he would look at it almost with love. It had been given to him by an old Indian; not for "services rendered" or anything of that sort, but because (so the Indian had said) Gerry was "meant" to have it. So long as he wore it, he need never worry about anything—not necessarily danger or such like things, but he would always be secure in anything which he undertook.

Gerry was never very clear in his own mind as to exactly what interpretation should be attached to the word "meant," but he received the impression that it was intended to convey some very definite fitness in his association with the ring. The old Indian had also added something about responsibility and trusteeship, and had told Gerry that his time of testing would come. Anyway, the net result was an air of poise and absolute self-confidence which was in sharp contrast to his light-hearted charm and sense of the ridiculous.

But it was a very changed Gerry whom I met that night at dinner; he was like a spring which has lost its temper. In the old days he had been an intensely positive type—now he was merely negative. We sat next to each other, and our talk naturally drifted back to old times. Towards

the end of dinner I noticed that he was no longer wearing his ring, and remarked on this.

"Yes," he said, "I lost it a long while ago; fancy your remembering it." And then added almost in an undertone: "Ye gods, what wouldn't I give to have it back again."

I explained that there was nothing odd in my remembering the ring, since I had been greatly struck by the arrangement of the three rubies in the snake's head, like an inverted triangle.

He then told me of his escape in the Afghan War, and how he had been out on a bombing raid and shot down. He went on: "As I gradually lost height it became hotter and hotter. I remember pulling off my gauntlets because my hands were getting so sticky; but to show you the confidence I felt in that ring I can only assure you that I wasn't even worried—let alone frightened. Very soon after pulling off my gauntlets, a sniper's bullet hit my prop, and I crash-landed with nothing worse than a few cuts and a rather bad shaking up and I had the luck to be found by one of our patrols quite soon afterwards. They took me back to Rissalpur and put me in hospital; it was while I was still in hospital that I discovered the loss of the ring. I realized that this must have occurred during my crash-landing and that it would be quite hopeless even to think of recovering it, and that's all there is to it."

He went on to explain from that moment everything had gone wrong with him. I expressed very genuine

sympathy, and asked whether it would not be possible to get a replica. I admit it was a stupid sort of question to ask, but even so I was quite unprepared for the outburst which followed.

"What the hell would be the good of that? Do you imagine I treasured the ring for its intrinsic value or its beauty? Good heavens man, I've seen hundreds of better ones—in any case, it was the sort of ring that only a Pansy or a Dago would wear." But again he repeated in a soft undertone, as though to himself: "But, my God, what would I give to have it back. . . ."

Gerry's outburst had silenced the conversation of the other two, so much so that I noticed the click of the door as Cooper left the room. Schreiber was the first to speak. "Excuse me, Mr. House, I couldn't help overhearing part of your conversation. Do you mind describing this ring to me?"

But Gerry was upset by his outburst and obviously reluctant to talk further on the subject. "Oh, it's nothing, Mr. Schreiber; it was just a ring given to me some years ago by an old Indian, and I became attached to it."

"Very well, Mr. House, if you don't wish to describe the ring to me, may I try to describe it to you? It was a gold ring fashioned like a snake with two ruby eyes and a third ruby just above the snout, the three rubies thus forming an inverted triangle. Am I right?"

But there was no need to ask; one look at Gerry's face gave the answer.

He leaned forward as white as a sheet. "How the hell do you know that? God almighty man, where is it? Have you got it?"

"No," replied Schreiber, "I haven't got it, but I should very much like to obtain it! I've been looking for that ring for the past fifteen years, and I am prepared to give big money for it, although its intrinsic value is not great."

Our host turned sharply to Schreiber. "What the devil are you getting at?" he asked. "You start off by describing a ring which was lost years ago, a ring which you admit is not a very valuable one, and then you talk of being willing to give big money for it. Where's the catch?"

"Mr. Quarry, there is no catch; although I am not at liberty to tell you who commissioned me to buy it, I will tell you something of its history.

"First, how did I guess what it was like? I had no need to guess; I couldn't help overhearing the reference to the inverted triangle of three rubies when the ring was being described to Mr. House by his friend a few moments ago, and that inverted triangle is the salient feature of the ring which I have been commissioned to trace and buy.

"As regards its history, it was the second of a pair which one of the Mogul emperors had made for his twin sons; the only difference between them was that the ring belonging to the elder son had three rubies arranged as already explained, while the younger son's had only two rubies forming the snake's eyes. My client told me that these two rings guaran-

tee success and happiness and succession to the throne provided the rings remain together, as he reckoned they were bound to do in the case of his twin sons. But if the rings became separated the succession clause would be invalidated, leaving only individual success and happiness.

"Personally," added Mr. Schreiber, "if any power could guarantee me success and happiness in all I undertook, you can keep all your kings and thrones.

"The ring with the two rubies has fallen into the hands of my client; I have seen it with my own eyes. What is more, if he could get hold of its pair he certainly believes he could cause your Government a whole heap of trouble! Do I believe the story? Gentlemen, I am an art dealer not a connoisseur in magic, and I am only interested in this deal from a strictly business point of view. Not only has my client given me a limit of up to one hundred thousand pounds if need be, but he told me not to let the ring go even then, if I was on its track, without telling him first. That will show you that at all events he is prepared to back his belief."

That made us all sit up; Schreiber was obviously not romancing.

At that moment Cooper re-entered the dining-room carrying a small silver salver on which rested a ring. Walking up to Gerry with his usual dignified tread, he handed him the salver. "Your ring, I believe, Mr. House. I regret having kept it all this time, but up till this evening I had no idea to whom it belonged. I was in that campaign—in the Infantry. You

gentlemen in the Air Force used to refer to us as the P.B.I. Your gloves were found by a friend of mine in the p——, I mean in the Infantry, sir, who happened to be in the party which rescued you after your crash. The gloves were too small for him so he sold them to me. It was not until some months later that I first had occasion to wear them, and when I put them on I found this ring in one of the fingers. I have only kept it on the off-chance that one day I might come across the rightful owner, and when I overheard part of the conversation at table I realized that you, sir, are the rightful owner. I am so happy to be able to restore it to you." And with that Cooper left the room as quietly as he had entered it.

It was Schreiber who at last broke the silence. "May I have a look at it, Mr. House?"

Without a word, Gerry passed the ring over. Schreiber's hand trembled slightly as he took it. "So that's it, is it, after all these years of search? And I doubt whether its intrinsic value is more than about twenty-five dollars! Well, sir, my offer stands. You now know the price I was prepared to pay, and I cannot expect you to take less. I never go anywhere without carrying my cheque-book, and I have it right here. I can write you out a cheque for twenty-five thousand pounds now and arrange the balance with my bank in the morning." He thereupon pulled out pen and cheque-book.

Gerry never opened his lips but, taking back the ring, just sat there fondling it; he seemed hardly to have heard the offer.

Our host broke the silence. "Well, Gerry, what about it? Are you taking the balance in notes or gold?"

Still Gerry said nothing, but just went on staring at the ring. Then in a soft whisper he murmured: "A hundred thousand pounds is a hell of a lot of money—a hell of a lot."

The atmosphere was tense. We were all conscious of the struggle that was going on, not only between Gerry and Schreiber but still more between Gerry and himself. I think we all hoped he would turn down the offer—I know I did. Apart from the drama of declining such a fantastic sum, it seemed almost a betrayal to part with the ring for money after the uncanny chain of circumstances which had brought the two together again. Then slowly Gerry looked up; you could almost feel the wrench as he dragged his eyes away from the ring; I could swear he was ashamed of what he contemplated.

Schreiber held out his hand. "Well, Mr. House, I congrat——"

And then suddenly Gerry came to, just as though he had come out of a dream. "No, I'm damned if I do—not for all the wealth in India. If the ring was 'meant' for me—and now I know it *must* have been—it was not meant for your client, no matter who he may be, and that's final, Mr. Schreiber—absolutely final. Now I know what the old Indian meant when he referred to my being tested. Well, I have been and I nearly failed but not quite. Sorry, Mr. Schreiber, but I'm afraid there's nothing doing."

There was no mistaking the finality

in Gerry's tone. Mr. Schreiber put his cheque-book away.

"Well, gentlemen, I hope you'll admit that I've done my best for my client; but let me just say this," and he leaned across towards Gerry and spoke very earnestly. "I'm glad you refused my offer, Mr. House, because I am one of the few living people who knows something of the purpose in my client's mind should he succeed in reuniting the two rings. But let me add this—a man who is willing to pay nearly half a million dollars for something which is not worth half a hundred wants that thing very, very badly—so badly indeed that he would stop at nothing to get it. If he got to know that you now have that ring and had refused to consider any offer to part with it, I should not like to think of the consequences; further, there are political issues which far transcend the question of your personal safety, Mr. House. If, however, we four and the manservant all undertake never again to refer to what has happened at this table tonight, there is no reason why anyone outside this room should ever know the identity of the present owner of the ring, and knowing my client as I do I should feel very much easier in my mind if we all took that pledge of silence."

"I quite agree with you, Schreiber," said our host, "and what is more, I imagine that if your client ever did

find out the identity of the present owner of the ring, he would be almost bound to learn also that you had traced the ring but failed in your mission to get possession of it. I am all for your suggestion of a pledge of silence."

Naturally we all gave it, our host undertaking to explain matters to Cooper and to bind him with the same pledge. With something of his old smile, Gerry slipped the ring on to his finger and the party broke up.

Had it not been for our host's rather pointed warning to Carl Schreiber about the possible consequences to himself due to the failure of his mission, I doubt if I should have given that obituary notice in *The Times* more than a passing thought; but somehow it was this warning rather than the strange sequence of events at the dinner party which kept on recurring to me—so much so that I wrote to a friend of mine in the New York Police to ask if he could ascertain for me the cause of Carl Schreiber's death.

His reply left me as much in the dark as ever. He wrote that the death certificate stated natural causes, but added that for some reason which he had been unable to ascertain the police had opened a dossier on the subject. I am forwarding this information to Robert Quarry in case he feels inclined to pass it on to Gerry House.



A LITTLE LESS THAN KITH

A. G. TUIITE

Illustrated by E. de Sousa

IT WAS A HUT built of fir logs, exactly similar to all those that formed the cluster of the village, but standing apart from them. Lars' father had shown his true Lapp nature when he built it, for it is said that neither Lapps nor reindeer thrive near roads.

Now the old man was dead. He died in the middle of a hard winter, and when the neighbours came in to see him laid out on the big table, it could be noticed that they all looked to see if the bunches of white garlic were hanging at the window and the door was protected with a dish of water. When the Lutheran pastor came in, even his sympathy and respect for the dead were not enough to restrain his anger at these signs of superstition. He tore down the herbs and upset the water. Lars took the rebuke silently, waited till the pastor had gone and then replaced the amulets.

Lapland is a strange place. It has no geographical boundaries and exists simultaneously in a number of different countries. It is a hole in the pocket of time, and its days seem to be made up from a long succession of forgotten yesterdays.

Belief in witchcraft and magic ebbs and flows there with the seasons.

Sometimes the old things can be talked about almost lightly, with no more than an occasional glance into the shadows, but when the flood is full a shuffling fear goes through the land. That is when the days are short and the nights cold. Then the werewolf and the screech owl hold the forest for their kind. Nothing is sure—a tree might walk or a dog speak. An open door might lead to the homely fire or to the brink of hell.

In summer, the death of the old man would have been no more than a sad bereavement, but, as it was, the people stood around his body and whispered furtively. Lars stood by his father's head. He was a little taller than the others there and even more heavily built. The muscles on his shoulders stood up in such ridges that they made them seem to be permanently bowed. Now and again his dark little eyes would sweep quickly round the circle, but never stayed long away from the corpse.

One old man, a dwarfish little creature with his head poking out of his furs like an animal from its earth, said to Lars:

"Watch him carefully, Lars. You know how cunning the witches are. They'll steal his fingers if they can; dead men's fingers are powerful in a spell."

Lars just looked at him for a second

and gave a little grunt; then his eyes went back to the body.

After a little while all the neighbours went away, and Lars was left with his father's body on the big table and his wife, Angrad, keening softly from the corner by the fire.

When darkness came, Lars kept his vigil alone, for he trusted no one. The secret world of evil lay all about him, he knew, but it was impossible to guess who were its citizens. The golden girl in the fields, the brother at your elbow, even the wife in your bed—who could tell? Was their life all that the world could see by day, or was there a secret side to it that began when the sun disappeared?

All night he sat and looked at his father on the table, with a dish of salt on his chest and six tall candles round him. The smell of the burning wax was sickening in his nostrils, and he was afraid of the things the twisting shadows of the flames could do. Sometimes he seemed to see a movement from the body—a finger twitching or a slight rise of the chest as if a little breath were being taken in.

He heard the howl of devils round the house. There came to him the awful muttering of the unholy procession that every night sweeps hellwards across the fields and through the woods. Lost souls ran there and witches whose time on earth was done—Lamias, beast-headed things and imps that drove them on.

Sometimes his wife rose up on her elbow and cried from the bed in the corner:

“Come and lie down, Lars. Let me sit up for a while.”



But he would never move or even take his eyes from the corpse. Each time he would answer:

“Go to sleep, Angrad. I am all right.”

So he stayed till his father's body was carried out, and then he followed the coffin to the grave that had been hacked out of the frozen ground and listened to the earth falling on it in great blocks with a sound of thunder. The grave, when it was filled in, was lumpy on top like a box of nuts; but before the mourners turned away the snow swept down and rounded it into smooth, white anonymity.

They went back to the hut then and, despite his all-night vigil, Lars still had tradition to observe. So when he had carried the moss to the reindeer in their shed, he came back and sat with the other men round the big table that had borne the corpse. A jar of clear spirit was passed round. Soon they began to sing, deep and mournfully, their feet stamped a sombre rhythm on the floor. The short day finished long before they did.

When they had gone, Lars slept for three hours. After that he rose, took his axe and went into the forest as he normally would have done. That was Thursday, and for the next two days also he went out in the morning and worked amongst the trees till the light faded.

Then it was Sunday. That morning he walked with Angrad up to the church instead of going out to work.

There was a little, excited crowd in the churchyard, and they all became silent when Lars appeared. He went over and saw that they were standing by his father's grave. It was open and empty.

Lars stood there on the graveside, and looked round at the people surrounding him. Few members of the community were absent, and so he knew that the evil ones must be near him. They were innocent-seeming people who mixed with the others and talked gently and sympathized in the daylight, but crept out at night to live their other life. He was afraid of them. He was afraid in his mind and his soul, but he drew up angry strength to fight his fear and trembled whilst he defied.

"Someone here," he cried, "one at least amongst you, is guilty of this. One of you has put himself into the grip of Satan, and may that grip soon close on him and tear him."

He stared round, his fists clenched and raised, and veins swelling like purple whipcords under the brown of his forehead.

"Curse him! Curse her! Whoever it is, curse the witch who refuses peace to the dead. I shall find my

father's body, and I'll stamp the witch under my feet."

Fearful, small murmurs shot quick like snakes from lip to lip. A few friends came round and tried to soothe him.

"Be careful, Lars. If they hear you. . . . Besides, he is dead, he will feel no pain. They always bring the bodies back in the end."

"What! Without his hands. How can my father rest without his hands? He was always a man of his hands; what in Heaven will he do without them?"

Certain places there were that rumour had traditionally assigned to the coven. Lars knew of them and, like everyone else, had hitherto avoided them. Now he went in search of them. Turning back from the church, he went into the hut and picked up his axe. Angrad sank into the fireside corner, but Lars strode silently into the forest.

He searched all day. He covered ground that he never trod before, penetrating into places where the pine boughs made an everlasting night and even the earth was black because the snow could not fall on it. Nevertheless, he saw nobody, living or dead; not so much as a broken twig or a footprint to show where one had passed. Despondently he returned to his hut in the dark, and as he approached it he seemed to hear wild laughter coming from it. In sudden panic of further evil, he ran the last few yards and threw open the door. All was well; his wife still

crouched over the fire as he had left her.

Next day he continued his search. There was a place of piled and frozen rocks of which he had heard whispered stories. It lay at some distance from his home, but he trudged there and examined every crevice. No more success attended him than on the previous day, and it was long past daylight when, chilled and torn by the icy ridges, he staggered back.

A grim beacon lighted the last few miles for him. Some hand had fired the winter stock of reindeer fodder piled behind the hut.

Still undeterred, Lars went on. He was out even earlier on the third day and back later. No trouble seemed to be waiting for him then, but when he went to bed something hard touched his leg. He pulled it out, and

it was a little wax figure crowned with pins.

This was a threat direct, and Lars could not force himself to ignore it. He went out again on the following morning, but not this time to go on looking for the body. There was a man he knew of who lived far from all others, and he was the only one who might now be able to help him. Lars visited this man, and when he came back he was carrying a skin bottle of liquid, some dried herbs and a number of polished stones.

Angrad was again crouched over the fire when he came in. She seemed to have done nothing but that since Sunday. Other people, too, in the village had withdrawn from him; but with Angrad it was different. Not only did she seem afraid, but her fear seemed to have stolen from her



all those things that he knew and loved.

She looked up when he laid the things he had brought home on the table.

"Lars, what have you there?"

"These are to protect us, Angrad. Nothing evil can cross the barrier I shall make with these."

"I am afraid to have such things in the house."

"There would be more reason to fear were they not in the house."

Despite her protests, he pulled the bed to the centre of the room and began making a circle round it. He poured the liquid into a number of bowls and spaced them at intervals. Between these he alternated sprigs of the herbs with the stones.

"There," he said when that was completed, "now we can sleep safely. Nothing evil can cross that circle from the outside."

But Angrad seemed to have lost her reason to terror. She crouched moaning on her stool and refused to move. Even when Lars picked her up in his arms and attempted to carry her to bed over the barrier, she screamed until, to pacify her, he had to remove some of the objects from the circle and then put her to bed. However, when she seemed to be asleep he replaced them before lying down beside her.

The day's exertions had so tired Lars that, despite the worry and fear in his mind, he quickly fell asleep. His sleep was deep at first, but he awoke before morning. The fire had died out, it was as dark as the inside of Hell's own chimney, and a sense

of evil hung like smoke in the air.

It was cold. A different kind of cold from the hard grip of winter when the sap explodes in the trees. A man can fight that and make his blood run quickly again with hard work. This cold seemed to work outwards from his heart, freezing the blood in his veins till rivers of ice seemed to run out to his extremities.

He lay still for a long time. He was afraid to move, yet it was not any presence in the hut that he feared. Some awful thing, he knew, was waiting to be discovered, and a voice called out to him from his soul that all joy in life would die with the discovery.

Like the coils of a python, the terror wrapped around him and made limbs and voice useless. He found it impossible even to scream, and he might have died there in the grip of fear had not the thought of Angrad inspired him to supreme effort.

How was she? Did she also lie terror-stricken in the bed, and unable to call out for the comfort and strength that he owed her?

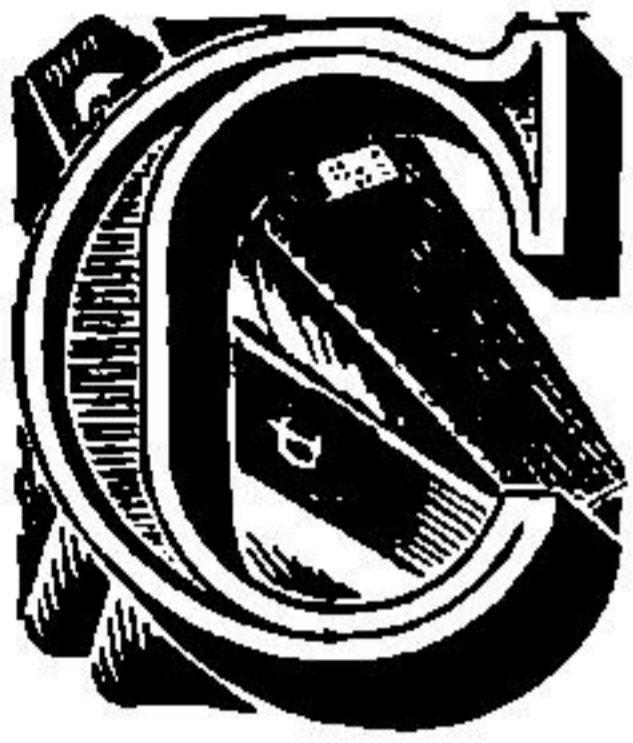
He turned to take her in his arms, and the body was cold and stiff. There was no time for him to ask himself if his temerity had brought this penalty upon her for, before reason could suggest any explanation to his mind, a blue-white ray of moonlight struck through the door which lay open and pointed pitilessly to the truth.

The circle was broken—and that could have been done only from the inside. In his arms he held his father's handless corpse.

THE STEEL VAULT MURDER

ROSWELL B. ROHDE

Illustrated by Nicholas Wadley



CAPTAIN JEFF NORDEN OF Homicide paced the floor impatiently, a scowl replacing his usual half-amused expression. It was hell, he reflected bitterly, to know that something evil was going on and not be able to do anything about it!

He looked at the faces of the others gathered there in the living-room of the Bentley home—old Park Bentley's relatives, all of them. Jill Bentley Zweig, the daughter, on the wrong side of forty and showing it in every line of her ugly over-plump face and squat body, sniffing audibly every few minutes; Frank Bentley, a nephew with the face of a gambler, smooth, bland, with eyes that never looked directly at you; John Taylor, also a nephew, small, wiry, with dark hard eyes, rubbing one of them now, then moving his hand up to scratch his head, sending down a little shower of dandruff on his already speckled shoulders.

A door opened at one end of the rectangular room, and a short plump, very bald man of fifty bustled in. His steps were mincing, and he kept glancing anxiously at Jill, a questioning look in his mild calf's eyes.

Captain Norden scowled at him, and he actually took a step backward.

"Kurt Zweig?" Norden sounded a

trifle louder than necessary, for there was no other sound in the room.

"Yes . . .?" It was nearly a bleat, high-pitched, nervous.

"Sit down."

The little man sat. He would be Jill's husband, Norden knew. He had married her for her money, and after twenty years there still was no money. It was enough to make any fortune hunter desperate. Desperate enough to do murder? That was the question. A question, too, whether murder had been done. And that question was what made Norden swear under his breath.

"You were the one who called?"

Zweig looked as though he might cry.

"Yes . . . yes . . ." he said. He looked at his wife, opened his mouth, and then closed it without further utterance. He seemed petrified by Jill's glance. Not, Norden thought, that he could be blamed. She was a chip off the old block, and the old block, from all accounts, was plenty tough.

"Let's go over it again," Captain Norden said. He glanced at the steel vault door that was set in the opposite wall, and then at his watch. Kurt Zweig cleared his throat nervously.

"It's like I told you over the phone, Captain. I was alone in this room when the house phone rang. That one there beside you. . . . I answered. It . . . it was Mr. Bentley. He had been

in his room since lunch. . . . He said : 'Something's wrong . . . my ears . . . can't see. . . . Help!'"

"Was that all?"

Zweig swallowed with obvious effort, looked at his wife who was studying the floor apparently oblivious to what he was saying.

"I think . . . I'm sure . . . he muttered something that sounded like . . . 'murder' . . .!"

"Go on. . . ."

"That was all. Honest it was. There was a sharp noise, as though he'd dropped the phone maybe. Then nothing more."

John Taylor stopped scratching his head and spoke, his voice surprisingly resonant for a small man :

"If it weren't for this damned foolishness of locking himself in—we'd be able to help him!"

And with a time-lock, to boot, Norden thought. Couldn't even get out. Not until the pre-set time-lock opened. He glanced once more at his watch. 4.55. Only five minutes to go, but Lord! they'd been waiting half an hour. And it must have been a full forty-five minutes since Bentley had called. Provided Zweig had phoned the police immediately, and as yet there was nothing to prove that he had done otherwise.

Norden picked up the house phone. A low buzz sounded in his ear.

"I suppose the room has some outside connections." Norden put down the phone and glanced at the group. "What about plumbing?"

"Yes. He had radiant electric heat, though."

"What about ventilation?"

"None."

"None—impossible!"

"Well, not in the usual sense. He kept oxygen tanks in there. Had some sort of automatic deal worked out to introduce just the right amount into the air to keep it fresh. Then of course when he wasn't in there this vault door was open—at least part of the time."

Norden leaned forward.

"You mean everyone had access to his laboratory when he wasn't in it?"

"Oh my, no!" This time it was Frank Bentley speaking, his voice as smooth as his soft-white face. "I believe he had his door constructed to the exact specifications of the Northern Trust Co.—one of the banks of which he is a director. There was an inner door made of steel bars. This permitted ventilation when the outer door was open without any danger of the laboratory being entered. My uncle was most particular, almost fanatically so, that no one get into his lab. One door or the other was always closed—except of course when he himself came or went."

"It was always locked, then, except when he was entering or leaving."

"Always. I'm sure that was his intention."

"The inner door operated by key?"

"I believe so. Yes, I've seen him use a key to enter."

"And do you mean to tell me that this vault . . . er . . . room had no other ventilation? Why not?"

Everyone seemed suddenly uncomfortable. There was silence. Norden swung suddenly about and pointed.

"Why not, Zweig?"

The little man cowered in his chair.

"Why . . . why . . . I . . . I'm afraid I don't know. . . ."

"Why don't you tell him, Kurt?"

It was Jill Zweig speaking for the first time, her voice as husky in contrast as her husband's tended to falsetto. She turned to face Captain Norden, and he saw that her eyes were red.

"I'll tell you why he took these precautions. You'll find out, anyway, if you question the servants. As you may have heard, my father was eccentric——"

"Looney," Taylor muttered loudly enough that all heard. Jill Zweig did not blink or give any indication that she had heard.

"Since he has been conducting these . . . these experiments of his, he has become even more peculiar. Secretive—suspicious. . . ."

"Of what was he suspicious, Mrs. Zweig? Did he tell you?"

"Not exactly. But I have reason to believe he felt his life was in danger. He was particularly afraid of poisons. This may have been an outgrowth of the fact that he was required by his doctors to take a number of bad-tasting medicines each day, and he recognized the ease with which poison might be given him."

"But the odd ventilation?"

"He was in the First World War. He had a horror of poison gas. I am convinced he believed poison might be administered through the ventilating system."

"So he had a room lined with solid steel—made into a vault in fact?"

"That is what it amounts to, I believe."

Norden shook his head wearily. He was inclined to agree with Taylor's word: "Looney!"

"What was the nature of his experiments?"

Taylor snorted. "He was trying to prolong his life!"

A natural enough desire, Norden thought. Perhaps the old boy wasn't as crazy as his laboratory would indicate. Of course it would seem more rational to depend on doctors to do all possible, but his own experiments might well occupy his mind and do him a lot of good. By the same token, he might have become so involved in his theories that he had ceased to be rational.

"Can you tell me anything more specific. How did he propose doing this?"

Bentley said: "He wouldn't tell us anything that he could keep from us. As you have probably gathered, he had reached a point — and an age——"

"By the way, how old is Mr. Bentley?"

"Eighty-two in another month. As I was saying, he had become, to put it mildly—odd. As you may know, the common carp lives as long as three hundred years. We know his experiments had something to do with these fish because he kept a number of them in a pond in the garden. Huge devils, and undoubtedly older than Bentley himself. Once in a while he would take one of them into his lab, and once he let slip at dinner—you remember the time, John, we were

having pike and it nearly turned your stomach—he let slip that the secret of the carp’s longevity lay in the lining of its entrails. . . .”

Norden stood up, glancing at his watch as he did so. He looked quickly at each of them in turn.

“Did Mr. Bentley ever say if he were succeeding in his experiments? Was he, perhaps, on the threshold of something that would add say twenty or thirty years to his present age?”

Jill Zweig looked up quickly.

“Do *you* believe that there might be something that would do that—add years to one’s life, I mean?”

She was genuinely interested, Norden noted, but whether for her father’s or her own sake he couldn’t say. At any rate, he wasn’t going to be drawn into a discussion of such a hypothetical question. If he knew human nature, and he felt he knew a little about it, the important thing was not whether Park Bentley had discovered something approximating the Fountain of Youth but whether his relatives believed that he had! Because according to all the information the police had been able to gather, and they have an odd way of storing away bits of information that may or may not ever be useful, so long as Park Bentley lived the whole kiboodle of them—Jill, her husband, Frank Bentley, and John Taylor—were dependent on his charity as on the dole. Not one of them seemed ever to have done any useful labour for gain, unless, perhaps, Frank Bentley’s gambling could be construed to constitute as such an activity. They were all of them in their forties or early fifties,

a time when money—or the lack of it—would be of paramount importance. If Park Bentley could add twenty or thirty years to his already long life, then his relatives (and presumably heirs) might be past caring for money, unless he shared his secret with them. At least they’d have a good long wait. . . .

“Did your father mention anything that would lead you to believe he might be successful?”

He addressed his question to Jill Zweig, but it was John Taylor who answered.

“Yes,” he said. “Park has been fairly bubbling with some secret triumph for a week now. He told us at dinner three days ago that he would be able to prolong human life—the only question still unanswered was how much longer. I’m afraid his conversation was hardly that of a rational man. . . .!”

“Five o’clock!” Norden said. “Let’s see what has happened, if anything. . . .”

The control wheel spun easily once the time mechanism had clicked its release, and the vault door swung open silently on well-oiled hinges. Norden was a few steps ahead of the others, but they followed as closely as they could.

The laboratory was not a large room, but it seemed well-equipped. In fact, it seemed even smaller by virtue of the large number of cabinets containing row on row of bottles, each with its label, thick slab-topped tables and complicated clusters of glass tubing, burners, a large and undoubtedly expensive microscope, and a lot

more equipment, the nature of which Norden didn't even venture a guess. At one side of the room stood a desk on which was a litter of papers, and among them a telephone cradle. The phone itself lay on the floor beside the desk, and just beyond the phone, partially concealed by the desk itself as they saw it from the doorway, lay Park Bentley.

It was at precisely this moment that the Police Surgeon, Dr. Fitzhugh, walked into the room.

"Sorry I couldn't make it sooner, Jeff. When you phoned you said you didn't know whether you needed me, and I——"

Norden had crossed the room, and now bent down behind the desk. He rose an instant later.

"I need you all right, Doc. The rest of you—outside. Mr. Bentley is dead!"

A few moments later when the relatives had been ousted, not without protest and a finger-print expert and photographer summoned, Norden returned to the room. The water that he had heard over the phone was still splashing into a sink, and he turned it off, being careful to touch only the end of the handle. It was extremely doubtful that there would be any finger-prints other than Park's, but habit of long standing made the precaution automatic.

"Well, Doc?"

The Police Surgeon raised up on his haunches and pointed at the old man who lay exactly as he had fallen. The dead man's features were twisted as though in agony, and he was bent

almost double. His face was bluish.

"I'd almost swear it was poison, Jeff. But what kind is more of a puzzler."

He pointed to glass fragments on the floor.

"Apparently he drank something from that glass, felt this coming on, and called outside. He must have been as screwy as they say—locked himself in here, didn't he?"

"No idea what poison, huh?"

The M.O. bent down from his squat position and sniffed the broken glass. There was a little spot of moisture where it had shattered.

"Prussic acid was my first thought," he said, still sniffing audibly, "but now I'm sure not. There was evidently medicine in the glass—or the remains. But if there was poison in it—it was odourless. . . ."

Dr. Fitzhugh went on talking to himself as he continued his examination. At last he rose.

"This is a funny one, Jeff. I don't like the look of his face—not at all. It appears some of the blood-vessels in it are broken. The poison, whatever it was, must have spread through his whole system before his heart stopped beating, yet from what I can see now it must have worked almost immediately it hit his stomach. I'll know more after the autopsy."

He scratched the back of his hand, a gesture Norden had long since learned meant that he was annoyed.

"This might be some new poison, Jeff. You don't suppose the old codger was brewing up something for his relatives and got it himself by mistake?"

Captain Norden shrugged his shoulders.

"It's possible," he said, "but from what they say—Zweig particularly—he got the call from the old man—it's more apt to be murder!"

Norden was met at the door of the autopsy laboratory by a much-agitated Dr. Fitzhugh.

"Jeff," he said, "you won't believe this. I'm telling you you won't believe me!"

"Try me," said Norden, unsmiling.

"No poison!"

"What?"

"That's right! No poison on the fragments of glass. No poison on my smear from the floor. And get this, Jeffie boy—no poison in his body!"

"I suppose you're going to tell me he died from natural causes then?"

Dr. Fitzhugh paced nervously. It was a habit that had cost him his private practice years before.

"Now don't get excited, Jeff. We'll get it—believe me, we'll get it. But right now, well, I just don't know what killed him. Whatever it was, though—it wasn't natural!"

Captain Norden left the M.O. talking to himself. It was seldom, if ever, that Dr. Fitzhugh was stumped, and then never for long. He would come up with an answer after a bit; but in the meantime Jeff Norden felt a curious dissatisfaction with himself. He felt that he had within his mind something, some fact, a bit of evidence that was important; but for the moment it eluded him.

He drove back to the Bentley estate,

and now it seemed larger and more formidable than before. There was something particularly pregnant in a situation where a rich old man was living with a number of avaricious, predatory relatives whose only salvation from what seemed to them poverty lay in his death. There was something ironic in his work to lengthen his life, and then his sudden, violent death, coming at the very moment that he felt himself successful in his efforts.

Norden parked in the circular drive and went into the house, scowling in concentration. Once there he did not seek out any of the relatives of Park Bentley. He went instead to the laboratory, which an officer was guarding pending the completion of the investigation there.

"Anybody try to get in?" Norden asked, half humorously, but the officer nodded affirmation.

"The woman," he said. "And then the little squeaky guy—her husband he said he was."

"The Zweigs?"

"They didn't get in, though. I saw to that!"

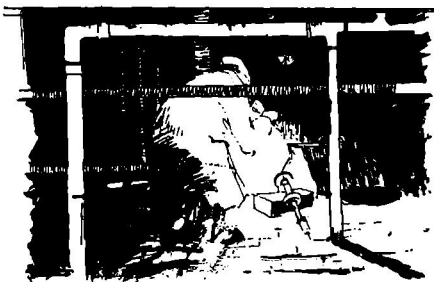
Jeff went on into the laboratory, thinking that perhaps it would have been interesting to let them in—see what it was they were after. He had rather an idea, though.

He stood in the centre of the crowded little room and looked around him. Something was nagging in the back of his mind, trying to force itself into his conscious mind. He looked at the place where Park Bentley had lain. Then he let his gaze move slowly around the room, trying to

fathom what it was that he should be remembering. The finger-print expert had finished his work in the room and gone back to headquarters. But Norden was certain that he'd found little if anything of interest. After all, you couldn't defeat the reality of steel, of a door inches thick, of time-locks and safety that wasn't really safety, but which had become for Park Bentley a trap in which he had died! And according to the M.O. no one had poisoned his medicines ahead of time. What was worse, from the police point of view, was the fact that unless Dr. Fitzhugh could tell how Bentley met death, it would be impossible to tell definitely that he had been murdered. In his mind Jeff Norden was certain that this was what had happened, but if it couldn't be proved, then the relatives would get what they had waited so long for, and the murderer would go free.

He pondered briefly the possibility that the crime, if crime there had been, had been done by more than one of the survivors, perhaps by the whole group together. They seemed a nasty bunch, but he decided that this was idle speculation. After all, you had to prove the fact of crime before you could charge anyone with it.

Something didn't seem exactly right, as Norden reviewed his meagre facts, and suddenly he thought he knew what it was. In one corner of the room, behind a metal screen, was a W.C. and wash basin. And when he had first glanced behind that screen, he had noticed that the floor in the cubicle was wet. He looked again in the corner; some of the water had



evaporated, but there was no doubt about it, the floor had been wet. It was a full minute before he realized there was no water in the W.C.

He called to the detective at the door.

"I thought you said no one had been in here?"

"They haven't."

"No one has touched this W.C.?"

The officer shook his head emphatically. "I didn't even know it was there—but no one has passed me at the door. Like I said, the squeaky guy and his wife wanted to get in, but I wouldn't let them. . . ."

"All right. Just notice—there is no water in the bowl—see?"

"That's right. There isn't, is there?"

Norden tripped the handle and the W.C. flushed and filled.

"There's water in it now," the officer said. "Is it important?"

Norden nodded. "Could be."

He left the vault laboratory and went back into the service wing, encountering the butler coming along a hall.

"How do I get down into the basement?"

The man, trying to look impassive,

succeeded only in scowling, but led him back into the main part of the house and showed him the self-operated lift.

"Any other way down?"

"Certainly, sir. Back stairs at the end of the service hall. The workmen have been using it. But this is much more convenient."

"Workmen? What workmen?"

"The ones who are constructing the new wine cellar, sir."

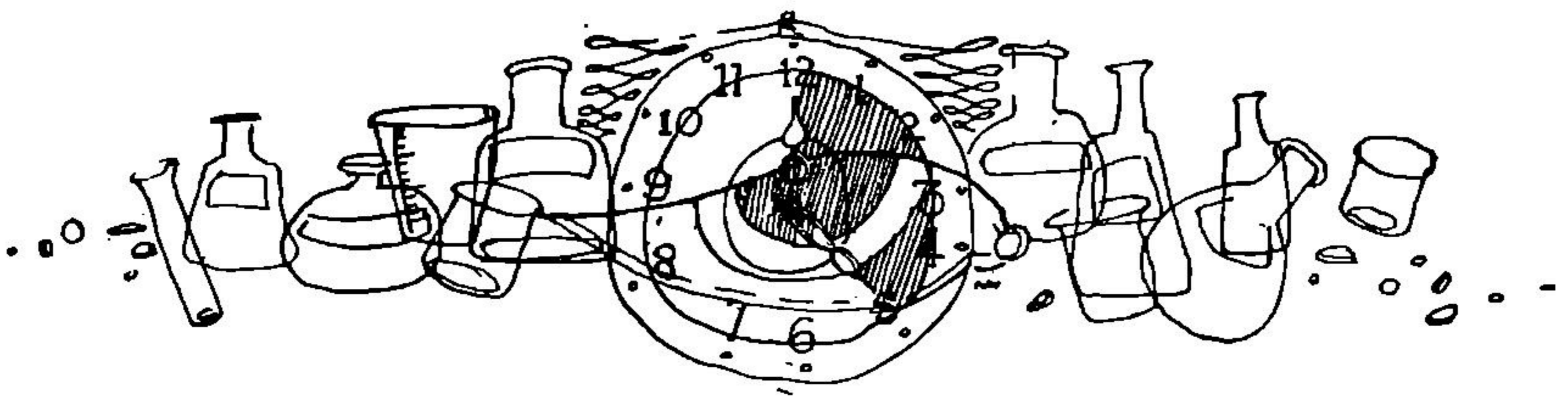
"They are working today?"

"I don't think so—at least not this

evidently led to more than one installation, those which served the laboratory had been put in for that purpose alone.

At one side of the room stood an air compressor and a number of mason's tools. A portion of one wall had been removed, and pieces of concrete and rock lay about. This was undoubtedly to be the new wine cellar, still in the process of construction.

Norden examined the piping with care, paying particular attention to



afternoon, sir. It's Saturday, you know, and they're strict union, if you know what I mean. I did think I heard their equipment this morning, but I didn't pay any attention. . . ."

"All right. I'll have a look."

"I'm sure you'll find this lift more convenient than the stairs. . . ."

"No doubt," the Captain said, and went into it, lowering himself to the basement.

In one of the back rooms, not too clean and obviously unused for anything else, he found the pipes that supplied the facilities of the house. It wasn't too difficult to locate the ones that served the laboratory. They had been put in much more recently than the rest of the plumbing, and whereas some of the others were larger and

that coming from the laboratory. He checked the plug at the elbow of the sewer tile. He noted that the basement ceiling had been painted with white paint, and that some of it was chipping. A patch of it, in fact, seemed to be gone near the elbow of the sewer tile.

He stood for a moment in silent thought. Then he rechecked the mason's tools. He noticed among them a pipe wrench. Again he checked the sewer connection. There could be no doubt—it had been removed, and recently. . . .

Carefully he went over the facts that he knew—the odd death of Bentley, his apparent poisoning, and the absence of poison—the sealed room

—the water on the floor and the absence of water in the W.C.

He reviewed the facts once more in his mind, and an instant later was in the lift and on his way up. In the hall he met the butler.

“Where are the Zweigs? Bentley? Taylor? Quickly?”

“In their rooms, I believe. All except Mr. Taylor, sir. I believe he went to consult his physician. Mentioned something about his nerves, sir!”

“Which doctor—come now, this is important!”

“W. F. Lindell, sir. In the Enterprise Buildings.”

Over the phone Norden learned that Taylor was still in the doctor’s waiting-room.

“Whatever you get out of his eye, doctor—preserve it. Don’t let him get it, whatever you do. What? No—don’t try to detain him. We’ll be there before he leaves. Yes—murder!”

Norden stopped briefly at headquarters on his way to Dr. Lindell’s. He verified what he already suspected with Dr. Fitzhugh, who had just emerged, tired but triumphant, from a further session with Bentley’s body.

“Bends, Jeffie boy,” he said, no longer baffled, good-humoured once more. “That’s what he died from. Subject to terrific pressure and then the pressure was reduced too quickly. Same as divers get. But how in hell anyone introduced pressure to that vault of his, I’ll never——”

“A reducer on the sewer tile plug—and an air compressor handily not in use on a Saturday. The butler thought he heard it in the morning, but he was mistaken—it was after lunch. Then the murderer replaced the regular plug after letting the pressure out of the room, and had plenty of time to rejoin the group in the living-room and wait for the time-lock to work. I’ll have an analysis for you to do when I get back—paint most likely. A lot of it blew around when the air was released from the lab. . . .”

“What——?”

“Later, Doc. You know, we’ve got to hand it to that Taylor guy. He really had us fooled for a while, and he might have had us fooled permanently if he hadn’t had the bad luck to get something in his eye. A master murder—foiled by a mote!”



Truth will come to light; murder cannot be hid long.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

BARGAIN CONCLUDED

GEORGE YON

The Devil exacts his due any time now. The evil hour is at hand. You may see it happen, so watch the man of fabulous success reaching the end of his tether.



FREDERICK CLINTON was exactly the sort of man that Masterson had expected him to be. As the train chuffed into the little station he had no difficulty in singling him out from the small group of people standing on the platform—Clinton stood head and shoulders above the rest.

He didn't join the spontaneous surge forward as the train stopped, but remained where he was, lounging carelessly in the doorway of the ticket-office and almost filling it, an impressive study of strength in repose. From beneath his drooping hat-brim his cool, grey eyes surveyed the passengers, and it was only when Masterson alighted that he moved forward. Masterson noticed that people made way for him without question.

Clinton's smile was friendly and direct. "You must be Clive Masterson. Did you get my letter?" he asked. He made no attempt to introduce himself, seeming to take it as a matter of course that Masterson must know him.

Masterson found himself grasping the hand that was thrust towards him.

"Yes," he replied cautiously. "And you're Fred Clinton."

The grey eyes smiled the affirma-

tive with an air of easy self-assurance, and Masterson felt Clinton's famous personality leap at him like a wave. There was something about this man—Masterson felt it from the very beginning—a compelling, almost hypnotic influence that made you want to serve him, to get down on your knees and clean his shoes. He steeled himself to resist it.

"You're welcome, of course, but I must warn you that you'll find it rather uncomfortable."

"Fine! I'll be quite at home." Clinton's voice conveyed appreciation without any degree of gratitude. It was the tone of a man accustomed to having his way. He turned and led the way towards the gate. Masterson followed with his case in his hand, feeling, in spite of himself, very much like a valet at the heels of his master.

In the car-park a Rolls-Royce gleamed majestically. Clinton opened the door and they drove off. Masterson leaned back against the cushions and carefully studied the calm-faced man at the wheel.

So this, he thought with a slight feeling of awe, is the fabulous "Lucky" Clinton, the man who had smashed his way through life from homeless urchin to self-made millionaire at the age of thirty-five; the man whose every venture had proved an

astonishing success, from diamonds in Kimberley to oil in the United States; from pearls in the South Seas to whaling in the Antarctic.

This man had travelled in the far-away corners of the earth, had tasted all of its delights and faced many of its terrors. He had come unscathed through ordeals in which other men had perished, and had continued his fantastic career without so much as a backward glance, taking all in his stride and piling conquest upon conquest, fortune upon fortune, till the tales of his exploits were featured in every newspaper in the civilized world and his name had become a living legend.

While still young, Frederick Clinton had come pretty close to the summit of world achievement. Men stood in awe of him, women idolized him and the world was at his feet.

Clive Masterson was a fair-minded man. He realized that he should feel honoured in having so distinguished a guest, but for some reason that he could not quite fathom, he felt ill at ease and a little resentful.

He made a bid to assert himself.

"Well," he said patronizingly, "have you noticed much change in the old hometown since you last saw it?"

Clinton frowned pensively. "I don't think so. But I was quite a youngster when I left, and most of my life had been spent up at the cottage. I'm afraid I hardly know the village at all."

"I see. Met any old friends since you've been back?"

"Friends?" A hint of bitterness

marred Clinton's voice. "We never had any. Mother and I lived alone in the cottage, year after year, scrounging our livelihood from our little garden and the moors. There were no friends to help us, and we didn't look for any." He looked squarely at Masterson and patted the steering-wheel. "You needn't think I always had these things," he said shortly. "Hunger and poverty are no strangers to me."

Masterson sensed the rebuff in Clinton's voice. He had a disturbing feeling of having been put in his place, and, while resenting the other's authoritative manner, was unable to counter it.

Clinton bent his attention to the car's progress. They were clear of the village, and the road had dwindled to an almost indefinable track, boulder-strewn and overgrown with grass. The light was failing fast when they pulled up at the cottage, and in the purple tinge of twilight the low, squat building, with its weather-beaten and crumbling stone walls, looked desolate and infinitely lonely.

"It'll be better when we get a fire going," Masterson said apologetically. He stepped out of the car and shivered. "You take a stroll around while I get things moving inside."

Clinton seemed not to have heard him. He stood staring at the bleak picture with expressionless eyes; staring back through the obscuring mists of twenty-five eventful years.

A fire was beginning to blaze in the little stone hearth and Masterson was opening a tin of milk by the unsteady light of a candle when, some fifteen

minutes later, Clinton entered the room. He was smiling, faintly and wistfully, and as he approached the circle of light his features seemed to have lost much of their hardness. Masterson fancied he looked younger, somehow. Probably due to the softening effect of his childhood environment, he thought.

"Ham and eggs is all I can offer you for supper, I'm afraid," Masterson said.

"Thanks, Clive. It's awfully good of you."

Masterson shot him a glance of mild surprise. There was unexpected friendliness and humility in his voice.

They ate their meal in silence; Clinton distant and preoccupied, Masterson feeling slightly awed. Once, looking up, he found Clinton regarding him thoughtfully and ventured an experimental smile. Clinton returned it absently. He seemed uncertain and shy, and for the first time Masterson began to feel at ease in his presence.

Something had happened to Clinton during the past half-hour, breaking down his defences and subduing his assertiveness. Masterson realized with a feeling of wonder that the mastery of the situation had passed over to himself, and he handled it delicately. The sudden and unaccountable change puzzled him, yet he felt sympathetically attuned to Clinton's strange mood.

The meal was over and they were comfortably seated before the fire when Clinton spoke.

"Would you care to sell the old place?" he asked.

Masterson shook his head slowly.

"Sorry, Clinton. I only bought it a couple of months ago. Being right on the edge of the moor, I find it so handy for the grouse shooting. I come down here almost every week-end, and have some damn good sport, too."

"You can name any figure you want, of course."

"No, I can't think of selling yet. I quite understand your reasons for wanting it—sentimental attachment and all that—but it's definitely not for sale. You're welcome to use it whenever you want to, though."

"Thanks," Clinton sighed. He did not persist.

Masterson broke the moment of silence that followed with a low chuckle.

"It's supposed to be haunted, you know."

Clinton looked up in surprise. Then he grinned, and the firelight gleamed redly on his strong white teeth.

"Oh! I'd buy the ghost, too, of course. What's it supposed to be?"

"A baby or something. I haven't seen anything myself, so I wouldn't know."

"Well, I lived here till I was ten years old, and the only thing I found to be afraid of was the wolf at the door."

They laughed together, softly, and Masterson found himself beginning to like the man. The silence glowed with the warmth of companionship.

Behind them the candle on the table dimmed suddenly. As suddenly it flared, illuminating the rough stone of the walls and the patches of green where for years the water had seeped

down through the decaying roof, the tiny window hanging crookedly on its rusted hinges and the cracked stone lintel over the door. Then it dipped again, lingered for a moment, a pin-point of light in the darkness, and finally expired in a wisp of smoke.

In the hearth the little fire struggled valiantly against the encroaching shadows. Its feeble light, flickering forlornly over the opposite wall, projected upon it the monstrously magnified and distorted shadows of the two men—shadows that crouched and leapt in silent violence with every flare and flicker of the flames.

Masterson shivered and pulled his chair closer to the blaze. It was comfortable in front of the fire, and tolerably cheerful if one kept one's eyes on the patch of redness immediately in front of the hearth and ignored the pools of darkness swirling silently in the corners of the room. Masterson felt drowsily tired, but the thought of the cold, cell-like little bedroom at the back of the cottage made him shiver. He closed his eyes and settled himself lower in his chair.

"Masterson!" Clinton's voice hissed through the stillness in a tight, urgent whisper.

Masterson jerked his eyes open and glanced uneasily at his guest. Clinton's face was pale and tense; his eyes gleamed feverishly.

"Have you heard what they say about me down in the village?"

"Yes," Masterson said soothingly. "All nonsense, of course. Superstitious crowd, these country folk."

There was a rising note of wildness in Clinton's short laugh.

"You talk about friends!" he exclaimed bitterly. "Why! They hated us like poison and shunned us like the plague. I can remember seeing my poor mother kneeling in the dust at the foot of the hill where the road enters the village, covering her head with her bare arms to protect herself from the stones those high and mighty village women were flinging at her. And I too small to do anything but stand and cry with misery. How they screamed! 'Witch!' they shouted. 'Witch! Witch! Witch!'"

"Witch? My God, Masterson! She was the purest angel that ever walked this earth, and the only friend I ever had. Can you wonder that I feel bitter towards them?"

Masterston said nothing, feeling that no reply was expected of him. He recognized the opening of the sluice-gates, relieving a dam of emotion swollen to bursting point by the overwhelming flood of memories.

"I don't remember how we got home that day," Clinton continued softly. "She was bruised and bleeding, and almost too weak to crawl. But I got her into the cottage and on to the bed, over in that corner there." He gestured towards the back of the room. "For two weeks I nursed her as best I could, while not a soul came near us. She lived for three years after that, and when she died I dug her grave and buried her myself, saying the few childish prayers I could remember. She lies out there now, under that heap of stones by the

well." He paused and stared steadily into the fire.

"It was the end of everything for me. As soon as I had laid her away, I wrapped up my few belongings in a bundle and walked out. I don't think I even bothered to close the door. I suppose the rest of the story is common knowledge."

It certainly was, and, recalling the tales he had heard and read concerning the fabulous "Lucky" Clinton, Masterson found it difficult to identify this heroic figure with the tense young man beside him. The dominating personality and the inflexible will-power that had served him to such good purpose and upon which his reputation had been built seemed to have been stripped away from him, suddenly and mercilessly, leaving him hesitant and nervous and pitifully vulnerable. Emotion, which for years had been allowed neither time nor place in his life, had risen against him in a mighty force and now held him in its grip.

He stretched out a tremulous hand and touched Masterson's sleeve. His eyes were dark with fear and doubt.

"Tell me, Masterson. Why did they call her a witch?"

There is something awe-inspiring in the collapse of a strong character, a revelation of weaknesses so intimately hidden as to be almost sacred. Masterson sensed it and could find no words to reply to the unexpected question. Clinton lowered his voice to an earnest whisper, pleading for comfort and reassurance.

"I've always felt there was something hanging over us, even in those

early days. What did she do? What could she have done?" His eyes brightened feverishly, and the words forced themselves through unwilling lips. "D'you know, Masterson, those village gossips could have been right. I've had far more than my fair share of luck."

A sudden chill struck at Masterson's spine and the breath caught in his throat.

"Look here!" he snapped. "You'd better put those stupid notions out of your head at once." He rose abruptly and disappeared into the shadows. In an instant he was back with a bottle and two glasses. "Whisky," he said, pouring lavishly. "Finest cure for overwrought nerves." He emptied his glass at a gulp and resettled himself in his chair.

Clinton sipped his drink slowly, staring absently into the fire. Then he sighed deeply. "I guess you're right," he said.

He drained the glass and pulled himself together with a visible effort. "Sorry for being so morbid, old man," he laughed shamefacedly. "I suppose it's the effect of being back in the old surroundings. The sort of experience I've had here takes a lot of forgetting."

"That's all right," Masterson said understandingly. "The best of us must give way to sentiment at times. Especially at moments like these."

A wall of white mist was rolling in from across the moor. Looking over his shoulder, Masterson could see it spiralling past the window in ragged, shapeless columns. He yawned

sleepily and returned to the fire.

Clinton appeared to be dozing. His arms sprawled limply along the sides of his chair and his head drooped, the point of his chin almost touching his chest. Masterson leaned forward and adjusted a log, sending a fountain of sparks dancing up the chimney. He sat back and closed his eyes, and a deep silence settled over the room. As the untended fire sank fitfully lower, the shadows crept stealthily out of the corners, nibbling away the little patch of firelight till the room was steeped in darkness and the damp rose up in waves from the chill stone floor.

What happened next is something that Masterson seldom cares to talk about, and when he does he lays stress on the possibility that he may have fallen asleep and dreamt it all.

That he did fall asleep is certain, but it is the time of waking that he is in doubt about. He maintains, however, that asleep or awake the drama that was played out before him was enacted with a vividness that was anything but dreamlike.

His first impression was that someone had rekindled the fire, though it was bitterly cold and he could feel no warmth from it. The shadows had partially disappeared from the right side of the room, and the bare wall reflected an unsteady, blue-tinged light that, as he later realized, could not possibly have emanated from the fireplace. It seemed to hover in the air, a flat, even glow, with no concentration of brilliance to indicate a source. Sharply outlined against the

light was the still slumbering figure of Frederick Clinton.

With his senses befuddled with sleep and the effects of the whisky he had drunk, Masterson attached no significance to the occurrence. He regarded the light drowsily, listening for a repetition of the sound that had awakened him. As he watched, the light grew stronger and he was able to distinguish the outlines of the table in the corner. He frowned at it puzzledly without knowing why, till he remembered that it had stood in the centre of the room when they had had their meal earlier in the evening, and neither he nor Clinton had moved it.

The oddness of the situation dawned on him suddenly, and his mind cleared in a flash. Simultaneously with the realization came the sound he had been waiting for, close at hand and painfully distinct; the small fretful whimper of a child.

A cold wind sprang up in the room, ruffling the little hairs on the nape of his neck and causing his skin to tingle. He felt the moisture forming on his face and the palms of his hands, but his predominant sensation at that stage was not of fear but of morbid, almost sensual curiosity.

The whimpering rose again, accompanied by a low crooning sound. Looking in the direction from which the sound seemed to come, he perceived for the first time the shape of a cradle and, bending low over it, the shadowy figure of a woman—tall, thin and clothed in black. The pitiful cries of the child became clearer and more persistent, shrill against the low,

mournful voice of the woman, which rose and fell in a weird, inarticulate mixture of soothing and lamentation.

After the first shock of surprise a numbness took hold of Masterson's mind, and though he had a mental impulse to strike a match, there was no reaction from his fingers, and he remained seated, rigid and unmoving.

The stooping figure turned slowly away from the cot, and for an instant he had a clear view of the woman's face. It was pale and haggard with grief, and Masterson, still more curious than fearful, was filled with pity for what he knew to be the distracted mother. With her long grey hair streaming about her tear-stained face, she darted wildly to the corner of the room where the table stood and cast herself down on the floor in an attitude of supplication. In the dimness Masterson could see a crucifix on the wall above her head. While she prayed, the child continued to cry; now moaning piteously, now wailing in pain.

Then the kneeling woman threw up her arms in a despairing gesture and lurched to her feet, staring wildly about her and clawing desperately at her streaky hair. With a frenzied movement she snatched the crucifix from the wall, fumbled with it for a moment, then replaced it. Swiftly she drew a long black shawl from about her shoulders and spread it on the table. Then she glided noiselessly towards the door and became lost in the shadows.

Masterson watched intently, his consciousness completely absorbed in what he saw. The woman's actions

puzzled him at first, and he could make nothing of it, until, happening to look up at the wall, the significance of the whole thing came upon him with a shock and the icy fingers of terror closed around his heart.

The crucifix now hung *upside down!*

Panic-stricken, his skin crawling repulsively, Masterson knew beyond all doubt that he was about to become a witness to the dim, unspeakable horror of the Black Mass, the incantation to the Evil One. The cold sweat poured from him as he exerted all his will-power in an effort to free himself from the grip of the paralysis that held him. His whole being rebelled against the hideousness of the thing, but he was powerless to lift a finger, powerless even to close his eyes to it.

There was a movement in the shadows near the door and the black-clad figure reappeared. From her hand trailed the dangling body of a cockerel, its head swinging limply. Even in the semi-darkness Masterson could see the gouts of blood still spurting from its freshly severed throat. She laid her sacrifice falteringly upon the improvised altar, and sank to the ground, covering her face with her hands.

And now the response was immediate and terrifying. A change stole over the atmosphere of the room; making it indescribably loathsome and repellent. Something had entered the room, something invisible yet almost tangible in the intensity of its utter evilness. It seemed to hover in the air, alive and throbbing, radiat-

ing wave upon wave of sickening, overpowering vileness, impregnating the room till the very walls and roofs pulsated with the unholiness of its presence.

The child's cries gradually grew softer, then died away completely. Rising fearfully to her feet the woman tottered across to the now silent cot and bent eagerly over it. Then the room rang with her loud, thankful cry.

The whole picture dimmed and blurred suddenly, as if thrown out of focus. The strange light waned rapidly and faded away, leaving Masterson bathed in perspiration and quivering like a leaf, staring into the darkness and wondering if he had really seen the apparition or whether he had just awakened from a hideous dream.

Of one thing he felt absolutely certain. The scene he had just witnessed, whether real or imagined, had been the re-enactment of, or had some bearing on, an event that had happened in this house at some time in the past. He thought of the former inhabitants and the whispered rumours he had heard about them in the village, but his mind still refused to accept the idea. Such fantastic happenings formed the basis of several plays and stories he had read, but he couldn't see how it could happen in real life. Moreover, there was only one ending to such stories—the inevitable return of the sinister deliverer to exact his dreadful toll. And here was Clinton beside him, still full of life if fast asleep. He could hear his

deep, steady breathing. No, he decided, it could not have been anything other than a particularly bad dream; brought on no doubt by Clinton's behaviour earlier in the evening.

He stretched his cramped legs, and was rising to stir up the fire when, without warning, the cold hand of horror clamped down on him again and he sank back cowering in his chair.

It was still in the room! He could sense the awful malignity, silent and brooding, bearing down upon his consciousness in the darkness. But now there seemed to be a quality of expectancy about it. He felt that it was waiting . . . waiting . . .

Masterson's hand shook almost beyond his control as he fumbled in his pockets for the matches. He was on the point of striking a light when a long, piercing shriek shattered the dark silence. Again and again it was repeated, while Masterson crouched, momentarily stricken into immobility. Then he was on his feet in a bound, holding the flaring match over his head.

The first thing he saw was Clinton, his arms helplessly flailing the empty air and his face livid and distorted with agony and terror. Fearful though the spectacle was, what completely broke Masterson's nerve was that the sounds issuing from Clinton's twisted lips were the thin, high-pitched screams of a little child.

Masterson dropped the match and, himself screaming, ran blindly out across the mist-covered moor.

THE SLAVE DETECTIVE

THE CASE OF THE DRUGGED WINE

WALLACE NICHOLS

The Slave Detective is commanded by the Emperor Commodus to unravel a suspected conspiracy. He is given great power in Rome for the purpose, but the slave's reward might as equally be death as the lavished gold of the imperial gratitude. He has therefore to walk very warily in this, one of the greatest of his cases brought to a successful conclusion.

I

IN THE DEAD middle of the December night Sollius was awakened by being violently shaken. To his utter astonishment it was his master.

"Get up, Sollius, at once!" cried Sabinus. "You are summoned by the Emperor! Oh, what have you done?" he demanded, wringing his hands.

Outside the gate mounted lictors and torchmen surrounded an imperial litter.

"Am I your prisoner?" asked Sollius, trembling as much from the cold of the night as from his natural fears.

"Would the Emperor send a litter for a prisoner?" guffawed one of the lictors. "You are to travel soft; the Emperor himself has lain among those cushions. Get in, slave!"

At the palace he was led at once along a marble labyrinth of corridors to the Emperor's private apartments. Sentries of the Prætorian Guards were posted at either side of a gilded door, and Laetus, their Prefect, was striding restlessly up and down. Near the door, his arms folded, stood Fusculus, the Emperor's favourite wrest-

ler, a young and very handsome Apulian. The lictor conducting the Slave Detective rapped softly with his knuckles in a secret rhythm, and the door was immediately opened by the Emperor himself.

"I praise the Gods you are come, Sollius!" he cried hoarsely, and, taking the Slave Detective by the arm, forcibly dragged him inside.

The chamber was dazzling in its luxury, Eastern opulence mingling with Roman ostentation. It was lit by golden lamps and seemed utterly ablaze with light. A richly cushioned divan stood in one corner, and upon it, semi-naked, lay the most beautiful girl whom Sollius had ever seen. At his entrance she roused herself a little, and lay upon one arm, silently staring at him while the Emperor excitedly poured out his reason for summoning the Slave Detective.

"You must save me," burst out Commodus. "You are the only man. Save me as you did before.¹ There is another conspiracy against my life. Probe into it, Sollius. Bring me the name of its fountain-head, and I will

¹ See *The London Mystery Magazine*, No. 9.



give you your utmost dream upon earth."

"Is it permitted, O Augustus, to question you a little?"

Commodus nodded and flung himself into a gold-inlaid ivory chair.

"What makes you, Majesty, aware of such a conspiracy?"

"I can smell it all about me like the blood in the arena after a happy sport," tensely whispered the brutal young Emperor. "You do not hold the kind of power that *I* do, slave, without smelling the moods of those about you. I feel safe only with my dear wrestlers and gladiators!"

"Have you a suspicion of a particular enemy?"

"I have so many enemies," answered Commodus, biting his nails. "I can confer the most marvellous benefits on whom I will—and seem only hated for it."

Sollius did not reply that the fault

lay in the conferring of imperial favours on only the criminal and the worthless; instead, he asked whether any sudden happening had brought the fear of a plot on the Emperor's mind.

"Last time, O Augustus," he said, "a gladiator, condemned for some crime, made a confession——"

"Under torture," interrupted Commodus with joy in the recollection.

"Under torture," agreed Sollius, "which gave a fact that I could pursue. Have you, Majesty, any such fact to give me now?"

"My wine tonight was—must have been!—drugged. After drinking I became inordinately drowsy and heavy-eyed. Marcia here will tell you. She witnessed my heaviness after drinking. Tell him, Marcia!"

"The Augustus," she shamelessly replied, "became drowsy in the midst of love—quite incredible with *me!*"

"Clearly," Commodus muttered, "the drug was too weak—for I did not sleep. What might have happened had I slept. . . . Ah, gods, how I fear to sleep!" he breathed, and covered his white face with trembling hands.

"Who served you with your wine tonight, Majesty?" asked Sollius.

"My personal slave, Callias the Greek. He has served me since my father's day. Am I to distrust *him*? I have heaped favour after favour upon him; I have poured gold over his head like oil. But I cannot afford to have doubts of any man. He must die. He shall die tonight—now—at once!" cried the Emperor hysterically.

"Tonight—now—at once!" echoed Marcia, her eyes glinting. "Fustulus is on guard—let him strangle Callias—now—here. Let us *see* it done, and then we'll know you are safe, my dearest one."

She was up with the speed of a tigress, and was half-way to the door to give the wrestler his orders when Sollius caught at her hand and swung her round.

"Not tonight, lord," he cried in a voice of such firmness that Commodus stared at him and the hysteria stopped. "How, lord, can I get to the bottom of this if you kill so necessary a witness before I have time to examine him."

Marcia flung off his clutch, but a sign from Commodus sent her, pouting, back to the divan.

"True, true," said the Emperor. "I was wrong; he shall live . . . a while. But I will not drink from his pouring again. You—you alone, my beloved Marcia—shall pour for me until this

plot is rooted out. But whom can I trust, Sollius?" he besought, hysterical again. "Save me, Sollius, protect me!"

"Be calm, O Augustus," soothed Sollius. "Let us call about you those who are incorruptible."

"Are there *any*?" laughed Commodus in a high-pitched whine, and had to stay his laughter by a fist at his mouth.

"Let me have the old ex-centurion Decius fetched from his allotted farm, and give me your slave—once my master's—the young man Lucius, and you shall have two faithful watchers of your sleep by day and night. These men you can trust, Majesty. May I have them?"

Commodus took a waxed tablet, scratched a while with his stylus, and passed the tablet over. It virtually created Sollius the second man in Rome.

"Have whom you will; do whatever you will. You have all-power in Rome for a week!" cried Commodus. "The gods my father worshipped bless you, Sollius," he murmured, and again covered his white face with trembling hands.

II

His audience over, Sollius sought out Lucius. The youth whom he had once loved as a son was now a man, and Sollius eyed him narrowly to see whether his purchase by the Emperor from Sabinus and the subsequent sojourn at Commodus's lascivious court had corrupted his nature. The two met with a mutual nervous-

ness, but a single smile from Lucius reassured the Slave Detective, and Sollius proceeded to give him his orders.

"Do not leave the Augustus until Decius comes to take over."

"Like old times, Sollius!" grinned a delighted Lucius, and he hastened to the Emperor's apartments.

Sollius then asked to see Eclectus, the imperial chamberlain. This man, whom he knew to be haughty, unscrupulous and avaricious, was enraged at being aroused in the middle of the night, and refused to speak with him; but a sight of the tablet which Commodus had scratched reduced him to pallor and compliance.

"What is it, Sollius? What can I do?" he demanded, and for all his haughtiness he began shaking with fear.

"Who would give Callias the wine to pour for the Augustus?"

"He would get it himself from the imperial cellars. He has the duty of receiving whatever is to be drunk by the Augustus himself."

"Does it pass through your own hands, O Eclectus?"

"Only at a state banquet," replied the chamberlain, his face working.

"Will you send for Callias?"

Though the palace was searched practically from room to room Callias was not found until dawn, and then his body was discovered in the open air, not far from the private garden of the Empress. He had died from poison.

With a thoughtful face Sollius limped his way to the headquarters of the City Cohorts. The Prefect of the



City, his old friend Publius Helvius Pertinax, received him with a furrowed brow. He was not alone; with him in conference was Laetus, the Prefect of the Prætorians.

"Here comes the lord Sollius!" cried the latter, half amusedly, half angrily, for he had resented the powers given to the slave.

"Hail, lord Sollius!" said Pertinax, lifting his hand in salute, but he spoke with the smile of old affection and association. He knew the Slave Detective's gifts and admired him. Moreover, he was grateful for the considerable help which he had given him in many a difficult—and dangerous—case. "What can I do for you?" he asked, but not as graciously as his smile had led Sollius to expect.

"I want the use of your officer Gratianus," replied the Slave Detective, and produced his tablet of authority.

"He is yours," curtly replied Pertinax.

"If the Augustus would confide his safety to his Prætorian Guards, instead of trusting only to wrestlers and gladiators of the worst possible char-

acter," said Laetus, now more angry than amused, "there would be no need to call in a slave!"

"Lord, it seems a domestic danger, not a public one."

"I have guards about his door day and night," snapped Laetus.

"Yet his cup was drugged," said Sollius, a little maliciously, pleased when he saw both men start, "yet poured by Callias—as usual."

"I did not know that," muttered Pertinax.

"It is why he sent for me," replied Sollius with quiet emphasis. "And now Callias is dead, too—poisoned, probably by the same drug."

"This has not been reported," cried Pertinax severely.

"I am reporting it now," blandly replied the Slave Detective.

"I will come at once."

"The evidence," said Sollius, "died with Callias. It is, I think, a secret enemy of the Augustus, for I can find no trace of one seeking the imperial diadem."

"There is no near relative to have it," said Laetus, "and he has adopted no successor."

He glanced at the City Prefect as he spoke, and both men stared at one another as if the precariousness of the Roman political situation had dawned upon them for the first time.

"I wonder," pursued Sollius, as though musing aloud yet keeping both men in view under half-shut eyes, "whether one of the generals of any of the provincial armies is a too-ambitious man."

A dead silence followed. Sollius felt that he had been right not to men-

tion Clodius Albinus in Britain, Pescennius Niger in Syria and Septimus Severus in Pannonia by name. All three, according to his master the Senator, were men of distinct ambition.

"Why do you ask?" demanded Laetus stiffly, after a pause. "Do you question the honour of the Roman army?"

"I wondered," meekly replied Sollius, "whether one of them had a known freedman in the City."

Again Pertinax and Laetus glanced at one another.

"I know of none," said the City Prefect.

III

Returning to the palace, he was told that the Emperor was practising with his favourite wrestler, Fustulus. Decius, Lucius informed him, would be on guard near by.

"The lady Marcia wishes to see you," added the young slave.

"Marcia . . ." mused Sollius. "What kind of a woman is this new concubine of the Emperor?"

"She loves jewels—and wine," was the shrugged answer. "But she is less haughty than some of the others have been. I know no more of her."

The Slave Detective hastened immediately to Marcia's apartment, and was permitted to enter at once. She was certainly a beauty, a dark, flashing Bacchante; and her setting, all marble and gilding, was luxurious beyond wonder.

"Ah, Slave Detective, come. Sit. Take this stool here, near me. I did

not say before the Emperor last night what I could have said. But this is another moment, and the Gods have given me the chance now. You see, I suspect . . . someone. But I dare not tell the Augustus; besides, he would put my suspicion down—as a man would—to feminine spite. But I love the Emperor,” she continued with a slow, inward smile, “and the spite—I suppose it is natural—would be hers rather than mine. To one so clever as you, need I suggest more?”

Slowly Sollius shook his head.

“You will sift it?” she urged, her eyes bright.

“I will sift it,” he promised, and sighed at the task.

“She sent him lately a little brown boy as a present . . . a sly little Arab, capable . . . of anything. He was assisting Callias to serve the Augustus last night.”

“I will sift it, lady; I will sift everything,” Sollius replied gravely, and took his leave.

He knew that the Empress Crispina, equally affronted as Empress and wife, had such cause to hate her husband as would excuse most kinds of retaliation—except murder. He asked Lucius about the Arab boy.

“A little brown whelp,” was the answer, “cheeky and above his years. So the Augusta gave him to the Emperor . . .” Lucius mused. “I thought the Emperor had bought him from Eclectus the chamberlain.”

“Marcia says he was a gift from the Empress.”

“She is probably right; but the lord Eclectus had an Arab slave—and I took this to be the same. He may be

another boy altogether.”

“Fetch him hither,” ordered the Slave Detective.

They found the little Arab slave-boy in the same spot near the Augusta’s private garden where they had found Callias. He had been stabbed with a specially sharpened fruit-knife which belonged to the Emperor himself.

IV

Sollius was annoyed. He felt that someone was mocking his efforts, that those two murders were unnecessary counters in a game which an unseen player was playing with him. Heaving a deep sigh, he begged for an audience of the Augusta.

She was still young and still beautiful, but her face was frozen into a defensive callousness such as only deep disillusion could etch upon feminine features. A sense of compassion invaded him and caused him to speak in a low, humane voice, not at all the voice of an interrogator.

“Do you know, lady, why the Augustus is employing me?”

“Is he afraid at last of one of his courtiers—or gladiators?” she scornfully asked.

“He fears one whom he cannot name. I am to find him that name, O Augusta.”

“In doing so, will you punish the brute who killed my little Arab?”

“I think it will prove the same man,” he whispered, and stared at her full in the face.

“You know him?” she whispered

back so that her attendant should not hear.

Sollius shook his head, but their glances crossed like swords.

"Why did you send the Arab to the Augustus?"

"Does a woman have to give a reason for trying to placate . . . a difficult husband? A fearful husband . . ." she breathed, but the mask of her face held and only her eyes had life.

"Send away your woman," bade Sollius.

Her face haughtily lifted. He showed her the Emperor's tablet. She gave him a dreadful, imploring look—and bade her woman retire.

"What is it, Sollius? Surely he has not chosen *you* to kill me?"

"Augusta," said Sollius, holding her eyes with his own, "what was the drug you gave the Arab . . . for Marcia?"

"How did you know?" she breathed.

"I know too little," he answered. "But some things you can tell me. The Arab *had* a drug—poisonous in excess?"

It was neither acquiescence nor denial; it was a fearful stare.

"I think he put it in the wrong cup," whispered Sollius.

"He would not do that. He knew whom I hated."

"You hate them both," asserted Sollius.

"Do what you were sent to do," she said wearily. "Call in the lictor who is to strike off my head."

"Tell me first, lady, from whom had you the drug?"

"From Eclectus," she whispered.

"He has found such . . . for the Emperor's use . . . from time to time. Finish me, Sollius; have me slain, but do not torture my mind."

"Augusta," he answered pityingly, "I am not here to have you slain, but only to question you, and to learn . . . what I have learnt."

He raised his arm in salute, and left a pale, trembling woman to her weeping.

V

The Slave Detective found Gratianus waiting for him.

"You asked for me, Sollius?"

In reply Sollius showed him the Emperor's tablet.

"Have *you* heard of any plot against the Emperor?" he asked on receiving it back, together with a strained, curious look. "You have your ear, I know, always buried in the Roman mud."

"Is it safe to speak?" muttered Gratianus.

"It is unsafe not to speak!" Sollius grimly replied.

"There is fear in the Subura," whispered Gratianus, glancing round him carefully before speaking, though they were in an empty room of the palace, "not the usual sort of fear among thieves and malefactors, but a sense . . . of insecure expectancy. The same kind of fear has occurred before. I particularly remember it three times, and each time a favourite of the Emperor fell, and the city was in a turmoil for some days: when Maximus Quintilianus fell; when Perennis fell; and when Cleander; with lesser

disturbances when the fall was of lesser men. I have learnt to sense—and to fear!—this shuddering current in the Subura; it always portends some crash of headlong ruin.”

“How do they hear in the Subura the secret court rumours?” asked Sollius.

“How not, when the Emperor takes his favourites *from* the Subura?” Gratianus cynically answered.

“And now?”

“There is again the same stir, like the movement upon water’s surface from an unseen fearful monster below. I cannot explain it; it *is* so.”

“Who are Commodus’s chief favourites today?”

“Laetus, whom he lately made Prefect of the Prætorians; Eclectus, whom equally lately he made his chamberlain; Fustulus, the young wrestler—and Marcia, his newest girl.”

“Must we protect them, too,” muttered Sollius between his teeth, “as well as the Augustus himself? This is an impossible case, Gratianus!”

“Rome,” answered Gratianus, “has become an impossible city.”

“Because Commodus,” sighed the Slave Detective, “is an impossible Emperor! Yet it is I, feeling so, who am tasked to save him . . . for what worse deeds? I repeat, Gratianus, an impossible case!”



The fourth and fifth days of the imperial tablet's validity came and passed, and though Sollius pondered deeply and questioned most of the palace household, freedmen and slaves alike, he obtained no clue to any plot against the Emperor's life. Or had he missed, he continuously asked himself, some clue hidden in anything which he had already been told? He felt exasperated and helpless, and feared every moment the inevitable summons by Commodus to report on his progress. The sixth of his allotted days came—and the summons with it.

The Emperor saw him in the same chamber as before, and again Marcia was present. This time she was seated in the Emperor's own gold-inlaid ivory chair, and Commodus himself paced about like one of the arena's lions in its cage.

"Well?" cried the Emperor, eyeing him obliquely. "Do you know the man? Can we torture him—now and here?" he demanded eagerly.

"Not yet, Majesty. . . ."

"Not yet, not yet! Have you done *anything*, slave, except bask in your ephemeral power?"

"At least, Majesty, you are safe," stammered Sollius.

"I do not feel safe," muttered Commodus. "For all I know, it may be a woman. Is it my wife? Have you evidence against *her*? By the Gods, I would it were she. Two bodies have been found near her private walk."

"It is the Augusta," burst out Marcia. "She hates you—and me, too. I never trusted that pestilent little

Arab, and he was her creature. I also, Sollius, am afraid. You must save *me* as well as the Augustus."

"You talk too much," snapped Commodus. "Who will trouble to kill *you*? Not even I! This is men's business. Is it my wife, Sollius?"

"There is suggestive evidence both ways, Majesty. But I feel that this case springs from fear, and I do not see what the Augusta has to fear," he added. "The Senate is her shield, and we do not fear merely because we hate."

"You are quibbling," snarled Commodus, a slight froth at the corners of his thin lips. "Two days, slave, and you die—unless you bring me the truth! I will have you torn to death with the subtlest agonies discovered by evil!" he shrieked fiercely, and feverishly left them.

"Who, slave, is safe in Rome?" sighed Marcia, and wrung her hands in terror at the Emperor's hysterical departure. Suddenly she gave Sollius a sharp look. "Have you no guess at the truth?" she asked softly. "You may not have the evidence to give to the Emperor, but—oh, tell me, Sollius!—have you no guess at all? Your guesses, clever one, are apt to be certainties. All Rome, slave, knows that. Tell me!"

She leaned towards him, her young, perfect lips parted, and he breathed her fragrance, wondering how such deep and probably calculated lasciviousness could outwardly be so sweet.

"Tell me," she repeated, her voice low and pleading, and he knew that he could have kissed her unrebuked. "I feel so . . . unsafe."

"I will say this," he quietly answered, fixing his eyes upon hers. "I have enough suspicion to give Pertinax, Prefect of the City, the most likely line of inquiry should harm come to the Emperor's sacred person. But I have no evidence—as yet—beyond that of my own wits. Still, as you graciously said, lady," he added with a mock complacency, "my guesses are apt to be certain."

"I am becoming doubly afraid, Sollius," she breathed. "Between the moods of the Augustus himself and my fear of this unknown danger—for what should I be were Commodus to perish?—I am a most unhappy and defenceless woman though trumpets sound for me and way is made for my litter by obsequious lictors. Well, I see you will tell me no more. So go, slave!"

Leaving her, he saluted Fustulus the wrestler, about to enter.

VII

Late that evening Commodus returned to his private apartments wearied out from slaying in the arena a batch of wild beasts recently brought from one of the eastern provinces. He called for Marcia, and surlily commanded wine. She alone now would he permit to pour for him. Fustulus, carrying the Emperor's equipment, entered the corridor a moment afterwards.

Already about the doorway, waiting upon the imperial pleasure, were grouped Laetus and Eclectus and, though somewhat separately, Sollius, Lucius and Decius, the last once more

wearing his old cuirass, greaves and red horse-haired helmet of bronze. Commodus had swept them all with suspicious eyes, but had spoken to none, though, as he passed Sollius, he had maliciously turned down his thumbs. The Slave Detective shivered, not so much from his own danger as because he was suddenly the prey of an importunate intuition—that the very moment was fraught with almost instant peril.

"Let none enter, Lucius, Decius," he commanded on an impulse.

"That does not apply to me!" said Fustulus, pushing forward.

"It applies to all tonight," answered Sollius.

"It is the Emperor's wish that I attend him, slave," insolently cried the wrestler.

"I have the Emperor's authority to do as I will."

"Not for much longer," sneered Fustulus.

"At least now!" snapped Sollius.

Suddenly at his elbow appeared a palace freedman. The Augusta, came the whisper, desired the presence of the slave named Sollius.

"You are to enter by the garden way," the freedman murmuringly added.

In a flash Sollius knew that his guess and certainty were one. He flung off the man's arm.

"Go in," he ordered Decius, "and bring out Marcia!"

"Stay where you are, Centurion!" cried Laetus, and drew his short stabbing-sword.

Lucius snatched out a dagger from his tunic, but Eclectus instantly

stabbed him through the side, while Fustulus grasped Sollius by the two arms to prevent him from moving.

"You should have gone with the freedman, fool!" he whispered fiercely.

In that instant Commodus himself appeared on the threshold, white, staggering, sweating, hardly able to utter.

"Sollius . . . she, she! O hideousness of beauty! I am drenched with the drug . . ." he gasped, and fell forward on his face.

Fustulus immediately leapt and completed Marcia's work by strangling him.

VIII

"How," asked Sabinus the next morning, "did you know it was Marcia?"

"It began," answered Sollius, "by Gratianus telling me of the restlessness in the Subura, and his saying that it frequently occurred before the fall of a favourite; and it struck my thought that favourites, if cunning enough, might anticipate the fall in some way; from which it followed that the four of them, Marcia, Laetus, Eclectus and Fustulus, might league together to prevent their fate by attacking the Emperor beforehand. It was only a thought, lord, but once in my mind it grew, and everything so well fitted in, like brick to brick in

one of our Roman buildings. It was not too clever of them to try to implicate the Augusta; for though she had wrongs from her husband to avenge, she had at least his contemptuous protection. I could not see her destroying the prop of her social life! Commodus, mad and bad as he was, would not make a Marcia his Empress. Then, again, I noticed how handsome Fustulus was. My guess was not wide, but I had no evidence. I think, lord," he added, looking his master in the eye, "I am not repentant that I was too late in certainty to save the Augustus. A man owes something to the central goodness of life! Yet I am sorry that I could not bring the four criminals to justice. But who can touch the masters of Rome?"

"Who indeed!" sighed Sabinus, and then asked if Lucius would live.

"He is already out of danger," replied Sollius, "and hopes to be back again as your slave, lord."

"I will buy him from the new Emperor. How Rome breathes again!"

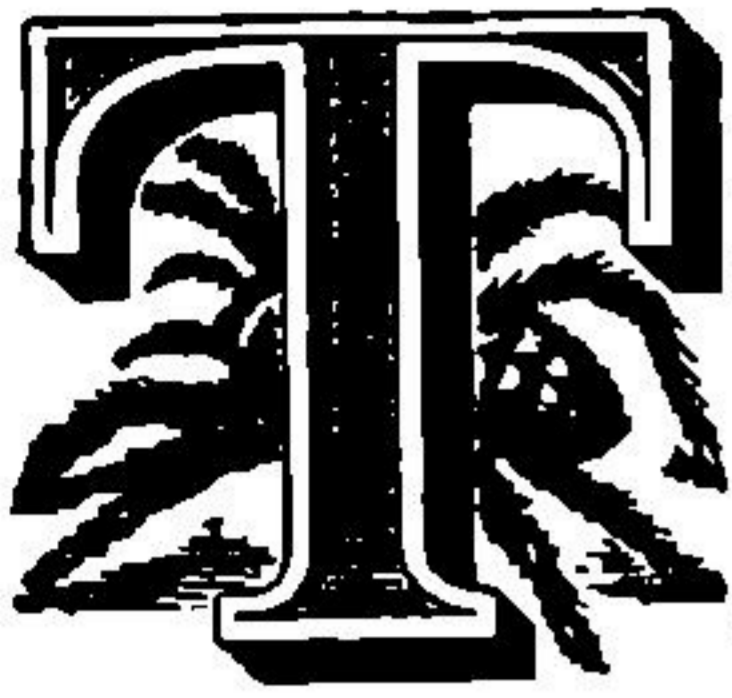
"Is one already chosen, lord?"

"Would Laetus and Eclectus have conspired without a bridge behind them?" sardonically asked the Senator. "They and the Prætorians elected their man by acclamation last night, and the Senate is to confirm it today. You, at least, should be pleased, Sollius," laughed his master. "He is quite a friend of yours: Pertinax!"



MURDER FOR THE MILLION

MARY WHEELER



THE GIRLS WERE lining up on the far side of the white roped-off arena. A loudspeaker blared, appropriately, "She's my lovely," and the girls looked each other up and down speculatively and patted themselves hopefully.

The loudspeaker then informed us that the first competitor for this year's title of "Queen of Poolston" would be Miss Hope Leroy.

Tim, my brother-in-law, muttered something in my ear; my sister Sally, his wife, automatically told him to behave himself. I turned and studied the judges. Three. No, four. Then I realized that the angular lady was the Mayoress, who had just come along to keep an eye on the old man. The Mayor sat in the middle. He gave the impression that he would have been delighted to leave the old lady at home. Since she so obviously didn't approve of these goings on, he had to look as though he didn't either, but was just being broadminded. What he actually achieved was a nasty kind of leer.

On the Mayor's left was the dress designer—a most elegant young man. On the right of the Mayoress sat the man who really interested me. Gerard Mapperley, the author. I was in a rather interesting position, since indirectly I had put

Gerard Mapperley where he was today. He would no doubt have got there in any case, but I had helped.

The beauty parade started. On they came, one after another; the usual selections of would-be Audrey Hepburns and ersatz Jean Simmondses. Then, almost as though she had slipped in by accident, came a small dark girl in what I believe is called a "regulation" swim-suit. She looked like anyone's fifth-form sister; even the Mayoress couldn't but have approved. She was just the kind you'd gladly take home to show to mother. Her name, it seemed, was Elizabeth Brown.

"A bit pathetic, isn't she, poor child?" whispered my sister. But Elizabeth Brown didn't have a chance against Hope Leroy. None of them did. The party broke up, and we went back to our hotel. In the dining-room we saw Gerard Mapperley and Hope Leroy.

People say, don't they, that you can't make money out of literature? Of course *Murder for the Million* is scarcely literature. But it is a book, and Gerard Mapperley had made a packet from it. I ought to know, since I work for the publishers.

When we had finished dinner, I glanced at Mapperley's table again. If Hope had expected a pleasant little *tête-à-tête*, she didn't get it. One or two people asked Mapperley for his autograph, and that started quite a rush. I decided to join the queue, and

when I reached the table, I held out my card.

"If you wouldn't mind, Mr. Mapperley?"

The blonde looked at me. In the middle of a yawn she stopped, and I saw a flicker at the back of her eyes. Then she decided I wasn't worth the effort.

"We get it," she drawled, "you sure think Gerard's book was the darnedest thing you ever did read. And we'll take the rest for said. Sign up, Gerard—I want my cawfee."

"Miss Leroy," I ventured, "you sure do say the nicest things. But if you wanna be took for a real full-blooded Yank, put in some practice. Have you never watched a Yank eat, for example? They never use a knife and fork the way you used yours."

I thought she was going to hit me, but she merely grinned. Gerard smiled too, though a little uncertainly.

"Could I join you for that coffee?" I asked.

"Go on," Hope told him, "order the coffee, Gerard. We'll get rid of him quicker."

"I've been wanting to meet you, Mr. Mapperley," I told him. "You see, if it was not for me, perhaps you wouldn't be here——"

"You look young, papa," observed the blonde.

I ignored that.

"I read your book for the publisher," I explained.

"Oh," said Mapperley, "you're a publisher's reader." He was quick on the uptake, you see. "Well, this is wonderful, Mr. ——"

"Peter Saunders," I supplied. I

passed round my cigarettes and we drank our coffee. Hope said something about a liqueur, but Gerard didn't seem to hear. This was a man who had been in at the very genesis of his masterpiece. Gerard was very happy. He talked eagerly about the future. He'd been offered film and stage rights for *Murder for the Million*.

Hope came to life again when he mentioned that.

"Look, darling," I told her, "you'll get nowhere by playing up to the author. He's a small fish in these matters. If you really want a part——"

"Don't say that, Peter Saunders." The eyes smouldered. "Gerard here thinks it's his fresh young charm that got me."

Before we could get far on the fresh young charm, there was a phone call for Mapperley.

"Play with something your own age," I told Hope.

"But I love him," she said. "I love anyone who could rake in all those thousands on one novel, with plenty more on the mat, just waiting." She sighed. "And I just see myself as Psyche."

I could see her as Psyche myself. Psyche, the dumb-blonde secretary to old Charlie Devoter in the novel. Maybe I'd better tell you something about the book, in case you haven't read it.

It was clever: it was funny. If you're the sort who went for *Arsenic and Old Lace*, you'd go for *Murder for the Million*.

It told, in laconic, almost school-boy prose, the story of a dear old fel-

low called Charlie Devoter who ran a correspondence college for murderers. If you wanted tuition in bumping off anything from a rich aunt to an awkward boss, Charlie Devoter was your man.

He was, if you like that kind of thing, good clean fun.

When Gerard returned to the table, he looked anxious. He told Hope, a trifle pompously, that he had an urgent business appointment and would have to run her home.

She took her congé so happily I felt she'd probably got something more exciting lined up for the rest of the evening.

But, just before they left, he muttered to me, in a somewhat melodramatic side-whisper, that he would be so grateful if I'd meet him in the lounge in ten minutes.

He was back in exactly ten minutes—a punctual, tidy-minded young man.

“That phone call I had—it was from one of the other competitors. Elizabeth Brown——”

Elizabeth Brown . . . the nice little thing at the end of the queue.

“She wants me to meet her at the end of the pier at ten-fifteen. Saunders, I'd be so grateful if you'd come along. . . . Some of these women are a trifle embarrassing.”

So—I came along.

The pier show had just finished and it wasn't the kind of night for lingering embraces under the moon. When we reached the end of the pier, there was no one but a solitary fisherman in a large mackintosh.

Then I saw that the fisherman was Elizabeth Brown.

I'll never be sure whether she saw us first or not. But suddenly she flung off the mackintosh, climbed the railings and poised herself to jump.

“Get down, you fool,” I said

Gerard grabbed her and pulled her to safety.

“Why did you do that?” he asked, looking at her with remarkable interest.

She burst into tears and sobbed out an incoherent story about her brother's disgrace. Ten pounds occurred frequently in the story. We managed to find one of those promenade shelters which wasn't full of courting couples, and she sobbed out her story. She had been desperate. If she had won the beauty contest, the prize was a tenner. Since she didn't, death seemed the only solution.

But she had taken the trouble to ask Gerard to meet her before the deathly encounter. One way and another, I thought that Elizabeth Brown was as phoney as they came. But Gerard was completely bowled over. This was a nice little thing he could protect and inspire and be very tough over.

Anyway, after much bandying to and fro, since she wouldn't accept the cheque for a tenner there and then, he arranged to take her home and meet her for a chat in the morning.

When we got back to the hotel, I thought I ought to tell him she was phoney. He said it was a pity I was such a poor judge of character, and we parted coolly.

However, when I saw him next

morning in the lounge about eleven, I was evidently forgiven. He told me that he had seen Elizabeth and she had agreed to accept the cheque. In return, she had insisted on working for him part-time as a typist when they returned to town.

That seemed to be that. Little Elizabeth, I thought, knew her onions.

I forgot the whole incident until a couple of weeks later, when I ran into Gerard in Regent Street.

He looked ghastly—white, tired, strained, ten years older.

“What on earth’s the matter with you?” I asked.

“Everything,” he said dramatically; “I’m a washout—a failure.”

I took him into a pub and got a couple of drinks down him in the hope that that might help. It did—but not much.

“Come on,” I said, “tell Uncle Peter.”

“Pete”—he turned agonized eyes on me—“writing a book is one thing. Dramatizing it is another. Here I am, with people clamouring for the script and I’m stuck—stuck.”

“Get a ghost writer in to do it for you,” I suggested. “After all, play-writing is a specialized form.”

“I don’t want anyone else to touch it,” he said rather pettishly, adding, with an acute glimpse of business acumen, “I’d have to pay ’em, wouldn’t I?”

“Yes. But that’s better than killing yourself.”

“The film script isn’t so difficult,” he said, “they only take a synopsis, and I expect they’ll hack the whole thing to blazes, anyway. It’s the stage

play. . . . Old Coram says there’s thousands in it for me—here and in the States.”

“If I were you, I’d let old Coram, whoever he may be, find someone to write it for you. You’d get the kudos, and you’d get most of the cash.”

He brightened, but the sun of his radiance soon faded.

“I can’t do that. It would be letting Elizabeth down. She’s been so wonderful. Every evening since I got back from Poolston, she’s come round to the flat and done the typing for me.” He sighed. “Not that there’s been much to type.”

“Look,” I said, “perhaps I know more about the mechanics of play-writing than you do. Let me have a look at what you’ve done so far. No charge,” I added hastily. You didn’t spend much time in Gerard Mapperley’s company without realizing that he didn’t enjoy parting with money.

He jumped at my offer. We went then and there to his flat. Elizabeth was busily typing away at a small side-table in Gerard’s magnificent sitting-room. I asked after the erring brother, who was, it seemed, doing very well as a car salesman now, and all because of Gerard’s ten pounds.

What I noticed most about the set-up at the flat was the library. Dozens and dozens and dozens of books on crime around the room.

Gerard explained. He felt he couldn’t use the same case histories for the play as had appeared in the book, since they were too well known. So there he was, browsing through every murder in fact and fiction for the last fifty years.

"Elizabeth's been so helpful," he told me, giving her a fond smile, "she brings these books for me on approval and I read what I can. Of course I do buy one here and there that might be useful as a standby."

"An absolute find, our Miss Brown," I said.

Elizabeth obviously didn't care for me.

Looking at the welter of typescript on the table, I could see that Gerard had been pretty busy, even if he had achieved little.

"You can't wade through this tonight," he said. "I know—come down for the week-end to my cottage. There's some good fishing and I've got a boat."

I went down for the week-end, and it was then I had the first glimpse of the masterpiece. In my job as publisher's reader I've waded through some duff stuff in my time. But this was indescribable.

Murder for the Million had sparkled from the first page. It got you, it shocked you, shook you, tickled you and left you breathless. But this effort—it was pathetic.

I stared at Gerard as he asked me, quite cheerfully now, what I thought of it.

The average amateur, we know, hasn't any idea how to judge his own work. He revels in what he thinks to be a clever twist of a plot. He pounds home the idea till it screams at you. Which was exactly what Gerard had done. But it was all wrong. He was no amateur. He'd written a book which had sold in its thousands and thousands.

"You're a good novelist," I told him, "but no dramatist, I'm afraid."

"Elizabeth thinks it's grand now. A great improvement."

Maybe. But Elizabeth could be stringing him along for a host of reasons.

"You're in love with her?" I asked.

"I am. She's such a brave little thing. That attempt at suicide wasn't really *her*. It was just that she was desperate, poor sweet."

He smiled beatifically. "You see, Peter, that's why I must do this play myself; why I can't farm it out. It's something we're building together, Elizabeth and I. . . ."

When they're that far gone, you can't help them.

Fortunately, next morning it looked good for a sail. Gerard said he'd just slip down to the village for some food.

"Parcel up those books, will you?" he asked. "Some Elizabeth sent down for me from the shop."

"Shop?"

"Surely I told you. Elizabeth works for Chattering's the book-sellers. That's how she has access to all the new books. And of course"—he smiled modestly—"they like to have my name as a customer. . . ."

Since they seemed to have few sales, I couldn't quite see that point. But I did as he asked and parcelled up the books. There was paper and string ready, and Elizabeth had also sent him a neat pile of printed labels bearing Chattering's name and address. "Elizabeth is so efficient," said Gerard.

We sent off the books and made

our way down to the boat. It looked like being a good week-end. Only it wasn't. We hadn't been on board the boat for more than an hour when I was as sick as a dog. I went on being sicker and sicker.

Gerard was most concerned.

"It must have been that tin of fish last night," he said. "Did you notice if it had a bulge in it?"

I didn't. I hadn't. I was in no condition to care.

We returned to the cottage, and for the rest of the day I lay about, feeling half dead. Since I didn't feel it was fair to Gerard to burden him with my nausea, I went back to town early next morning.

He asked me down, however, for the following week-end. After an excellent supper of freshly boiled ham and salad, I settled down to read the manuscript. It was still, not to put too fine a point on it, bloody. With relief I turned to the latest batch of crime fiction which Elizabeth had sent down that week.

When he asked me my opinion of the play, I put him off. After all, I couldn't help feeling sorry for the bloke.

Next morning we decided to get that sail we'd been cheated of the previous week-end.

I reminded Gerard he'd said something about getting those novels back to London. He packed them while I cleared our breakfast dishes, and we posted them on our way down to the boat. A really big batch it was this time; certainly Chatterings weren't making much money out of our Gerard.

This time we didn't even get as far as the boat. We hadn't gone five hundred yards from the village before Gerard said he was going to be sick.

He was so desperately ill that it had me worried. I couldn't work it out at all; there'd been no canned fish this week-end.

I remembered noticing a doctor's red lamp at the corner of the village street. I managed to convince the half-witted maid that it was pretty urgent, and the medico trotted along.

He took one look at Gerard and got to work with a stomach-pump.

After a pregnant spell, he told me, icily, that he thought this was a case for the police.

Gerard had recovered sufficiently to look as horrified as I did.

The doctor proceeded to go into a lot of technical details, and thoroughly blinded us with science. But we got the general idea. This wasn't food poisoning. And the doctor saw no way in which Gerard could have accidentally taken the stuff.

"I think you ought to know," I told him, "that the same thing happened to me last week-end. Only not so badly."

The doctor looked at us both thoughtfully, as if trying to decide whether we were the kind who would spend alternate week-ends trying to poison each other. Then he called in the sanitary people, and he called in the police.

Gerard and I waited. They checked on everything, but they couldn't find the source of the poison.

We gathered it was arsenic, but we weren't even sure about that. Not

very forthcoming, the authorities.

But they were not, apparently, bringing a charge against me. I was allowed to go back home on Sunday night. And, during the long hours of that night I did a great deal of solid thinking . . . because an idea was slowly dawning in my mind.

This attack was not apparently the only one Gerard had had, though the others had been more slight.

Someone didn't like Gerard, or me either. Suddenly, it seemed a good idea to do a little looking into Gerard's earlier life before fame came upon him. I did just that the following morning.

I knew where he had been living when he sold the novel, because he often compared his present luxury with Mrs. Graves's first-floor-front. So it was to Mrs. Graves's house in south-east London that I took myself that Monday.

It was a big Victorian house with respectable lace curtains. And by a stroke of luck the lady liked to talk.

I represented myself as a newspaper man writing up Gerard's early life, and she swallowed it whole. She *loved* Mr. Mapperley.

Such a nice young man . . . sent her flowers for her birthday even now. A lovely young man; the best lodger she'd ever had.

"Not," she sniffed, "like the one I had in there afore him, that Mr. Jobson. . . ."

Mr. Jobson, it appeared, had been a poor specimen. Stingy. Moody. Always grumbling.

Then he'd been inconsiderate enough to die before she could bustle

him to hospital. And after that, all the relations who'd ignored him for years came down in droves; Mrs. Graves couldn't think why they bothered. Ten pounds in the bank he had, and his effects fetched another fifteen.

But in the general spate she let slip something which made me feel I was getting near the end of the trail.

I knew what I had to do next. I left London at six o'clock, by road.

I hoped that Gerard wouldn't think too badly of me for borrowing his cottage. He wouldn't be there—he was back at the flat by now.

I knew where he always left the key for the woman who came in to clean: getting into the cottage was no problem.

Once inside, I went straight to Gerard's desk. And then I cursed, roundly. The one bit of evidence I needed had vanished. Either destroyed by accident—or removed. And I didn't think there was anything accidental about its disappearance.

I locked the cottage again, got into the car and drove up the lane. Where I turned into the main road, I saw a figure waiting by the bus stop.

"A lift to town, Elizabeth?" I asked.

I didn't wait for an answer; bundled her into the car, grabbed her handbag. She made a show of fighting, but it was no more than a show. And I soon found what I was looking for and stowed it safely into my wallet.

"Now, Elizabeth Brown," I said, "what's it to be? Gerard? Or the police?"

She looked very young at that mo-

ment. It was difficult to remember that she had tried to kill two people.

After a long time she said:

"All right then. Gerard. It'll be the police afterwards, won't it?"

I nodded.

"But you know," she said, "I never did intend to *kill* him. . . ."

Gerard seemed surprised to see us when we arrived at the flat.

I told him I was going to do the talking.

"It all concerns a manuscript," I said, "of a novel called *Murder for the Million*."

He looked as if someone had kicked him in the face. Then he said, "I never, never wanted Elizabeth to realize——"

"Don't worry," I told him, "she's known for far longer than I have. . . ."

It was very much as I expected. Gerard had found the manuscript in a cupboard which Mrs. Graves hadn't got around to turning out. Read the story; liked it. Decided there might be a hundred or so in it.

"A hundred or so," he repeated, and laughed grimly. "I didn't know it was so damned good. And once things started I couldn't stop them."

He moved to the table, and the next moment we heard the sound of tearing paper. One less play for the critics to kill.

And then it was Elizabeth's turn, to tell the story from her angle.

Uncle John Jobson had visited her mother shortly before his death. He'd hinted, broadly, that he might soon be a wealthy man.

When he died, of course, they could find no reason for his hope. All the family decided the old chap had been bats. All, that is, except Elizabeth. Knowing what she did of him, she'd somehow tumbled to the idea that the old chap had written some kind of a book; he'd played at writing most of his life. But she couldn't find the manuscript.

And then, when *Murder for the Million* appeared under Gerard's name, and she realized Gerard had taken over Uncle John Jobson's room, Elizabeth guessed what had happened. Gerard Mapperley was for it.

Somehow she was going to get in touch—and keep in touch.

"But you know, Elizabeth," I told her, "it took me a long time to tumble to the use of those nice printed labels for the bookstore. A clever touch, mixing the gum on the labels with poison. What was the lethal dose, my girl—how many parcels!"

"I didn't mean to kill him," she said again. "I just wanted to frighten him into confessing. But he never would."

That's all. Except that Gerard Mapperley made over most of his money to Elizabeth's family and went back to his study of architecture.

And—rumour may lie of course—but I have it on good authority that a certain young woman at present serving a five-year sentence for attempted murder receives a bouquet of roses every week.

They say there's one born every minute, don't they?

FIFTY MISSING YEARS

MARGARET G. ALDRED

NAME OF THE deceased?" inquired the bored clerk, his quill pen poised over the appropriate form.

"The deceased had no name," was the reply.

Yet the deceased woman—now denied the smallest right of every human being—had lived for over fifty years without a stain on her character. What, then, was her crime? She had committed no crime or her crime had not been discovered.

One can only say she was the victim of such extraordinary circumstances that the French courts were baffled by her case and the judges could come to no conclusion as to her real identity. Was she the Marquise de Douhault of impeccable character, or was she Anne Buirette, one-time inmate of the Salpêtrière, the hospital for those deranged in mind?

The story begins on October 7th, 1741, when a daughter was born to Rogres de Champignelles and his wife Jeanne (*née* de Laubrière) at their château near Auxerre. The rejoicing in the family was great—she would be a companion for her little brother and a *mariage de convenance* could be arranged. Christened Adelaide, the child was educated at a convent until on August 30th, 1764, at the age of 23, she was married to the Marquis de Douhault, a wealthy

nobleman. Not long after the marriage it became obvious that the Marquis was showing signs of incipient insanity, for during one attack he savagely assaulted an unfortunate manservant, and only by the intervention of the Marquise was the man's life saved. But in intervening the Marquise received a deep sword cut on her right breast, and this sword cut must be remembered, for it could have been a decisive clue in the story of the woman without a name.

Within two years of the marriage the Marquis was confined to an asylum, dying there after twenty-one years. During this long period his wife remained faithful to him, living at her country home, helping the sick and giving freely to charity and loved by all.

In 1784 her father died, and from that moment peace deserted the Marquise, for under his will his wife was to receive a life interest in the estate and the son and daughter were to divide the estate fairly on the death of the mother. In addition, the Marquise was to receive 40,000 francs—the remainder of her dowry.

The brother of the Marquise was avaricious and without principle, and by persuasion he made his mother hand over the charge of the estate into his hands on condition he gave her 11,000 francs a year. Some little time after this settlement had been made, the Marquise received a letter

from her mother of a disturbing nature. The mother had no money and had been forced to sell some of her jewels—"for my son has sent no money. I understand you have not received your dowry money either. Would you be willing, my dear Adelaide, to start legal proceedings with me to recover our rights?"

Upon receipt of this letter, the Marquise wrote to her brother and, getting no satisfaction, informed her mother she would be with her in Paris at the beginning of 1788. This date is extremely important in the subsequent story, for upon it the future law cases rested.

Hearing of his sister's proposed visit to Paris and guessing the reason, the brother realized he would have to restore to his mother her life interest in the estate he now enjoyed—and upon his mother's death divide the estate with his sister. In the natural course of events his sister was likely to outlive his mother unless—yes, unless there was a mishap—an accident perhaps? We have to presume these details, but it is significant that the Marquise died soon afterwards under strange circumstances—but did she die?

Early in January 1788 Madam de Douhault left for Paris, breaking her journey at Argenton where she dismissed her coachman. At Argenton was Monsieur de Lude, a great-nephew on her husband's side, and one of those interested in the estate after her—the Marquise's—death. Monsieur de Lude acted suspiciously at Argenton in the light of later events, for, on being asked by the

Marquise to accompany her to Orleans where he lived, he politely refused and within the hour had left—for Orleans!

The Marquise followed the next day, and on reaching Orleans went to Monsieur de Lude's house expecting to stay there as usual only to be told that he regretted he could not accommodate her on this visit, but had arranged for her to stay with a Madame de la Roncière—"But my dear Aunt, I must ask you to dismiss your maid, for Madame cannot accommodate you both."

With the dismissal of the maid, the last link with the woman known as the Marquise de Douhault was severed.

At Madame de la Roncière's the Marquise was taken into a ground-floor room overlooking a small courtyard, and it was in this room, according to Monsieur de Lude, Madame de la Roncière and friends, that the Marquise became seriously ill, and on January 18th, 1788, died, the cause of death being certified as from "A lethargic disease."

On January 21st she was buried, and so ended the life of the Marquise de Douhault—for three years. It is singular, but a "dead" woman rose from her grave and proved to be not only very much alive but a thorn in the flesh of all concerned with her estate. Or did another woman rise from the misery of the Salpêtrière, a woman with an extraordinary likeness to the deceased Marquise and in possession of her life story?

We now move to October 17th, 1791, when a heavily veiled woman

in mourning asked for admittance at the lodge gates of the château de Champignelles, to be told politely that no one was admitted without Monsieur de Champignelle's written order, "No one, Madame."

The woman then showed the lodge-keeper her face, and said, "I am your master's sister. You must know me, St. Loup?"

"The Marquise died three years ago," replied the man. "Come now, Madame, I do not know you. You must please go away."

The lady left without further argument, but next day she attended Mass in the church of the town, and was seen praying before the tomb of Rogres de Champignelles. As she was crying bitterly she attracted attention, and as she rose to go to her seat it was whispered excitedly that she was remarkably like the Marquise de Douhault—sister to Monsieur de Champignelles. . . . "She died three years ago, you remember? I was here in this church at the Mass for her. . . ."

After the service the excitement rose and curious people crowded round her, and then came the question: "Pardon, Madame, but are you the Marquise de Douhault?"

The answer was startling: "I am that person."

With that answer her voice was remembered. Her walk was watched, the way she moved her hands; suspicion became a certainty. To add to the mystery, the woman then spoke to several people calling them by their personal names and laughing about incidents in their childhood

which only one intimate with them could have known. The municipal authorities were informed, and the Chief of Police, as intrigued as the inhabitants, ordered an immediate inquiry to be made and any who recognized the woman as the Marquise de Douhault to declare it before the Mayor. The inquiry began on October 23rd, when ninety-six people swore on oath that the woman was the dead Marquise.

Armed with this testimony and with legal advice, the unknown woman (or the Marquise) took action against either a stranger or her brother. But the brother refused to answer the summons, and the case was brought before the Tribunal of the District of Fargeau, when not only did the woman ask for her legal share of the property but also 500,000 francs compensation. This claim may seem suspicious—perhaps the claim of an impostor—and it led to trouble, for the question was asked and had to be answered: "What have you been doing for the past three years since your supposed death?"

The lady had her answer. She published it in the form of a memoir, and it is a strange document and we shall never know if it was the truth or not.

"On January 15th, 1788," wrote the Marquise, "I was preparing to leave for Paris when Madame de la Roncière persuaded me to go for a drive with her saying it was such a fine day and the Quay at Orleans very beautiful." During the drive it would appear that Madame offered the Marquise a pinch of snuff, which

she accepted. Never has one pinch of snuff led to such complications, for immediately after inhaling the snuff the Marquise was smitten with such a violent headache she had to return home and go to bed.

Her next conscious thought was of being in a strange place—in a hospital, it would seem. Inquiry elucidated the fact that it was indeed a hospital, but not a normal one. It was the dreaded Salpêtrière in Paris, the hospital for female lunatics and criminals. The first shock wearing off, the Marquise began to recall events and remembered seeing her brother in Paris, and then—then there had been a strange man who had taken her somewhere in a closed and stuffy carriage.

On demanding to see the authorities and revealing her identity, she was told coldly: "You are Anne Buirette. You are suffering from delusions. Anne Buirette is your name."

The Marquise was a determined woman, and by bribery she managed to send a note to a powerful friend, none other than Madame de Polignac, and on July 13th, 1788, she was released.

Her first visit on attaining her freedom was to her brother, only to be ordered from his house as "a mad-woman." Her uncle, a retired army officer, said he had never seen her before and advised her to leave his house, otherwise . . . When the Marquise said she would see her mother, she was told: "Your mother is dead." A strange remark, for it would indicate the uncle had recognized his niece. It was a false statement, too, for the mother was not dead, but it

did prevent the Marquise from trying to trace her whereabouts.

Now follows the strangest part of the story. The Marquise says she went to the Court of Louis XVI at Versailles, where she was recognized and accepted without question as the Marquise de Douhault, and actually befriended by the Princess de Lamballe the friend of Marie Antoinette. She also affirmed that the King gave her money as she was penniless.

So much for the memoir. If it is true that the Marquise was accepted and recognized at the Court of Versailles, then it is a strong point in her favour, for no one deranged in mind would have survived at the Court, and no one unused to its proscribed etiquette could have remained there for five minutes without making an error.

In February 1792, when revolution was breaking over France and when in the following year all those at that Court were either dead or in exile and no longer able to be of any assistance, the case of the Marquise de Douhault was heard. For some reason it was soon obvious that the judge and the court were against the Marquise, and it was her brother—if she were the Marquise—who clinched the matter. He had drawn up a list of 144 questions, and he put them through counsel relentlessly to the woman.

Up to question 38 she was word perfect, answering without hesitation, but on the 38th question she became a woman without a name—an outcast—an impostor.

"Tell me," asked pitiless counsel in a deceptively suave voice, "when you were placed in the Salpêtrière?"

Counsel was a little tired. A simple question this No. 38, and he anticipated no trouble.

"I was placed in the Salpêtrière on January 3rd, 1786," replied the woman without hesitation.

There was uproar in the court. A babble of voices. People shouted. The case was lost.

In the silence demanded by the judge, counsel went on:

"But on January 15th, 1788, you were supposed to be at Orleans. The Marquise de Douhault died there on January 18th, 1788."

The woman is confused. Counsel presses the point. He is very much awake now.

"Anne Buirette was placed in the Salpêtrière on—the very date you have just given to us. January 3rd, 1786. How do you know that date?"

The woman stammers and counsel interrupts:

"A curious coincidence you should choose that date," he says sarcastically. "I put it to you that you are Anne Buirette and not the Marquise de Douhault, for between 1786 and 1788 the Marquise was living at her château."

The case was over.

But wait. Is it not rather odd that no one commented on the fact that the woman in the box was over 50 years of age, and yet Anne Buirette was only 28 when placed in the Salpêtrière in 1786 and would therefore be only 34 at that moment?

Where was Anne Buirette? Vanished into thin air it would seem, unless this woman standing before the

court were she. Counsel went on without pity:

"A remarkable likeness to the deceased Marquise . . . a clever plot . . . the claim for 500,000 francs . . . then . . . I put it to you that this woman is a fraud, an impostor."

The woman was not defeated. Through all the French courts she dragged her case and lost each one, and this despite the fact that it became known that twenty-one witnesses for her had been threatened. Threatened by whom? And why?

It is also curious that no one could identify this woman or produce evidence as to her birth or her family.

The case is unique in that not one single fact of a life of over fifty years ever came to light. It would seem that by admitting she had been taken to the Salpêtrière on January 3rd, 1786—and it was a curious coincidence she chose that date—she had admitted to being Anne Buirette, a woman much younger than herself.

Since Anne Buirette could not be found, it seemed obvious that this tiresome woman was she.

What do you think? Before you decide upon a verdict, let us look at some extraordinary evidence. Do you remember that sword cut the Marquise had received on her right breast all those years ago when her husband assaulted his servant? This woman had a scar across her right breast—an old scar white and puckered. It was known, too, said the wiseacres, that as a child Mademoiselle de Champignelles had been severely bitten on her left hand by a dog. There on the left hand of this unknown

woman was the scar—an old scar. On the right arm of the young Mademoiselle was the mark of a surgical cautery.

“You remember?” asked the knowing ones. “Show us the scar.” And there was the scar.

It was no use. Madame Nobody or Mademoiselle Nobody was condemned to spend the rest of her life without a background and without hope. When she died, no one could give the registrar her name. The case might indeed have been revived but

for the French Revolution, when an aristocrat would not have been tried to establish her identity but would have been placed before the guillotine.

One may well ask why the coffin of the Marquise de Douhault was not exhumed, for surely the finding of a body would have helped with the problem. But suppose both the women had had identical scars? Or suppose a strange body lay in the coffin? And suppose the coffin had been empty?



It is now sixteen or seventeen years since I saw the Queen of France, then the Dauphiness, at Versailles; and surely never lighted on this orb, which she hardly seemed to touch, a more delightful vision. I saw her just above the horizon, decorating and cheering the elevated sphere she just began to move in, glittering like the morning star, full of life, and splendour, and joy. . . . Little did I dream that I should have lived to see disasters fallen upon her in a nation of gallant men, in a nation of men of honour, and of cavaliers. I thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult. But the age of chivalry is gone.

EDMUND BURKE (1728–1797).

AN EYE TO THE FUTURE

DEREK HILL



THE LETTER sharpened edges of pain that had blurred sooner than I expected. Only an alcove of my brain had believed Margaret's clichés about the healing powers of time. Hatred, I think, might have been a strong enough acid to dissolve the ache completely; but I liked David too well for more than jealousy. Even on the day of their wedding I could not make myself rage.

And now the envelope, the writing, peeled the protective flesh of almost a year down to a jagged nerve. The words were formal, the message preposterous. As "an old friend of the family," would I call and give them my urgently needed advice?

I made "H'm" sounds aloud to convince myself I was deliberating. My answer was obvious, but Margaret's question remained inexplicable. "Friend of the family" was a curious phrase, convenient but meaningless. Since their marriage I had only seen them twice. The first had been a smiling, superficial, top-of-bus exchange, the second a more brittle restaurant encounter.

But stranger still was the suggestion that I could help them with advice. The qualities which I admired in David—his determination, his energy, his remarkable forethought—had won him Margaret. "David has

an eye to the future," she informed me soon after I introduced them. David could plan and work to his plan. My ambitions were usually vague and seldom fulfilled.

When I left the magazine to freelance, David took over my position. He also took over Margaret, though this was clearly as much to his surprise as to his delight. They must both have known I had not done well in the past twelve months, and they probably could not help feeling that David's success proved the advantages of an organized existence. Yet now my advice was "urgently needed."

I replied at once, agreeing to the date Margaret suggested. Curiosity was not the only emotion I experienced, but it was the strongest. Apart from the reason for the letter, there was much that I looked forward to discovering. After a year of marriage, either of them might have changed. Margaret might be a little graver or David rather gayer. Even their home would be new to me.

Margaret showed me into a cactus-laden room full of sharp angles. The dark hallway had hidden her face. Now my eyes darted nervously over the plain walls, searching for a point of focus, and finishing in the inevitable hard stare I was so anxious to avoid.

The lines on Margaret's face, the lines I remembered as light and deli-

cate, were scored ruthlessly deep. Powdering dust seemed to have been sprinkled in every tiny crevice. Grey and even white appeared among the auburn hair that hung like a nagging memory. And as she spoke, the gentle chin I thought I knew dropped and jutted at every syllable.

"I'm glad you came," she said. "It was very good of you. I shouldn't really have asked you, I know, but I thought you might be able to help me—or rather, David—that is, both of us."

"Isn't David home?" I asked.

"Yes, but I can't show him to you until I've explained."

I felt a frown scribble its way across my forehead. "Show him to me? Is he ill? What can I do? Why me, in any case?" I sprayed the questions wide in my bewilderment.

"These stories you've been doing lately," said Margaret, looking at her finger rubbing in the dust on the arm of her chair. "Are they true? No, I don't mean that. They can't be, can they? But all this business of what you called the cracks in the surface, these things that can't be explained. What do you really think about them? Do you"—and her eyes lifted—"do you believe in the supernatural?"

I could say, "Well, er," then pause and ponder. I could smile wisely. I could make uncompromising gestures. I could, in fact, say anything but "Yes" or "No." Margaret would want to know all I'd seen or heard of, and would probably demand proof. But all I had known were fragments, so foolish, apparently, that they

should have been forgotten the day they occurred. Yet they had stayed with me, they still woke me unexpectedly, jabbing the tenderest corners of my mind. Half-right premonitions, coincidences, dreams, dark moments, lonely shivers and whispers of fear—not enough for a single anecdote.

"Why?" I asked at length. Margaret saw I was not going to commit myself, but she showed no disappointment or annoyance. Her face seemed to belong to a neglected statue. It might crumble or become a spider's nest without her knowing.

"It's David," she said. Tears suddenly fell to her lap, but her expression remained unaltered. I wanted to grip her, shake her, hurt her, anything to shatter this dreadful mask. But as I stretched out a fierce arm, she spoke again in the musty monotone which never cracked during her whole impossible story.

"Remember how I said David always had an eye to the future? I didn't know how true that was. We'd only been married a few weeks when it started. David took over the film section of the magazine—you probably noticed. He'd always wanted the job, and we were both feeling pretty pleased with life.

"You wouldn't think a cup of tea could be a danger-signal, would you? But that was the first sign I had. David came in one evening and started making faces across the table. He said the heat had turned the milk sour and his tea was undrinkable. But I'd only just taken the bottle from the fridge. Besides, I drank mine and it tasted all

right, and you know how easily I'm upset by anything that's gone off."

I didn't speak, just sat remembering, remembering, and looking at the face before me.

"Anyway, David became very insistent about it, and we had our first row. Not much of a one, of course, but still, it worried me. It worried me so much that the next day I did forget to put the milk in the fridge and I did make the tea with sour milk. Just as I was pouring out David's cup, I realized what I'd done. And I still went on pouring.

"I thought I was doing it as a kind of retaliation against David's outburst the night before. But when he drank it, he didn't say a word. I took one sip of mine and couldn't touch it again. And when I told David, he laughed and said I was imagining things. Just to prove it, he drank my cup too. D'you know, it was nearly a week before I understood?"

"Margaret," I said, staring, still staring, at the too-tight mouth. "Do try to relax. I don't know what this is all about, but——"

"What it's all about," she repeated. "It's all about a time lapse, that's what it's all about. Don't you see. David had a lapse, a time lapse, a very personal time lapse. He tasted the sour milk the day before it was sour. Somehow he'd accidentally blundered through some kind of time barrier. For a few seconds he was living in the future."

The obvious comments died on my tongue. Margaret's steel-bright eyes told me this was not the time to interrupt.

"There didn't seem anything to worry about even then," she went on. "I thought it was an isolated instance—one of your cracks in the surface. Haven't there been all sorts of odd theories about time? The fourth dimension and that kind of thing? I decided that if I went into it deeply enough I'd probably find the answer, but somehow I never found the time. Sorry, I didn't mean that."

She didn't smile, simply apologized and then hurried on.

"A few days later David came in babbling about a Press show he'd attended. You know what he's usually like after a film, cautious, not anxious to say much until he's thought it all over. I'd never seen him so enthusiastic before.

"Then he told me the title. That was when I realized how serious things might become. You see, the film he'd so enjoyed wasn't being shown to the Press until the next day. I could see the ticket on the mantelpiece the whole time he was talking.

"This time I didn't argue. The ticket might not have convinced him, but it would have worried him unbearably. I thought it was best to ignore the whole thing and just hope that it wouldn't happen again. It did, of course. He warned me he could smell something burning in the kitchen, but he warned me twenty-four hours too early.

"It was quite a while before he admitted what was happening. He would use all sorts of bluff. Once he cursed the *Radio Times* for advertising wrong programmes, but I saw him looking at me sideways and we both

knew it had happened again. Eventually we talked it over together. The attacks, as we called them, were becoming more frequent, and sometimes engaged all his senses together. Once he thought he caught his finger in a door. He felt and heard the door hit his hand, though it actually shut without touching him. And he saw the bruise on his finger when there was no bruise to see.

"That was the first time an attack didn't come true at the right time the next day. David seemed relieved. But I felt frightened, far more frightened, especially when he slammed the door on his finger three days after he'd felt it."

As Margaret's voice whined on, harsh and cold, I studied her, desperately searching for a flicker, a single recognizable flicker, of the girl I had known. Nothing was there; nothing, that is, but a droning woman whose madness seemed to have doubled her age.

"—until we couldn't call them attacks any longer," she was saying. "There wasn't any pause between them now. David was permanently living in the future. It was all this damned planning that did it. That's what I kept telling him. But it was too late then. He was answering questions I wasn't going to ask for a week or more. And the gap kept growing. It grew into months; it seemed to double itself every day. Soon it was years. Think of that—years, years ahead of me. Only his body was with me in time."

Margaret paused, the same white gaze still masking the face I had once

loved. Words of pity were burning my mouth, but David, I felt, would need them more. He had watched this happen to his wife.

"David lost his job," said Margaret suddenly. "I heard him arguing with the editor months before he was fired. We lived on my money, despite all his arguments—arguments he put up while he was still at the office, they tell me. We tried a doctor, of course, and a psychiatrist. I overheard David discussing the results ages before I ever took him. Eventually we couldn't talk. He tried now and again, but it only showed how far the time-lapse was extending. He spoke about a present for our twelfth anniversary after we'd been married eight months."

"And now?" I said encouragingly. Surely David didn't leave her alone for long?

"And now? Well, that's why I wrote to you. You write about these dreadful things; you ought to understand them. What am I to do about David? You must be able to suggest something. You'll have to see him first, I suppose. But—but do you realize what you're going to see?"

"Of course, Margaret," I said gently—too gently. She jumped up unsteadily, glazed eyes glaring.

"You haven't believed a single word I've told you," she grated furiously. "You think I'm insane, don't you? Don't you?"

"Margaret, don't be ridiculous. Of course I believe you. I've understood too. I've even got a theory—a possible cure."

In my desire to calm her, I went

too far. Sudden eagerness twitched at the furrows of her face. I heard the word "cure" rattle in her throat over and over again.

"Please sit down," I urged her. "I'll try to explain. But first I must see David." Nothing was in my mind, nothing. But I had to divert her.

"You really are prepared then?" she asked me again. "You realize what I mean when I tell you his mind is years, scores and scores of years, ahead of his body?" She left the room without another word.

"Scores and scores of years." The phrase kept clicking through my mind. What could she mean? But, more important, how was I going to ask David to get Margaret out of the way while I explained what had happened? Probably, though, she would not return. If David was really at home, he would almost certainly meet me alone as soon as she told him I was there.

Margaret's face at the door arrested my thoughts. By the hand she led David. I was shocked. The pity I had felt for him was gone. There was not a wrinkle on his face. He looked younger and more cheerful than I had ever seen him. I stretched out a hand and murmured a puzzled greeting. He said nothing, but Margaret, to my astonishment, lifted his limp hand and forced it into mine.

"There!" she cried. "Go on, shake it, you fool. You didn't believe me, after all. I told you, I told you. Only his body is with us. His mind—his mind has gone so far ahead that—

God, can't you guess?"

"David, David," I tried to whisper. But Margaret heard. Scorn and contempt crackled across her face.

"I sent for you to help," she muttered. "I thought you might know, might understand. Look, then, if it's proof you want."

To my horror she switched off the light. For one blind instant the room was black. Then a table lamp glowed in a corner, and Margaret, quivering, carried it forward.

"See? Can you see now?" she shouted. And held the lamp towards the figure that was, must have been, should have been, David. But it wasn't David I stared at as he stood with a gash of a grin distorted in the lamp's yellow light. It was the shadow, his shadow, which lay flat, prostrate along the wall, lay while he still stood.

"Even his shadow, you see," whimpered Margaret. "His future shadow, Heaven knows how many years from now."

"It could," began another voice, a voice squeezing awkwardly through my own lips, "it might——"

"Could what? Might what?" screamed Margaret. "Are you blind? Is it possible you haven't noticed yet? Answer this, then—and tell me what I can expect next. Senses, mind, shadow, and now——" She thrust the lamp into David's unblinking face.

"What next, what next?" I heard her repeating, but her cry seemed very distant. For I was gazing, gasping at a frozen, long-dead eye.



THE KINDLY PROFESSOR

FRANCIS MERRILEES

He delighted in cruelty. It led 'him to a fate grimmer and far more cruel than any he devised for animals.

PAUL BOLITZER STOOD with his back to the fireplace, feet spread wide and hands in the pockets of his riding breeches. A wiry and arrogant figure, he glanced through narrowed lids at the wizened little person in the alcove seat.

"Your training methods do not appeal to me, Herr Professor," he said. "They are unworkable."

"But I am not a trainer! I am an animal lover." Despite his nervousness, there was dignity in the old man's voice.

Bolitzer looked down at the nondescript mongrel which lay curled at the Professor's feet.

"So I perceive," he said, "but if it was to discuss the welfare of curs that you asked me here, I must remind you that the Managing Director of the Bolitzer Circus Combine has other matters claiming his attention."

He crossed the room and seated himself on the worn sofa with an air of finality that brought despair into the tired eyes of his host. Noting that look, Paul was satisfied.

He knew much about Professor Jan Meittel and his failures, but he did not make the mistake of underrating him. Properly handled, there was something to be gained from this crazy idealist; yet his theories, futile though they were, had already attracted the sentimental Press. The danger was at present negligible; but

it must be crushed, and in such a manner as to further the Bolitzer interest. Obviously Paul's first move was to induce in the Professor a fitting state of humility; in short, to deal with him as all sensible men dealt with animals. Later he could be made to see sense.

Paul rose and put his hand on the door-knob. "You are wasting your time, Professor," he said. His glance round the shabby room clearly implied that Jan had already wasted his inheritance.

The old man rose in alarm. "You are not going, mein Herr?" he cried. "You have not yet seen my animals!"

Paul laughed. "Your animals have been bought from circuses now under my control; I am already familiar with them."

"But not—not since——"

"Not since you brought them here to spoil them, Herr Professor; that much I grant you."

During his tour of the Altgarten estate, Paul decided that Jan's collection could be an even greater advantage to Bolitzer's than he had supposed; particularly in view of the growing difficulty he experienced in finding new blood. He therefore modified his attitude to conform with a carefully conceived plan.

This plan rested on two main points. First, the Professor's fanatic devotion to animals; a devotion carried to such lengths that he actually seemed able to talk their language. Second, the man's obvious poverty.

At breakfast next morning he began cautiously, "As you know, Herr

Meittel, I was at first against your ideas."

Jan's eyes glowed. "Is it possible you are convinced?"

"Convinced is hardly the word, but I think that, with your full co-operation——"

"I will do anything—*anything* to help my beloved creatures."

Paul watched his chance, timing his words like a boxer his blows. "Kindness might, as you suggest, replace the whip. Your affinity to these animals forces me to concede that point. I will also admit (which is perhaps your ultimate aim) that kindness may in time abolish circus menageries altogether." He held his hand up to check Jan's formal protest. "I can afford to ignore that part since it cannot happen in our lifetime; *but*"—Paul's voice hardened—"you must understand that with animals already trained to the ring, it is out of the question to adopt a different policy. It could only be done by wholesale replacements, a process too costly and difficult to contemplate."

Paul watched the effect of these words, noting the distress they caused.

"I have so little left," wailed the old man piteously. "Yet I will give all if it will help you to do this."

"That will be unnecessary, provided you do as I say."

"What is it, then, Herr Bolitzer?" There was anxiety as well as relief in Jan's voice.

"You have only to let me train your animals in the way you have shown—by kindness and trust. As they reach perfection, I will exchange

them, a few at a time, till all the beasts in the Bolitzer circuit have experienced the delights of Altgarten before returning to work."

Jan looked dubious. "But once they leave here——?"

"I will sign a legal undertaking never to allow the whip or any means of correction other than words. You will be at liberty to ensure this is carried out."

"And your men? They, too, will be forbidden to use force?"

Paul could see the struggle in the Professor's face. Refusal almost certainly meant ruin; but would he agree? He might be playing a double game; there might be people in countries like England from whom he had hopes. It was time to crack the whip again.

"I am offering you the full cooperation of the most powerful circus syndicate in the world, Professor Meittel," he said. "Accept, and your life's work will be realized."

He shrugged and fell silent. Let the old fool figure to himself the price of non-acceptance.

But Jan was not yet beaten. Desperately though he needed help, he could not bring himself to trust this sudden *volte-face* on the part of one who, only yesterday, sneered at mercy and championed pain.

"I am wondering, Herr Bolitzer," he ventured, "whether you yourself, who are bred to harsher methods, can show me that it is possible for a trainer to capture the trust and affection of my animals."

It was the question Paul had waited for.

"You have a fine cheetah in your park, Professor. We will begin with him, if you please."

Jan looked alarmed. "But—but my cheetah," he stammered, "he knows me; he may not be the same with you. Yesterday when I spoke to him he told me so."

The big trainer laughed harshly, throwing out his chest. "Paul Bolitzer is afraid of *nothing*, mein Herr. All I ask is an empty room and the cheetah." He spread his large, powerful hands. "I carry neither whip nor pistol. I ask you to leave me alone tonight in an empty room, with your cheetah. Tomorrow at dawn you shall judge how far our friendship has progressed."

Jan still showed reluctance, but this time it was on Paul's account. "Let me at least remain with you until he has fed."

"Fed!" Paul's amazement was well simulated; the ridiculous old fool was playing right into his hands. "Fed!" he repeated. "Surely your experience tells you that the first and most vital step towards a harmonious evening is that I feed him myself!"

It was a good-sized room, used, as the barred windows indicated, for housing new arrivals at Altgarten. There was no furniture, and a blue bulb provided the only light.

In a far corner lay the cheetah, a glorious animal whose tremendous hind-legs could launch it twenty yards and more in a single bound. Its head, smaller than a leopard's, rested on its forepaws, and its tawny skin displayed well-marked spots,

each separate from the next, instead of the rosettes of leopard or panther. These, with the non-retractable claws and canine fangs, showed it, to Paul's practised eye, as a perfect specimen of its kind. Its condition was far superior to the mangy aspect of menagerie animals.

As Paul came in, it raised its head and sniffed the meat he carried; then, recognizing a stranger, it emitted a low purring growl, indescribably menacing.

Paul immediately threw it some meat. Whilst it ate, he took from his pocket an envelope and liberally sprinkled the remaining meat with a fine grey powder.

For perhaps ten minutes Paul Bolitzer watched the drug take effect. Then he sprang. In that instant he became a beast himself, not as beautiful or as noble as the cheetah, but infinitely more savage. His body tautened like a ship's hawser and his face contorted with sadistic fury. For him this was the supreme moment, this subjugation of a more powerful animal.

The cheetah, its will-power strangled by the drug, was even more paralysed by the man's blazing, hypnotic eyes. Writhing but silent, it endured whilst Paul struck. His blows were delivered with the edge of the hand, and each one was scientifically calculated to induce acute agony.

"Stand up! Walk! Jump! Lie down!" Enforcing every order with excruciating pain, Paul drove the cheetah till its spirit yielded and it was totally obedient to his will.

When dawn came, Jan found them together, the man asleep with his

head pillowed on the wild beast—a study in mutual love.

Suave and composed, Paul Bolitzer rose to greet him. "I begin to agree with you, Professor," he said. "Kindness brings very satisfying results."

Able on successive mornings to show the delighted Jan an example of his policy, Paul felt he was well on the way to acquiring the whole stock of Altgarten. With six or seven weeks' more training, these animals would make a noble addition to the Bolitzer menageries. Already he had a cheetah, a grizzly bear, and, rarest of all, a young gorilla. Things were going to plan; nor had he any objection, when the larger animals were finished, to trying his hand on smaller game.

"They are so timid," said the old man, fondling a baby rabbit; "if you can win over these, too, then indeed I will be content."

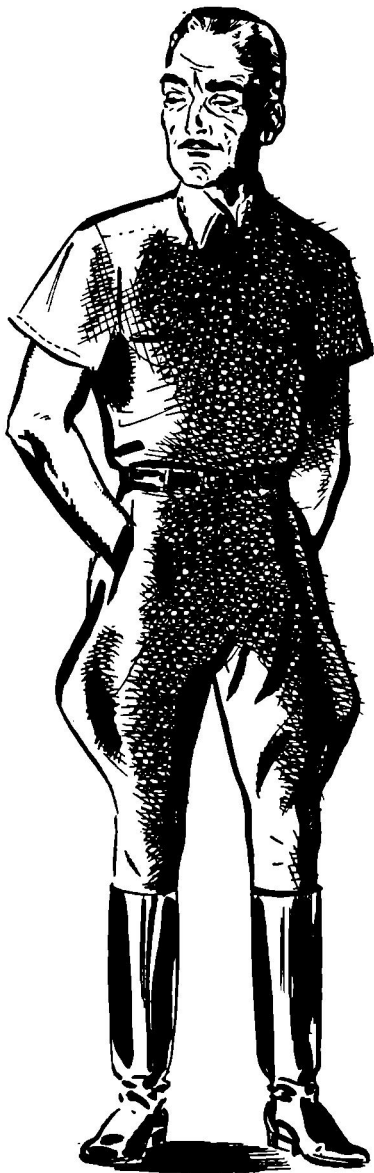
"Put them all in together," laughed Paul. He could afford to humour the poor fool now that he had gained his confidence. Besides, though worthless for the sawdust ring, rabbits and kittens and such vermin were useful for experiment. This admirable new drug compelled obedience without loss of action. If ordered to keep quiet, a subject would do so even under torture. It would be progressive to explore the degree of pain a rabbit could withstand.

An idea came to him. He might try the same on Meittel's dog! Paul chuckled at the notion. He had hated that mangy cur from the very start; a worthless mongrel to growl and

snap at the head of Bolitzer's! It was the grossest impertinence and should be treated as such. Moreover, he had twice caught it outside the door when he was instilling "kindness" into other animals. A more imaginative man would say it spied on him. Rubbish! Meittel's boast that he understood what animals said was mere nonsense. Yes, it would be extremely satisfying to have that insolent dog for a night's entertainment.

"I, Paul Wolfgang Bolitzer, do hereby promise and agree. . . ."

As he read it, Paul could hardly keep a straight face. It was such an old, old game, and the Professor obviously thought it was impressive and binding. Napoleon, Alexander the Great, Hitler—everyone except those smug hypocrites across the



Channel — had played it, and now here was he, Paul Bolitzer, doing the same!

Outside in the huge red-and-yellow Bolitzer conveyor vans was as fine a collection of wild animals as ever strutted through a game reserve. Tomorrow they would be on their way to the training grounds, and all he had to do was write his name under this jargon. As for the Exchange Clause, whereby he was supposed to surrender a like number to Altgarten, there would be "Administrative Difficulties."

In the meantime the Professor was squirming with delight.

"It is the greatest moment of my life, my dear Herr Bolitzer. It is the consummation of my entire existence! I can never thank you enough. Never!"

The old man got

up and trotted about the room, fingering trifles on the mantelpiece, opening and shutting drawers.

Paul smiled. He recognized the symptoms. Weaklings always acted the same when they thought they'd won. They wanted to load you with presents, completely forgetting you yourself had a share of the bargain. Well, there was not much in this old barrack worth the taking—unless the fool lost his head completely and gave away the entire estate! That certainly might be useful!

Jan had taken out a heavy gold watch of ancient design, and was regarding it thoughtfully. He seemed about to offer it; then he shook his head, smiling to himself as though a better idea had occurred to him.

He came up to Paul with his hands behind his back, rather like a child about to give a Christmas present.

"Have you ever travelled in Africa, mein Herr?" was his rather surprising question.

"I have enough to do in Europe and Russia," Paul answered, "without bothering with other continents; though my agents are of course everywhere."

"Then my little plan will appeal to you the more," crowed Jan. "You have done so much for me that I cannot let you go without a very special present. But if you do not know Africa, it is likely you do not know the Nchefu?"

"Never heard of it, unless of course I've met it under a different name."

"It is not easy to make friends with the Nchefu," went on Jan excitedly. "For that reason, and because I feared

to interrupt your wonderful success with other creatures, I have not introduced it to you. But I can say this: no circus, no menagerie and no zoo since the world began has ever possessed the Nchefu. If you can succeed where others fail, it is yours. I ask nothing in return."

Paul strove to hide his eagerness. Every specimen the Professor had so far produced had been outstanding. Obviously, despite what he said, the old man was reluctant to part with this final creature, whatever its name was. That he had made the offer argued a state of mental exhilaration which might not endure. The opportunity was one he must on no account miss.

"I have little doubt we will make friends," he said.

When Paul entered the "Kindness Chamber" it was empty. The Nchefu, as Meittel jokingly put it, preferred to arrive later than its guest. Paul lit a cigarette and prepared to wait, his mind pleasantly occupied with plans for the future. Mentally he rearranged his chain of circuses, deciding who should have charge of the bear and the cheetah, and how much time he should spend on the Malayan black leopard (a great find that!), and how best to present to the public the terrifying aspect of his new gorilla. A touch of electric current in the cage bars might help to work that gentleman into one of his spectacular rages.

He finished his cigarette and threw it down, stamping it out in the yellowish disinfectant that lay in pools on

the floor. It was sticky, treacly stuff, and he cursed as it clung to the sole of his smart riding-boot.

Hurry up, Jan! Let's have a look at this Nchefu of yours. Difficult to tame, is it? I'll soon see to that. He fingered the package in his pocket, savouring in advance the joy of crushing all resistance out of the new creature, as he had crushed it out of the others, including Jan Meittel's cur, and for that matter, Jan Meittel himself. Come to think of it, Meittel must be a precious fool not to have spotted what was going on! That dog of his had a couple of teeth missing, not to mention a dislocated leg. He had set the leg, of course, but even so. . . .

Then there was the bear; Paul really thought he had overdone things with the grizzly, when it moaned instead of licking his hand next morning.

A slight scuffling sound attracted his attention. The night was exceptionally quiet; it might be a breath of wind in the trees—except that the window was shut. The shuffling, whispering sound continued. It seemed to come from the corner of the room, the corner remote from the door. Paul noticed that the pool of disinfectant in that corner had for some reason turned black. Odd that; other pools seemed to be turning black, too, a glistening, shiny black; or was it this bluish half-light that deceived him? And now he saw that the pools were not only darkening but were growing in size and were sprouting black ribbons which joined together. The black ribbons throbbed and

wriggled; also there were small isolated things flanking them. These things stood erect, flashing miniature horns and eyeing him with extraordinary malice. You wouldn't think it possible for such venom to be concentrated in eyes no bigger than the sharp end of a pin.

The ribbons fanned outwards and upwards, covering the floor and walls. A good many of the ants ventured across the ceiling and dropped on him. Paul remembered the Professor's words: "It is not easy to make friends with the Nchefu."

Already the advanced guard was closing in, scenting the treacle he had trodden in. A red-hot wire pierced his calf, another dug into his knee. Good heavens, the brutes were on his hands now. He was a brave man, but he could not repress a cry of disgust and horror when one of them, a huge soldier ant, settled on his lip. It stood there on its hind-legs, waving its antennæ.

He threshed madly, kicking and stamping to keep them in check till he got to the door. But the door was locked on the outside. He knew it was useless shouting for help.

Paul kept his head even then. Pausing in his mad dance, he took the drug from his pocket and scattered it on his aggressors. Some, with the fine powder in their eyes, were blinded; many ate the particles and became drunk. They staggered, throwing themselves about and flourishing their antennæ, very like intoxicated humans. Instantly they were overwhelmed and devoured by their companions.

In the brief lull so gained, Paul took his copy of the agreement and set it alight, thrusting it into the corner whence marched reinforcements. For a second they checked and milled about; then, re-forming, they marched on, over the flaming paper, regardless of casualties, till their numbers quenched the fire. Still they advanced, their feet making a phuff-phuff as they crossed the charred paper and thrust aside the bursting bodies of their predecessors. As though in revenge, the ants now doubled their attack on Paul. They swarmed on ceiling and walls, dropping on him till face and arms were a black seething mass of ants, and his body was covered by them.

Maddened by pain and loathing, Paul scrabbled at the window, shrieking for help. Ants rushed into his open mouth, choking him; they dug

under his eyelids. Blood poured from countless tiny wounds as they were joined and enlarged into jagged cavities. The blood brought more ants.

Professor Jan Meittel opened the black-and-yellow vans, and waited whilst the last of his animals limped out. "My poor friends," he said, "you have suffered for my folly; but perhaps he is right, this circus trainer, when he says we can gain our ends only by fear? Instead of you, let us send to his directors a token to prove him right."

The old man stooped and picked up something wrapped in a sheet. Old and feeble though he was, he had no difficulty in lifting it into the van. He smiled, patting the mongrel's head. "See, Rutter," he said, "the Nchefu do not like their old Jan to lift heavy weights; they have made him light for me."



HOMECOMING

GEORGE GOWLER

Some men just won't accept the woeful fact of a bereavement, especially when they have been through something worse than death themselves. Here George Gowler tells the gruesome tale of a sick and passionate soldier home from Burma who just would not recognise the awful transformation that time and death had brought about in his beloved.

GEORGE BLAND STOOD IN the doorway of the little cottage and stared through the gathering darkness across the Fens. A locomotive whistle sounded twice in the distance. Bland grunted and peered at his watch. "Train's coming, Ann," he called back into the kitchen.

His sister appeared and, wiping her hands on her apron, stood by his side and also gazed into the distance. Suddenly she shivered and put her arm through his. "I wonder if he's changed so very much, George?" she said.

"He's had a pretty rough time, you know, Ann," replied George. "Three months in a Burmese hospital with all that he had, and then to hear about Alice—well, it enough to change any man. And Frank is the sensitive one of the family. Not like his humdrum stay-at-home brother and sister."

Ann shivered again. "Queer, though, that he didn't want us to meet him at the station."

"I don't know," said George. "He used to like that tramp across the

fields, especially when Alice met him. Maybe he just wants to be alone with his memories of those days. I hope he doesn't dwell too much on the past, Ann."

Ann was silent for a moment, then she turned back into the kitchen. "I'll just make sure everything's quite ready. He'll be here in a few minutes."

She bustled about the table, and George, left to himself, pondered on his brother's homecoming whilst his eyes searched the gloom for a familiar figure. Soon he saw a vague shape in the lane and then the gravel crunched by the gate.

"Frank. Is that you, Frank?" he called.

"Hello, George," quietly responded the other, and then the brothers were clasping hands.

"Let's go in, Frank," beamed George. "Ann is dying to see you." They entered the kitchen, and there was a flurry of footsteps as Ann appeared and flung herself at her brother. Then, after the greetings were over, they stood back and took stock of each other.

Frank saw his brother and sister

little changed. Their strong good-humoured faces were always as he had remembered them. They saw a Frank who was obviously physically and mentally damaged. Always on the thin side, he was really bony now with dark hollows in his face where there had been firm though sparse flesh. His face was yellowed and furrowed, and his restless eyes and hands betrayed his shaken nerves. An awkward silence fell on them all as they stood regarding each other, and then Ann, with a jarring laugh, cried "Come, let's broach the flowing bowl and feast the returned prodigal." She led the way into the softly lit dining-room with the table already set for the meal.

"Sit down, Frank," said George. "Grub's all ready. We'll eat first and talk afterwards."

Frank sat down hesitantly. "I'm not really hungry, George," he said. "Just thirsty. I'd like some tea, that's all."

"Oh, nonsense," cried Ann. "You must be hungry after all that travelling."

"Not a bit hungry," insisted Frank. "I'm just thirsty. I'd like something to drink, please."

"Oh, Frank," Ann said, "and after I'd got all this in, too. Just have a little then."

He suddenly flared up. "For heaven's sake, don't fuss so. Do as I say, Ann. Something to drink."

Taken aback, Ann hesitated and glanced at George. He was staring at Frank and then gave Ann a warning look.

She recovered herself. "Oh, all

right, Frank. I'm sorry. Just some tea, then."

Frank sprang up. "No, it is I who should be sorry. I shouldn't have spoken like that. I apologize. I've a terrific headache. I'm sorry I was so rude. I don't feel too good, to be honest."

Ann was immediately full of sympathy. "Of course. I was forgetting you're still convalescent. I'm so tactless; George always says I am. I'll give you some tea right now." She went on talking as she poured the tea, with George putting in a word here and there.

"Don't let me stop you eating," said Frank.

"You're not, Frank," replied George. "We don't often eat supper, Ann and I."

"So it was all for me, eh?" Frank said. "Well I'll make up for it when I've got used to being at home again."

There was a silence in the room until George broke it. "What are your plans, Frank? Have you made any?"

Frank paused. "I don't really know yet. I can't get my mind off those Burmese hospitals and medicines and fevers. I shall probably make a few calls tomorrow."

"There's plenty of time to settle down," said George. "Take it easy at first. Who will you be calling on tomorrow, Frank?"

"I think," replied the other, "I'll see the Godfreys first. Which reminds me. I've got something for Mr. Godfrey. Where is my coat, Ann? By the stairs? Just a minute, I'll get it."

He left the room and Ann spoke hurriedly to George. "He is strange,

George. What are we to say about Alice? We've got to say something about her—and he's calling on her parents tomorrow. And I can't mention her, George—I can't. He thought so much of her."

"I don't like it any more than you do, Ann, but we'll have to—ssh——"

With a puzzled expression, Frank re-entered the room. He stared at them in turn. "I say," he said. "What did I go to the stairs for?" He laughed uncertainly. "Silly of me, wasn't it? I found myself looking at my overcoat wondering what I was doing there."

"Why, you went to get something for Mr. Godfrey. It was in your coat," said George.

Frank looked even more perplexed. "Was it? For Mr. Godfrey? I've got nothing for Mr. Godfrey. Funny I should say that."

George passed it off. "Oh, think nothing of it, Frank. We all do peculiar things at times. Sit down and rest."

Frank sat down and accepted a cigarette, and Ann began to clear the table and, to relieve the tension as much as anything, chattered away as she worked. "There's a lot of local gossip to give you, Frank. Fifteen Acres Farm has changed hands again and there's going to be street lighting in the village and—oh yes, we've had burglars. Or very nearly did, but he got frightened and ran away when George shouted at him. And, of course, our policeman, old Stevens, never found him. We phoned him right away, too. And Mrs. Bradley has had a new baby. What else, George?"

"Can't think of much else," said

George slowly, "except that they're thinking of shutting the branch railway between Oulton and Hilton Fen. Not enough traffic. I shall have to get a car then, I suppose. You drive, don't you, Frank?"

There was no response and George glanced at his brother.

Frank was staring wide-eyed straight in front. There was a smile playing on his lips. They opened and began to shape soundless words, as his face brightened and became animated as if he was holding a ghostly conversation with some unknown person.

George looked around for Ann. She was standing directly behind him and staring fixedly at Frank. George stood up and took a step forward, and Frank immediately stopped his mouthing. He turned to the others, and in a normal conversational voice said, "Oh, George, I forgot to ask before but—what time did Alice say she would be here?"

George shivered and he felt Ann's fingers dig deeply into his shoulders.

"Frank," he stammered, "Frank. What are you saying, man? What are you saying?"

Frank looked bewildered, and gazed first at George and then at the statuesque Ann. "Eh?" he asked blankly. "Eh? What was I saying, then?"

George hesitated a moment, then plunged. "You were talking about Alice, Frank. As if you were expecting her."

"As if I were expecting her?" Frank echoed. He suddenly wheeled on the other two. His face was white

and drawn. "Shouldn't I be expecting her, then?" he shouted. "Do you think any moment of the night and day passes without I expect her? I see her face, hear her voice, feel her breath—always. Always! Do you understand?" All at once he crumpled up in a chair and sobbed unashamedly. This was something Ann and George could understand, and together they tried to soothe and comfort him. Eventually they seemed to succeed, and Frank became more composed and behaved in a more natural manner.

The last hour before bedtime passed in almost normal talk, with Ann and her brother carefully guiding the conversation away from Alice. It was Frank who came to the subject as he stubbed his cigarette preparatory to going to bed. "The Godfreys—they interred Alice in their vault, I suppose?" The Godfreys' family vault—a relic from generations past, when the Godfreys were prosperous landowners—stood at the very edge of the shrunken acres which contained their home. Poor though they were, they had a stubborn pride which made it unthinkable that any Godfrey could be buried except in their own private vault.

"Yes," replied George. "Alice was placed in there. I thought I had told you in my letter."

"I suppose you did. I forget easily now. I shall go to the vault in the morning. I must see her. It will be cold and dank in there." He turned to them and gave them one of his old-time grins. "I'm dead tired. You must excuse me if I go to bed now. No, I

know the way. As well as you do, you know. Good night, Ann. Good night, George."

They heard him run lightly upstairs to his old room.

George looked uneasily at Ann. "I don't like the look of him, Ann. He's more ill than I thought he would be. He'll want some careful nursing."

Ann didn't reply for a minute and then she said slowly, "He frightens me, I think. He talks—strangely." She shivered in front of the dying fire. "I'm going to bed, George."

"And I," he said.

They went up together and paused by Frank's door. There was no sound from within, and they whispered "Good night" and went to their respective bedrooms.

Ann lay wide awake for a long time, and was just becoming drowsy when she heard a sound from downstairs. She sat up and tried to place it. It was the front door of the cottage closing. Seconds later there was the sound of gravel crunching as footsteps receded from the house. Unhurried, purposeful footsteps with no attempt at concealment. She slid out of bed and peered down from the open window. The night was black and thick with drizzling rain, and she could see nothing. But someone had left the house and that person was—Frank!

Scrambling into her dressing-gown, she sped to George's room across the landing. She rapped urgently on his door, and George's voice responded so quickly she knew he could not have been asleep. She entered his room and he spoke first.

"I know, Ann. I heard it, too. I couldn't sleep." He looked pale and tired and his eyes shifted uneasily around the room. "Where can he have gone to, Ann? I'm afraid for him in his state."

But even as they stared at each other, they both knew the destination of their brother. "George," she whispered, "George. He can't be going there. Not there! Oh, George, no."

"He is. You remember his words tonight? 'I must see her.' Her! He is going to see her. Do you understand?"

She shrank from him. "No. No. I don't want to understand. It isn't true. He would be mad. Alice died three months ago."

He hastily reached for his clothes. "I must follow him, Ann."

She ran to her room to dress with trembling fingers. When she reached the kitchen George was already struggling into his raincoat. She began to follow suit.

"You must stay here," he said sharply. "This is a job for me."

"And me," she replied. "Frank is my brother, too."

"Ann. You must stay here. I want you to telephone Stevens. Get him to come over here at once. I think we shall need him before the night's out. Please don't argue. There is no time to lose. Isn't the vault kept locked?"

"Yes. But the key is hanging in a crevice nearby. Frank knows where it is."

He opened the door. The rain was falling steadily, and he pulled his collar up. "Phone Stevens right away," he said, and went out into the night.

Ann stared wide-eyed after him, one hand at her throat, and then slowly went to the telephone.

George switched on his torch in the lane. Although he knew every yard of the way, the driving rain cut visibility to a few feet. He reached the main road that led to the station and carried on in a large semicircle until it passed the boundary of the Godfreys' place, a total of about two miles. There was also a much shorter path across the fields that led directly there. George hesitated by the stile that commenced the track, for it was little more than that. "Which way?" he muttered. "The road or this?" He bent and examined the stile in the beam of the torch. There was a fresh smear of mud on the step and another on the top bar. George climbed quickly over. Frank had gone by the track and must be nearly there by now.

Half-running and half-slithering, he squelched through the mud. Sometimes he slipped into the deep furrows on either side, for the track ran through a ploughed field, and once he fell heavily. He clenched his teeth with pain as his ankle turned sharply, but he stumbled on without dropping his pace. His eyes were glued to the narrow path, so much so that it wasn't until he had reached the end of the field that he realized that the rain had eased off and through breaks in the heavy clouds the stars were shining down on a sodden world. The track now led through a piece of meadowland sloping steeply upwards. The clay and mud on his boots were weighing heavily now, and in spite of

himself George was slowed down to a laboured walk. Up through the soaking grass he still followed the track to a black copse in the far corner of the meadow. He felt his heart hammering away, and when he did finally stumble into the little knot of trees, he was compelled to call a halt whilst he leant against a tall elm. He gasped for breath whilst the water from the leaves dripped mournfully to earth. He was half-way there. Frank would have been at the vault for at least twenty minutes. At that thought, he forced himself to go on. He threaded his way through the trees, and then moved slightly downhill to the swiftly flowing dyke, spanned at that point by an old ramshackle wooden bridge. As he came into the open, he saw the cutting through which the drain-waters of the low-lying fens swirled on their way to the sea. The water moved fast and deep as George crossed the wooden bridge, his feet echoing on the wooden slats. He turned sharply to the right to pick up the track again on the last lap of his grim race. He found it and moved steadily onwards and upwards. Half-way up the last long field now, with a hundred yards to go, George looked up in the direction of the vault. It stood on a ridge, and the lightening sky faintly outlined its squat blackness. George was staring at something at the base of the blackness.

"A light," he panted. A steady yellow light burned. He had forgotten that electric light had been fitted into the vault. He had been imagining Frank fumbling about with a torch in

the vault, but with electric light installed . . .

He breasted the last hillock. A few yards brought him to the half a dozen stone steps leading down to the open doorway. A shaft of light came from inside the vault. With a pounding heart, George descended the steps slowly, and then stared into the chamber. The vault was octagonal in shape and only a few yards in diameter. Around the walls were placed six stone tables. On each was a pall-covered coffin, surmounted by a wreath of ever-lasting flowers. All but one had obviously been there many years. The exception was the one that stood by the farthest wall. By the side of the opened coffin was the dishevelled figure of Frank, in his arms, the shrouded remains of Alice. He was clasping the body closely to him, his white, contorted features staring into her face. He was making moaning noises to the thing in his arms, and as he stroked the dark hair that hung long and dank from the head, some of it came off in his hand.

A cry of horror came from George and aroused Frank from his ecstasy. He raised his staring eyes to those of his brother standing motionless in the doorway. He clasped the lolling figure closer to him as angry apprehension swept his face. "What do you want?" he cried shrilly. "Why have you followed me?"

"Frank, Frank," whispered George. "Put her down, man, put her down. You don't know what you're doing. Put her down. Come home with me. Alice is dead."

"Dead? Dead? My Alice dead?"

Oh no, she's not dead." He looked down at the ghastly face. "Not my Alice. Asleep, eh, Alice? Only asleep, that's all." He suddenly stepped forward in a rage. "I know why you say that. You want her, don't you?" he shouted. "You have always wanted her. You tried to get me out of the way so you could have her. Well, you won't. You won't." His voice went up into a screech as he advanced step by step towards his brother. Then exultantly he shouted, "Get out. Get out. You won't stop me now. We are to be married, Alice and I. Married, do you hear? Out of the way."

He ran forward with his burden, his eyes burning. The dark tresses brushed against George's hand, and then Frank was up the worn steps and standing for a moment outlined against the sky before he disappeared. Shakily, George followed. He saw his brother heading in the direction of the footbridge and slipped and slithered down the wet slope in pursuit.

Gradually he cut the gap between them to a few yards. "Frank, Frank," he gasped. "Stop."

His brother glared back at him over his shoulder and ran faster. George made one last great effort and got within arms'-reach of Frank. He cried out again as Frank's feet pounded hollowly on the wooden boards of the bridge. Again Frank looked back and shouted something unintelligible. As he did so a loose fold of the shrouded figure impaled on the rough handrail and jerked living and dead to a halt. Unable to stop, George gave a cry of disgust as he blundered into Alice, and he put

up his hands instinctively to ward her off. For a moment the three figures swayed against the rickety handrail of the bridge. Then it splintered, and there was a cry as one of the three plunged into the swift-moving waters beneath. . . .

For the third time Ann took off the receiver of the old-fashioned wall telephone.

"Give me 157, please. Oh, quickly, please, quickly." Her eyes moved restlessly around the room as she awaited. "Oh, Mrs. Stevens? It's Ann Brand again. Your husband. He hasn't come yet. He left—when? Ten minutes ago. Oh, thank you, Mrs. Stevens. I'm frightened—and nervous. No, George hasn't come back yet. Nor Frank. I feel so much alone here." Ann desperately hoped that Mrs. Stevens would understand and keep talking. Talking about anything—anything. Just so that she could hear a voice. "It's such a relief to be able to talk to someone over the phone," she went on. "Pardon? Oh. . . . I'm sorry. I didn't realize I had called you from your bed. No, please go back. I'm so sorry. I shall be all right. Mr. Stevens will be here soon. Yes, I'm sure. Good night, Mrs. Stevens," she finished dully. "Good night."

She replaced the receiver slowly. Mrs. Stevens hadn't understood. Ann took a deep breath. "I won't give way," she said aloud. "I won't." She bustled about the room for a minute or two, pretending to tidy and straighten the furniture. Then suddenly she broke down and threw her-

self into a chair facing the door. "Oh, hurry, George, hurry," she sobbed.

And then she stiffened and stared at the door. Outside on the gravel there was the sound of slow deliberate footsteps accompanied by a dragging noise. She arose from her chair, staring unblinkingly in front of her. The sounds came to a halt outside the door and then she heard Frank's voice.

"Only a little step now, darling. Nearly home. So tired, aren't we?"

"Frank!" whispered Ann. "Frank and—oh, God! No—no. Not that. . . ."

The door handle fumbled. "And here we are at last, my sweet."

"The door," mumbled Ann. "The door. Must keep it out." She took an uncertain step to the door and then stopped as it opened a little.

"Ann," called Frank. "Ann. Here we are, tired and cold and hungry. I've brought Alice home. Come on in, my pet."

The door opened wide. Muddied and soaked, he shuffled into the room. The feet of Alice dragged on the floor as he half-carried, half-pulled the body along by his side. He grinned crazily at Ann. "Come on, Ann. Be nice to your sister-in-law-to-be. Give her a nice kiss now."

Slowly the two of them advanced on Ann.



When hearts have once mingled
Love first leaves the well-built nest;
The weak one is singled
To endure what it once possessed.
O Love! who bewailest
The frailty of all things here,
Why choose you the frailest
For your cradle, your home, and your bier?

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY (1792–1822).

THE OBEEAH MAN

CHESTER DICK

Illustrated by John Wood

Natives of the Caribbean roll their eyes in fear when you mention him, but he walks still, in a land where the living are detested, watching his victim rotting in the roots of the mango tree.



SO YOU ARE NEW to the West Indies, are you? Well, you will pick up things fast here. I did. And that has to do with the story I want to tell you, if you're not asleep and can hear me.

I notice you have your mosquito-net in place. It really isn't necessary. Malaria exists only in the north-western part of Dominica. There's none at all here in the town of Roseau. True, you'll find something worse than malaria on the island.

Did you ever hear of Obee? Of course not. You're too new. Nobody will tell you about Obee. Ask a native, and he'll just roll his eyes around in fright and say nothing. Ask somebody who came over from England, say, only a year or two ago, and he'll tell you to keep your mouth shut and forget you ever heard the word. But I'll tell you something, and it's a warning: stay away from Nicotrin Estate! That is, if you can.

Everybody on the island knows about the Nicotrin star sapphire. They'll tell you it's still somewhere on the estate. It's been common knowledge since Bayard Nicotrin fled from Dominica in 1789, leaving his brother Edouard up on the estate. Some fool

got up enough nerve to visit Edouard about a year later. The story he brought back has kept everybody away from the place since. And no one else saw Edouard after that.

I came here in the summer of 1952. By that time you'd think Obee would have been forgotten. But Dominica doesn't change much. There's not much difference between the island as it is now and as it was two hundred years ago. I found that out after doing a little reading of some of the old books here, written by the first French settlers. Yes, I read and speak French almost as well as English, and I learned a fair amount of patois. You know all the natives in the Caribbean speak patois, which is more or less a combination of French, Spanish and some English.

Why did I come to Dominica? You know as well as I that it's not an easy place to reach, but it was the only place left in the Caribbean where nobody knew me. Ask on the other islands about "Reckless Red." They don't call me that just because my hair is red. The police back there on Guadeloupe wanted me to leave. They couldn't prove it, but they believed I had killed a man in an argument over some money. So I had to leave.

I left some broken hearts there. The girls know a good-looking man when they see one, and many a girl stood on the pier watching my boat pull away while tears ran down her face.

When I landed here, the first thing I learned about was this old story about the Nicotrin star sapphire. Naturally I decided to go after it. But nobody wanted to tell me how to find Nicotrin Estate. As soon as they guessed what I wanted to do, they tried to argue me out of going. They didn't seem to care about my finding the sapphire. They really were anxious for me to stay away from the place because something might happen to them as a result of my attempt. However, I picked up enough information to get an idea of where the estate was, on a mountain slope to the north where the rain-forest begins.

I set out with a pack of supplies on my back. It threatened rain, but on Dominica, which has one of the heaviest rainfalls in the world, you soon get used to rain. I trudged out of town across the bridge spanning the turbulent Roseau River, past the lime orchards, then began the long, tedious climb up through the foothills. The overcast sky became darker, but still the rain held off. I sighted my first landmark, three tall, ancient palm trees on the brow of a hill, when the first rain-drops began to fall. Then the sky opened and a torrent fell down. By the time I reached the palm trees, I was dripping wet.

Ahead of me twisted a section of an old French road: cobblestones laid neatly together to form a narrow road down which the produce of

coffee and sugar from Nicotrin Estate had been carried to sailing-ships waiting in the distant harbour. Though the rest of the road had long since disappeared, this section remained remarkably intact.

I hurried over the cobblestones, and followed the outline of what had been the rest of the road. It wound up a steep slope, crossed a ridge and dropped into a shallow valley choked with forest growth. At the far end of the valley I came upon a lichen-covered, very old stone wall tumbling down in places. The impression of a trail I had been following led between two massive gateposts and past the dripping trees to a slight elevation. There I caught sight of the centuries-old Nicotrin house.

Even at that distance it had a gloomy, depressing look. It was a massive structure, built of blocks of stones blackened by time. Occasional windows, set deep in the stone, broke up the rough expanse of the walls. An arched doorway supported the left partner of what had once been a double door. Made of heavy planking, now rotting away, that half of a door sagged outward towards the other half mouldering on the wet stone of a courtyard. As I approached the building, I found vines and air-plants choking the windows and doorway. Black soil and crawling plants covered much of the stone courtyard, which once must have been kept clear as a drying-place for picked coffee beans. It was anything but dry now.

Despite the rain pouring down on me, I hesitated about entering the

gloomy house ahead of me. The whole place had an oppressive, evil air. Dread lurked in the shadows, and in the surrounding trees, and in the ground around me. It seemed as though Nicotrin Estate had been given a curse which would never be lifted.

With the rain trickling down my face and clothes in rivulets, I at length forced myself to cross the threshold. I passed through a square hallway and into one of the larger rooms. Dropping my pack on the slime-spotted stone floor, I glanced warily around.

The furnishings were all but consumed by jungle rot. Remnants of mildewed tapestry hung from the damp walls. Crumbling furniture made shapeless blobs on the slimy floor. In one corner, decaying, leather-bound books spilled from what had once been a bookcase. I kicked through a mouldering pile beside me, and disturbed several candlesticks tarnished almost beyond recognition and several jagged pieces of what had once been a large-glass hurricane lamp. The place reeked of dampness and corruption. As I moved about, my feet made odd, squishing sounds on the encrusted floor. In the corner where the books had fallen I picked up a thin volume, but lost it immediately because the slick leather binding slid out of my hand.

The book fell open as it struck the floor, revealing yellow pages mouldering at the edges. The pages were covered with entries made with a heavy hand. Curious, I picked up the book with a firm hold and carried it

to a window. The words were in French, and seemed to make up a diary. On a flyleaf I found the legend: "Journal of Edouard Nicotrin," also written in French.

I gave a start. Here in my hands I held the diary of the master of Nicotrin Estate. There must be clues in it, I reasoned, that would give me an inkling of where the ring with its star sapphire lay hidden. In the weak light coming in through the window I read on. I skipped the front portion of the book, believing that the last entries to be made would offer the surest clues. I translated the French into English slowly, hampered by the old-fashioned manner of writing, with its many flourishes, and by some archaic phrases.

Here was recorded, in the most matter-of-fact manner, cold-blooded atrocities that startled even me, and I've seen a great deal of the seamier side of life. There was that incident on Guadeloupe where I—but I wander from my subject.

Edouard Nicotrin had been a brutal master. He had sent many a labourer of his to a too-early grave in the private cemetery. Towards the end his thoughts and writing concentrated on a strange feud between him and an Obeeah Man living somewhere above him in the rain-forest. The man had been a labourer on Nicotrin Estate until he contracted yaws, and had been chased into the mountains so as not to infect the other labourers. He was a venerated Obeeah Man, and because of the hunchback he had carried since birth, the Obee charms he made were

credited as the strongest. Fugitives from Nicotrin and other estates ran to him to get Obee to revenge them on those that had done them injury, for the purpose of Obee was to bewitch people or consume them by lingering illness or torture.

Edouard Nicotrin found that the Obee worn by many of his labourers was directed against him. He cited an instance in which a lackey of his had come to him with news of a powerful Obee that had just been made and was now being worn by a truculent labourer. The lackey had seen the Obeeah Man prepare it from grave-dirt, hair, teeth, human fat, feathers and certain roots. The Obee had been stuffed into a horn, and the Obeeah Man himself had slung the horn

around the labourer's neck. And Edouard Nicotrin's name had been repeated over and over again during the ceremony.

Edouard Nicotrin feared the Obee, so much so that he dared not touch a single horn worn by his labourers, though his whip felt their bare skin more and more frequently. He went on hunting expeditions into the rain-forest cloaking the mountains above him, trying to find the Obeeah Man to put him to death; but either Edouard's courage failed him, causing him to turn aside before he found his quarry, or the Obeeah Man eluded him, for Obee still continued to be made.

The last entry in the book told of a powerful Obee that had been placed in the hollow trunk of a mango tree near the house; Obee that would cause his death. Edouard's last sentence stated he was going to search the tree. The sentence had never been finished, as though he had left off writing in his haste to get to the mango tree.

I glanced up from the crumbling journal, my eyes aching, suddenly aware that evening was setting in. The book had become a blurred mass of writing, with half an empty page below the last entry. Looking through the vine-draped window beside me, I discovered that the rain had stopped and the clouds were scattering. The sun had already set; darkness was creeping over sky and earth. I put the book down and wearily shook myself. My wet garments rubbed cold and clammy against my skin. It was time I changed into dry clothes.



I discovered another room less accessible to the weather, and therefore not as damp as the first. Here I dropped my pack, opened it, peeled off my wet garments and pulled on dry ones. As I did so I thought of what I had read in the journal. The growing tension and brutality on Nicotrin Estate would explain why Edouard's brother, Bayard, had fled the island. But nowhere had I found mention of the object that had prompted my coming to this forbidding place: the ring with the star sapphire reputed to be worth a fortune. The thing to do now was to make a search through the house for the ring.

I took a candle from my pack, lighted it, and went on a tour through the mouldering rooms. I searched cabinets still fairly intact, drawers, shelves built into the stone walls, sifted through some of the debris on the floor, but found nothing. Yet I knew the ring was somewhere on the estate. With a combination of patience and luck, I knew I'd find it.

However, my candle was burning low. Several rooms had not yet been examined, but I decided to let them wait until morning when, aided by daylight, I would have a better chance of seeing what I was after. I returned to the room where I had left my pack.

Lighting another candle, I stuck it on the flagstone floor. The tiny flame only exaggerated the gloom. I threw myself upon a blanket on the floor and tried to sleep. But sleep was slow to come. Through the thin blanket I felt the sharp edges of each flagstone. The slime around me gave off a





graveyard stench. The hot air pressed close upon me, so that I ripped off my shirt the better to feel any breeze that might enter the room. Drops of moisture fell from the ceiling at intervals, striking me on the face or chest, so that soon I waited with my flesh twitching, wondering when the next drop would fall. A night insect crawled into my open mouth. In great revulsion I spat out the furry, scrambling mass; crushed it with the flat of my hand. Somewhere out in the rain-forest a nocturnal bird uttered low, mournful calls spaced minutes apart.

I shifted position, avoiding the falling drops of water, and lay watching the candle smoke rise in long, tenuous strands into the gloom. Towards midnight I fell asleep. I wandered from one oppressive dream to another. The candle had burned down several inches when I awoke abruptly.

The stillness of a cemetery lay around me. Then the sound came again, the one that had made me wake

up. A rasping sound. I couldn't identify it, but it seemed to come from somewhere outside. A quiver ran down my bare back. When I heard the sound again, I noiselessly rose, crept to the gaping front door, stared outside.

Scudding clouds let the moon shine fitfully, then swallowed it up. The black hulk of Morne Diablotin—the Devil Mountain—loomed to the left, its top hidden in the clouds. Mist swirled among the trees fronting the house. To the right the courtyard ran out to an open space in the centre of which rose the skeleton of a huge and old tree. Here and there a few leaves indicated it still lived. Airplants draped some of the bare limbs. Even at that distance I recognized it as a mango tree. The sound seemed to come from somewhere near it.

I crept towards the tree, finally stood beside it. Again I heard the sound and looked up. A branch had split and hung down. As the wind stirred it, it rubbed against a lower branch, making the rasping sound I had heard. Relieved, I burst out laughing. I flung my head back and laughed uncontrollably. And at that moment the moon came out from behind a cloud and lighted the landscape. I froze. Just above me, through a split in the tree trunk, a human eye was staring down at me!

How long I stood there, unable to move, I don't know. That glistening eye kept looking at me, held me rigid. Then the moon went behind the clouds again, and darkness hid the eye. Reason returned, and with it sudden memory of the last entry made

in Edouard Nicotrin's journal. He was on his way to a mango tree to hunt for a hidden Obee. This must be the tree; I had noticed no other mango tree on the estate. Suddenly I knew I would find the star sapphire.

I clambered up the trunk into the lower branches. The moon came out again to light my way. As I worked my way up, drops of moisture fell upon me from the airplants massed above. I would have paid no attention to them except that the drops caused a strange stinging sensation when they touched my skin. As I rubbed them away, the circles of skin they had touched felt leathery. I studied the plants, but couldn't identify them. Then I reached a hollow in the centre of that massive tree where part of the trunk had rotted away. I looked down.

The man trapped in that hollow had been dead a long time! The drippings from the airplants in the tree had preserved his body, though his clothes had long since crumbled away. A leather whip was coiled over one masculine shoulder. He had died looking out through a slit in the rotting trunk, wedged inescapably in his upright coffin. I screamed!

The screams stirred echoes from the steep side of Devil Mountain. The echoes scurried back and forth between the hills; catching up with one another, overlapping, so that it seemed a hundred lungs were screaming.

Then I got hold of myself. I was too close to success to let hysteria rob me of a fortune. The man was Edouard Nicotrin, and he must have

the ring. I reached down. Grasping a shock of hair on the corpse, I yanked viciously. The creature shifted upward, but still remained jammed in the trunk. Throwing all my strength into the effort, I yanked again. Edouard Nicotrin rose free of his coffin!

The mouldering leather whip fell off his shoulder, dangled a moment across a branch and slipped to the ground. I worked the naked corpse across two branches growing close together, shuddering as the creature's clammy skin rubbed against my own bare chest. A fetid air drifted from it. The left arm had twisted under the body. I pulled the arm free, held up its hand in the moonlight. The ring on a finger bore a huge, round stone in which a six-pointed star shifted at the slightest movement.

I lunged for the finger, grabbed the ring and tugged violently. With a brittle snap, the whole hand parted from the rest of the body! The stench rising from the open flesh sickened



me. Instinctively I let go of the hand. It slithered along a branch and fell into the hollow from which I had just extracted the body. I lunged after it. But it was too late, the hand and ring were gone.

Bitter disappointment filled me. A fortune had slipped away from me. But I would get it somehow. I had murdered a man for much less than the ring meant.

Twisting about, I slid feet first into the hollow. With my hands holding on to a limb, I slowly lowered myself. With my bare toes I felt around in the hollow, trying to reach the severed hand. Still I couldn't find it, and I lowered myself more. Abruptly the limb I clutched snapped in two, and I plummeted to the bottom of the hollow tree trunk!

I was hopelessly caught. So very tightly was I wedged that only my head was free to move. I twisted it around, discovered that by straining myself I could see out through the split in the trunk through which I had first seen the dead eye of Edouard Nicotrin. Desperately I stared out, saw only the brooding mountain, the ruined courtyard and beyond that the shadowed valley below Nicotrin Estate. Abruptly I realized that here was a land where the living were resented—no, hated!

Mist swirled in the gulf beyond the courtyard. There was a stir, a feeling in the air of something about to happen. My stomach felt as though a knife were twisting it, while my skin oozed cold sweat.

The mist thickened. It began to take on form. A shape appeared, hover-

ing over that gulf. It became human-like, and finally I recognized it as a hunch-backed, incredibly old man with a horn slung around his neck. The Obeeah Man! It shuffled through the night air until it was but a few feet away, peering at me from beneath shaggy brows all the while. And then it stopped, the bent head lifted as much as it could and the shrivelled mouth opened, revealing toothless gums. Wild eyes glaring at me, the thing spoke in patois, its voice a grating, thin mockery of human sound:

“Death alone will release you from the mango tree. And even after death this land will still hold you a prisoner. I have strong Obee and none ever escape it.”

Hate of all mankind gleamed from his small, close-set eyes. His lips drew together and he spat at me. A moment longer he crouched there beneath the dying branches of the mango tree, then retreated into the mist hanging over the gulf, became nebulous and dissolved into nothingness. Out of the miasma where he had been, Edouard Nicotrin appeared, his face haunted, his eyes incredibly despairing. His mouth twisted into sullen speech, the words were French:

“A murderer never leaves Nicotrin.”

He vanished as had the Obeeah Man. And after him followed others, but they never became more than vague shapes that bore reptilian aspects. The air swarmed with these nightmarish creatures, malevolent wraiths seething with hate for anything that lived! They were in per-

petual flight through that horror-filled other dimension that is the Obee world, where there is no time, only endless night. They roam the winds and the dark regions of space, but they cannot truly leave the unhallowed hills and mountain slopes of Nicotrin Estate. They are hopelessly chained to the soil there.

Let this be a warning to you, stranger. Do not come to Nicotrin, though you are told of the star sapphire. Yet I doubt that you will stay away. Greed is too strong an emotion to be controlled by weak caution. And you have lived dangerously and

want wealth as much as I did when I first came to the island.

Yet, stay away from Nicotrin. Leave the island by the first boat you can book passage on. Forget you ever heard of the star sapphire.

Should you go to Nicotrin Estate, you'll never return. Nicotrin leads on only to the hate-filled, shadowy world of the Obee. For evidence of this you will find the fast-dwindling remains of Edouard Nicotrin on the ground and among the branches of a mango tree there.

And in the hollow trunk you will find a dead man. It is me.



Bewildered furrows deepen the Thunderer's scowl;
This world so vast, so variously foul—
Who can have made its ugliness? In what
Revolting fancy were the Forms begot
Of all these monsters?

ALDOUS HUXLEY.

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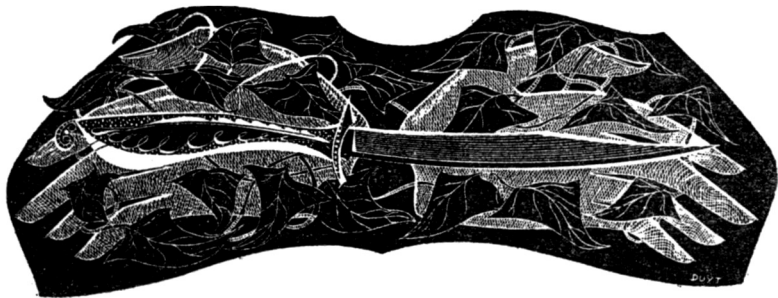
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CROOKS IN BOOKS

A review of some recent crime, mystery and detective books.

ANTHONY SHAFFER

"WHERE IS SHE NOW," by Laurence Meynell (*Collins*, 9s. 6d.).

Mr. Meynell works this very good plot of his up with beautifully measured suspense to its thoroughly convincing and satisfying climax.

The whys and wherefores (of a successful woman novelist's vanished secretary) are of the intellectual kind, but all the better for that. For once, the trick of the letter left behind by the suicide pays off.

"A CRIME IN TIME," by Miles Burton (*Crime Club*, 10s. 6d.).

A good old stalwart Crime Club whodunit. The least likely person is the answer, but the method is so diabolical in its cunning that one presumes it is impossible. If it is not, and time is taken by an intending murderer to master its every detail, the police of this country might shortly be faced with a very ticklish prob-

lem. All credit to the ingenious Mr. B.

"CLEAN BREAK," by Lionel White (*Boardman*, 9s. 6d.).

An exact, exciting, blow-by-blow description of an ingenious plan to rob the till of a Long Island race-track.

The plan is so foolproof that Mr. White is driven to the old dodge of making the flaws in the bandits' natures the cause of their undoing. It would, of course, be difficult to quarrel with a process which is at the basis of all great tragedies, but here it seems a little too contrived, and in one case, rank coincidental.

"THREE HOURS TO HANG," by Andrew Mackenzie (*Boardman*, 9s. 6d.).

A person wrongfully convicted of murder has three hours to live before execution. It is this which should, but doesn't, lend a pretty routine story of

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"To say that Creasey scores again is probably an understatement."

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SELDON TRUSS

"He tells a well-planned story and tells it ingeniously."

Sunday Times
(10/6 net)

The Silent Pool

PATRICIA WENTWORTH

"Patricia Wentworth is in the front rank of writers of detective fiction."

Birmingham Mail
(10/6 net)

HODDER AND STOUGHTON

smuggling and violence its sense of urgency. In fact, all the book does is give the reader three hours to yawn.

"YOU'VE GOT IT COMING," by James Hadley Chase (*Robert Hale*, 10s. 6d.).

Industrial diamonds seem lately to have taken the place of Communists and atom plans as the villains' desiderata. Mr. Chase, nothing loath these days to jog along in the van, here adds to the pile with a story of the hi-jacking of some diamonds by an ex-transport pilot, his squalid dreams of riches and the little (yet sexy) woman, and the inevitable retribution. Mr. Chase's Americanese is still strictly from Soho. Someone should tell him, for instance, that really acute native observers of the American crime scene are currently obsessed with European cars—Jags and Mercs mainly. The Caddy con is definitely *passé*.

"DEATH OF A DWARF," by Harold Kemp (*Geoffrey Bles*, 10s. 6d.).

A somewhat ordinary tale involving two bodies, a righteous detective of the better class and a touch of canonical plot-thickening.

"RING ROUND ROSA," by William Campbell Gault (*Boardman*, 9s. 6d.).

Once again the private peeper is hired to find the missing cutie. Once again he plays host to killers, and remains fortuitously way out ahead of the stupid, dumb, bastard cops. It's all very entertaining, but Raymond Chandler's *Farewell My Lovely* runs rings round Rosa.

"SHE LEFT A SILVER SLIPPER," by Frank Stevens (*Foulsham*, 9s. 6d.).

As tasty a dish of sex, sadism and pornography as was ever disguised under the 'tec story format. Should be very successful: they always say that's what has them in the aisles.

"THE DREAM WALKER," by Charlotte Armstrong (*Peter Davies*, 10s. 6d.).

Novel variations on the same woman in two places at the same time theme. Brilliantly chilling, in off-beat, dream-sequence style. Miss Armstrong joins good characterization with exceptional atmosphere, and backs the mixture with a first-rate plot. What more do you need?

"HOW BAD CAN THEY BE?" by Norman Leslie (*Arthur Barker*, 10s. 6d.).

Enough said.

"FATAL IN MY FASHION," by Pat McGerr (*Crime Club*, 10s. 6d.).

Average closed-circle slaying, bounded at all points of the circumference by the fashion world. In this type of book it is vaguely irritating to find that the killer escapes punishment.

"FATAL RELATIONS," by Margaret Erskine (*Hammond & Hammond*, 9s. 6d.).

Well-worked-out, village-girt whodunit, with fascinating twenty-page solution compounded in equal parts of the logical, the fortuitous and the unbelievable.

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"A FAMILY MATTER," by Francis Gaité (*Hodder & Stoughton*, 10s. 6d.).

A light-hearted tale of considerable plot deficiency, saved from limbo by its two delightful heroes, both of whom are ghosts. This gives both them, and the author, an unfair, if charming, advantage.

"CROOKS CARAVAN," by Frank King (*Robert Hale*, 9s. 6d.).

Average, well-constructed game of bluff it and buffet, with the usual international gang falling over each other, and the arch-villain playing hard, but not too hard, for the hero to get.

"THE GLASS VILLAGE," by Ellery Queen (*Gollancz*, 10s. 6d.).

Though this book was first published in August 1954, it deserves a place here, partly because it's about time we reviewed an Ellery Queen book in these pages, and partly because no better written detective story has emerged since that date.

As far as the plot is concerned—trial of obvious suspect for slaying a Grandma Moses figure, local prejudice agin furriners, and last-minute least likelihood deliverance—the Queens have done better work, even in their short stories.

But the New England background is superb. They make it seem, with its old Colonial architecture and Puritan conscience, its homely blueberry muffins, grape butter and johnnycake, and its almost tangible sense of remoteness, to be the only place to live in. Certainly the only place in America. A royal book. Thank you, Queens.

"A TANGLED WEB," by Nicholas Blake (*Crime Club*, 12s. 6d.).

After *The Whisper in the Gloom*, this really is a disappointment. The story of a young criminal betrayed wittingly by a friend and unwittingly by his mistress, for all its rather obvious overtones, add up to very inferior Graham Greene (early period). Oh what a tangled web we weave when first we practise to "bring a quality of tragedy" (as the blurb puts it) to a book.

"THE DEVIL HIS DUE," by William O'Farrell (*Robert Hale*, 9s. 6d.).

Facile thriller with New York background etched in all the customary acid. Everyone is either very rich or very poor, very beautiful and vicious, or very homely and sincere—heroes and heels. There is a plot, but I've rather forgotten it.

"A TIME FOR MURDER," by Patrick O. McGuire (*Hammond & Hammond*, 9s. 6d.).

Run-of-the-mill rough stuff, set in Northumberland for a change. A little bit of love for an O.K. girl; an obvious villain or two (to get just desserts, author for the use of); a distinguished old party, and a posse of pachydermic cops (dashing young hero for the use and convenience of when necessary, and to be given the slip to, by, when not), all strung together on a wisp of marihuana.

"UNLUCKY FOR SOME," by Arthur Behrend (*Eyre & Spottiswoode*, 12s. 6d.).

An exciting story of black market-

THRILLERS OF THE MONTH

Still in wide demand

The Body Snatchers

by Jack Finney

The Deadly Climate

by Ursula Curtiss

Unlucky for Some

by Arthur Behrend

Choices for the Spring

The Pinned Man †

by George Griswold
(author of *Red Pawns*)

Invasion of Privacy *

by Harry Kurnitz

The Beckoning Dream

by Evelyn Bershman

Goodbye is not worthwhile

by William Mole
(author of *The Hammersmith Maggot*)

† Just out

* March 23

Thrillers of the Month from

EYRE & SPOTTISWOODE

ing and illegal exporting by a gang of sinister street musicians (though not as sinister as those in Margery Allingham's *Tiger in the Smoke*), told in a wry, salty style, which by a trick that defies analysis manages to stay just on the right side of facetiousness for 190 pages.

This is Mr. Behrend's first book since the war and, as is so rare with unpractised thriller writers, makes us hope for more speedily.

"TARGET IN TAFFETA," by Ben Benson (*Collins, 9s. 6d.*).

Another from the lone-cop-fights-town-boss stable. Only this horse is lamer than most. (Or is it just that sex and violence have become so much a part of this kind of literature, that a book with less than the usual quota must of necessity seem lame?)

"LIEUTENANT PASCAL'S TASTES IN HOMICIDE," by Hugh Pentecost (*Boardman, 9s. 6d.*).

Lieutenant Pascal, oddly enough, reflects the taste of the general American public in these matters; viz. blood and sex in lavish helpings, and handstitched plots of a penetrating unlikeliness.

Of the three stories, "Eager Victim" has the palm by a long way.

"SERGEANT DEATH," by Douglas G. Browne (*Macdonald, 9s. 6d.*).

Nom du nom! What will these wicked Commies get up to next? Propaganda, assassinations and secret weapons are one thing, but blowing up the Gulf Stream so that Europe

will freeze into extinction is hardly cricket.

"THE SMILING SPIDER," by Leonard Halliday (*Hammond & Hammond, 9s. 6d.*).

Another diabolical international plot is thwarted, this time by a first-rate foilist and sabreur. And there's plenty of good, clean, upright fencing to show he's no phoney, either as a swordsman or as a gent.

"THE TREMBLING THREAD," by Charles Franklin (*Collins, 9s. 6d.*).

In the very first chapter a man called Carruthers, drinking whiskies in the bar of the Strangers' Club in Villafranca, says with leather-straight face, "You can take it from me, the natives are getting restless."

Ordinarily one would read no further, but such is the persuasion of Charles Franklin's fast-moving prose that I perused this tale of revolution and political intrigue to the end, and found it pretty exciting if unrelievedly silly.

"WHISTLE PAST THE GRAVEYARD," by Richard Deming (*Boardman, 9s. 6d.*).

A strange Heath-Robinsonian type murder, with a mechanical invention designed to prevent hunters from getting shot by other hunters. It is a little more laboured than the general run of these *affaires Americaines*, and to the experienced the murderer is obvious. All in all, it's a better book than most, but the cognoscenti should whistle past the public library.

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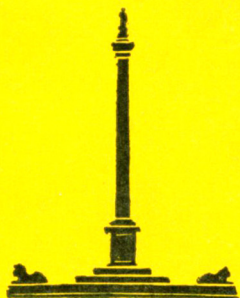
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