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29

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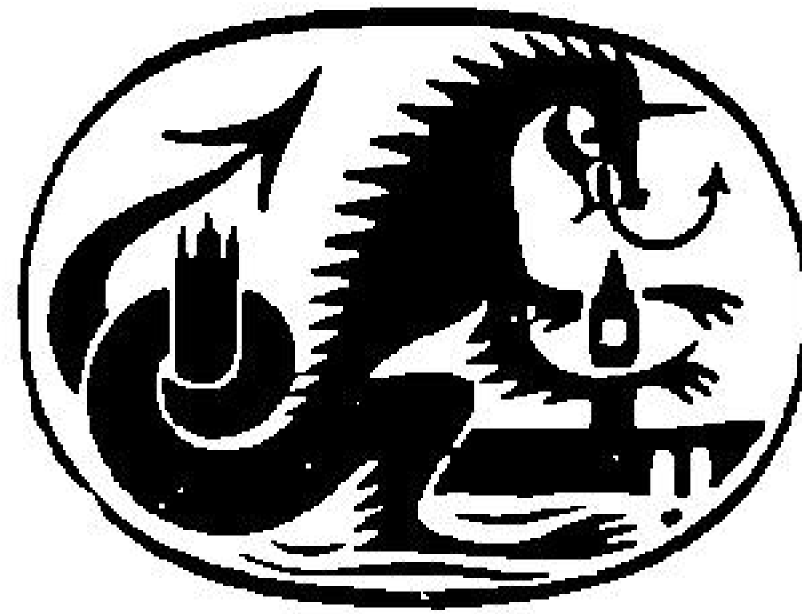

THE LONDON MYSTERY MAGAZINE

We have so many admirers. They are addicts of the macabre and the terrible. They have been watching us with hollow-eyed expectation, panting for the stories we have chosen to chill you in the summer-time.

Well, here they are and they have everything. They are macabre and sensational and gruesomely beautiful all at once. When you have devoured them, you will be steeled with horror. You will take that high jump. You will go on resolutely to buy the strychnine for your maiden aunt. You will push your brother out of the window without a scruple.

Yes, readers, this issue is one of our eeriest. We have been inspired by unrest, considerably upset since our last appearance. New impressions have overwhelmed us. For once we were in chambers with Mr. Sherlock Holmes in Baker Street. We have spent many enchanted years in Trafalgar Square. Now we have come to live by the Thames.

Generations of Scotland Yard sleuths have been inspired by views of the river. We, too, now dominate the waterway of the world. We go home along the Embankment. We assure you we miss nothing that is curious. On your behalf we count the corpses washed up, we question the derelicts and comb all flotsam and jetsam for the strangest stories.

You must think of us where was formerly the "Sign of the Crossed Keys" in Southwark. Many a big ship slipping under London Bridge once came alongside at this spot. Here many a foreign sailor was refreshed and entertained by the bear-baiting down the road. Now it is our sign you will see along the way. So immured are we already, we feel we have been mystifying here for years. We were the first to ferry across the water where is now Blackfriars Bridge on our frequent gruesome errands to the Old Bailey and the Fleet. We saw St. Paul's grow up over the way.

You must expect maturity from us, then; excellence in our trade which is the location of the terrible. These tales are as deeply seasoned as the oak of the old ships in tow along the river, potent as the sack once bottled in our cellars which we may now use for more eerie purposes.

It may be summer-time and the sun may be shining. But expect no respite from horror. These stories will affright your holidays. There are devil dolls; there are man-eating butterflies, much enveloping witchcraft and several maniacs; there is murder most foul. All the monstrous fancies that play in the back of the mind here cluster together. You will rejoice in so much diabolical ingenuity and sheer entertainment. Then you will wish to keep permanently in touch with us. To do this you must turn to pages 2 and 128. EDITOR.

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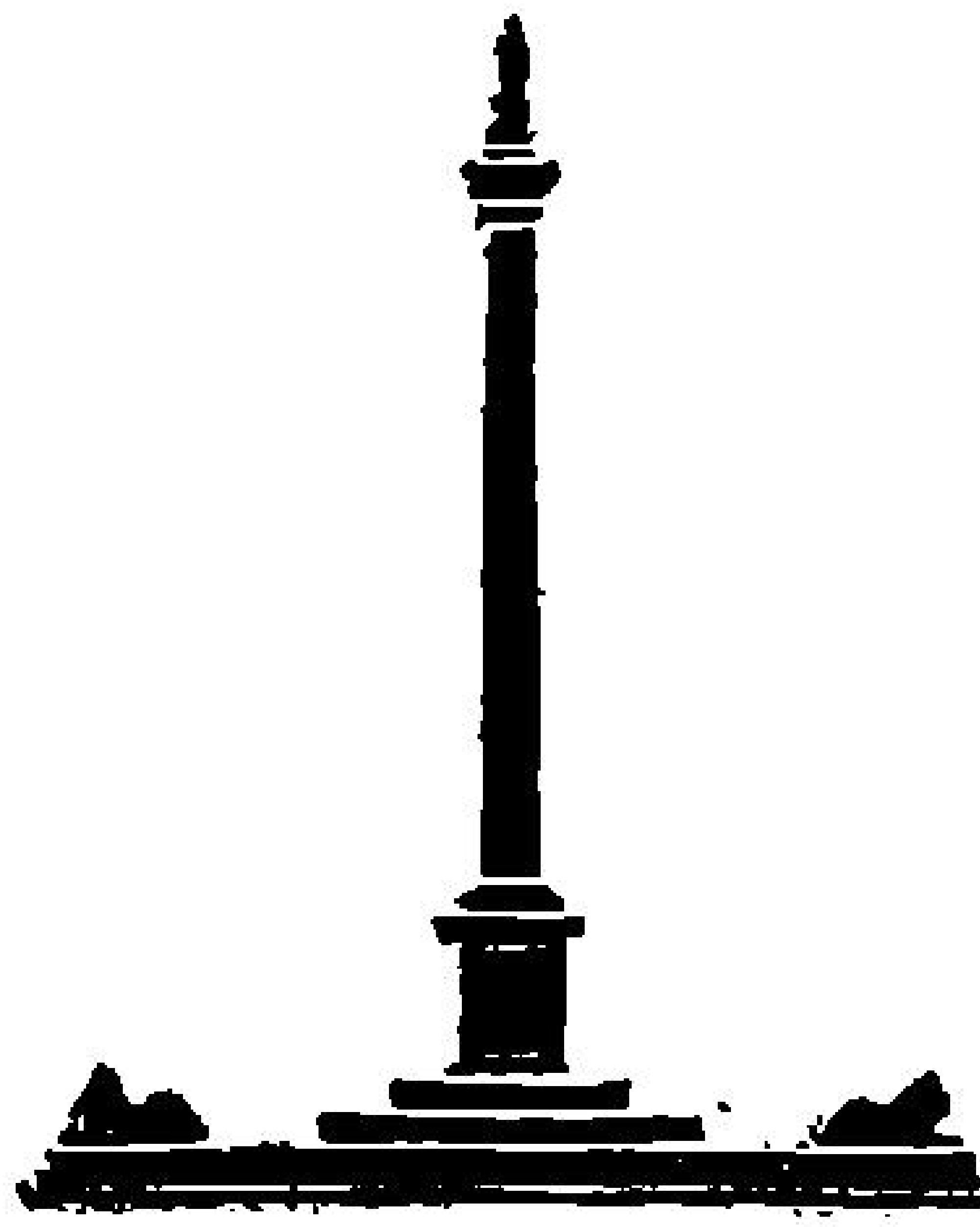

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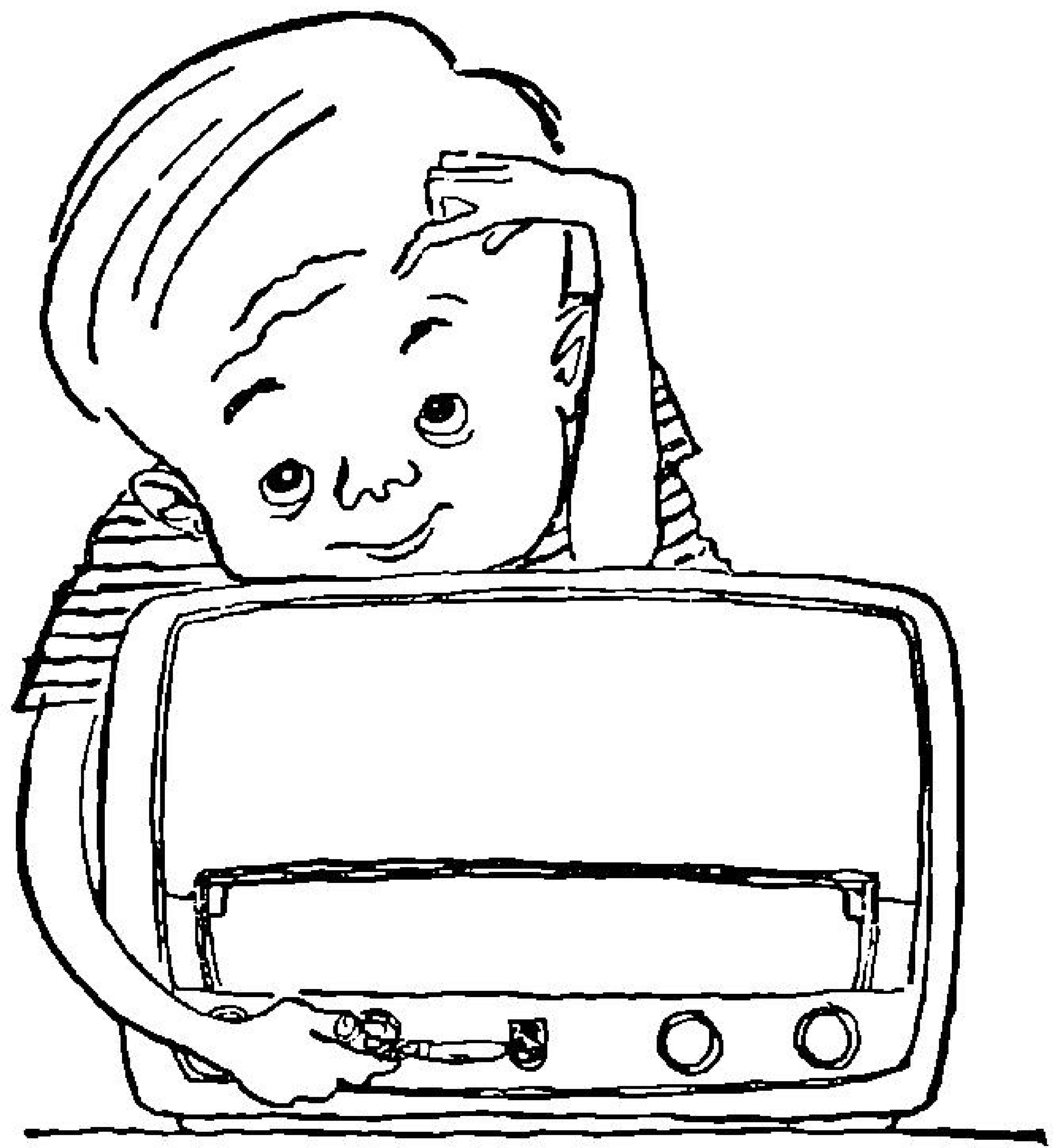

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(P36H)

FLORINDA

SHAMUS FRAZER

Illustrated by Nicholas Wadley

"DID YOU AND MISS Reeve have a lovely walk, darling?" Clare asked of the child in the tarnished depths of glass before her.

"Well, it was lovely for me but not for Miss Reeve, because she tore her stocking on a bramble, and it bled."

"The stocking?"

"No, that ran a beautiful ladder," said Jane very solemnly. "But there were two long tears on her leg as if a cat had scratched her. We were going along the path by the lake when the brambles caught her. She almost fell in. She *did* look funny, Mummy, hopping on the bank like a hen blackbird a cat's playing with—and squawking."

"*Poor* Miss Reeve! . . . Your father's going to have that path cleared soon; it's quite overgrown."

"Oh, I hope not soon, Mummy. I love the brambly places, and what the birds and rabbits'll do if they're cut down I can't imagine. The thickety bushes are all hopping and fluttering with them when you walk. And the path wriggles as if it were living, too—so you must lift your feet high and stamp on it, the way Florinda does. . ."

But Clare was not listening any more. She had withdrawn her glance from Jane's grave elfin features in the shadowed recesses of the glass to fix it on her own image, spread as elegantly upon its surface as a swan.

"And if Daddy has the bushes cut down," Jane went on, "what will poor Florinda do? Where will she play? There will be no place at all for the little traps and snares she sets; no place for her to creep and whistle in, and tinkle into laughter when something funny happens—like Miss Reeve caught by the leg and hopping." This was the time, when her mother was not listening, that Jane could talk most easily about Florinda. She looked at her mother's image, wrapt in the dull mysteries of grown-up thought within the oval Chippendale glass—and thence to the rococo frame of gilded wood in whose interlacing design two birds of faded gilt, a bat with a chipped wing and flowers whose golden petals and leaves showed here and there little spots and tips of white plaster like a disease, were all caught for ever.

"That's how I met Florinda." She was chattering quite confidently, now that she knew that it was only to herself. "I had been down to the edge of the lake where there are no brambles—you know, the *lawn* side; and I knelt down to look at myself in the water, *and there were two of me.*

That's what I thought at first—two of me. And then I saw one was someone else—it was Florinda, smiling at me; but I couldn't smile back, not for anything. There we were like you and me in the glass—one smiling and one very solemn. Then Miss Reeve called and Florinda just *went*—and my face was alone and astonished in the anyway. And her eyes can't shut even when she lies down."

"I thought she was called Arabella."

"That's the doll Uncle Richard gave me last Christmas. Arabella *does* close her eyes when *she* lies down, and she says 'Good night, Mamma,' too, because of the gramophone record

water. She's shy, Florinda is—and sly, too. Shy and sly—that's Florinda for you."

The repeated name stirred Clare to a vague consciousness: she had heard it on Jane's lips before.

"Who is Florinda?" she asked.

"Mummy, I've told you. She's a doll, I think, only large, large as me. And she never talks—not with words, inside her. But Florinda's different. She's not a house doll. She belongs outside—though I *have* asked her to come to tea on Christmas Eve."

"Well, darling, I've lots of letters to write, so just you run along to the nursery and have a lovely tea."

So Florinda was a doll—an ideal doll, it seemed, that Jane had invented in anticipation of Christmas.

Nine in the New Year, Jane was growing perhaps a little old for dolls. A strange child, thought Clare, difficult to understand. In that she took after her mother—though in looks it was her father she resembled. With a sigh Clare slid out the drawer of the mahogany writing-desk. She distributed writing-paper and envelopes, the Christmas cards (reproductions of Alken prints), in neat piles over the red leather—and, opening her address-book, set herself to write.

Roger came in with the early December dusk. He had been tramping round the estate with Wakefield the agent, and the cold had painted his cheeks blue and nipped his nose red so that he looked like a large, clumsy gnome. He kissed Clare on the nape, and the icy touch of his nose spread gooseflesh over her shoulders.

"You go and pour yourself a whisky," she said, "and thaw yourself out by the fire. I'll be with you in a minute." She addressed two more envelopes in her large clear hand, and then, without looking round, said: "Have we bitten off rather more than we can chew?"

"There's an awful lot to be done," said her husband from the fire, "so much one hardly knows where to begin. The woods are a shambles—Nissen huts, nastiness and barbed wire. One would have thought Uncle Eustace would have made some effort to clear up the mess after the army moved out. . . ."

"But, darling, he never came back to live here. He was too wise."

"Too ill and too old—and he never gave a thought to those who'd inherit the place, I suppose."

"He never thought we'd be foolish enough to come and live here, anyway."

Roger's uncle had died in a nursing-home in Bournemouth earlier in the year, and Roger had come into these acres of Darkshire park and woodland, and the sombre peeling house, Fowling Hall, set among them. At Clare's urging he had tried to sell the place, but there were no offers. And now Roger had the obstinate notion of settling here, and trying to make pigs and chickens pay for the upkeep of the estate. Of course, Clare knew, there was something else behind this recent interest in the country life. Nothing had been said, but she knew what Roger wanted, and she knew, too, that he would hint at it again before long—the forbidden subject. She stacked her letters on the desk and went to join him by the fire.

"There's one thing you *can* do," she said. "Clear that path that goes round the lake. Poor Miss Reeve tore herself quite nastily on a bramble this afternoon, walking there."

"I'll remind Wakefield to get the men on the job tomorrow. And what was Jane doing down by the lake just now as I came in? I called her and she ran off into the bushes."

"My dear, Jane's been up in the nursery for the last hour or more. Miss Reeve's reading to her. You know, she's not allowed out this raw weather except when the sun's up. The doctor said——"

"Well, I wondered. . . . I only

glimpsed her—a little girl in the dusk. She ran off when I called."

"One of the workmen's children, I expect."

"Perhaps. . . . Strange, I didn't think of that."

He took a gulp of whisky, and changed the subject: "Clare, it's going to cost the earth to put this place properly in order. It would be worth it if . . . if . . ." He added with an effort, "I mean, if one thought it was leading anywhere. . . ."

So it had come out, the first hint.

"You mean if we had a son, don't you? . . . Don't you, Roger?" She spoke accusingly.

"I merely meant. . . . Well, yes—though, of course——"

She didn't let him finish. "But you know what the doctor said after Jane. You know how delicate she is. . . . You can't want——?"

"If she had a brother——" Roger began.

Clare laughed, a sudden shiver of laughter, and held her hands to the fire.

"Roger, what an open hypocrite you are! 'If she had a brother,' when all the time you mean 'if I had a son.' And how could you be certain it wouldn't be a sister? No, Roger, we've had this out a thousand times in the past. It can't be done." She shook her head and blinked at the fire. "It wouldn't work out."

Roger went into the nursery, as was his too irregular custom, to say good night to Jane. She was in her pink fleecy dressing-gown, slippered toes resting on the wire fender, a bowl emptied of bread and milk on her knees. Miss Reeve was reading her a story about a princess who was turned by enchantment into a fox.

"Don't let me interrupt, Miss Reeve. I'll look in again later."

"Oh, do come in, Mr. Waley. We're almost ready for bed."

"I was sorry to hear about your accident this afternoon."

"It was such a silly thing, really. I caught my foot in a slip-noose of bramble. It was as if somebody had set it on the path on purpose, only that would be too ridiculous for words. But it was a shock—and I tore myself painfully, trying to get free."

There was still the ghost of that panic, Roger noticed, in Miss Reeve's pasty, pudgy features, and in the signalling behind the round lenses of her spectacles. "It's not a very nice path for a walk," she added, "but one can't keep Jane away from the lake."

"I'm having all the undergrowth cleared away from the banks," said Roger; "that should make it easier walking."

"Oh, that'll be ever so much nicer, Mr. Waley."

"Florinda won't like it," thought Jane, sitting stiffly in her wicker chair by the fire. "She won't like it at all. She'll be in a wicked temper will Florinda." But she said aloud in a voice of small protest—for what was the use of speaking about Florinda to grown-ups?—"It won't be nice at all. It will be quite horribly beastly."

The men didn't care for the work they had been set to do. It was the skeletons, they said — and they

prodded suspiciously with their implements at the little lumps of bone and feather and fur that their cutting and scything had revealed. There was a killer somewhere in the woods; owls said one, stoats said another, but old Renshawe said glumly it was neither bird nor beast, that it was Something-that-walked-that-shouldn't, and this infected the others with a derisive disquiet. All the same, fifty yards of path were cleared during the morning, which took them beyond the small Doric pavilion that once served as boathouse and was reflected by a stone twin housing the loch mechanism on the eastern side of the lake.

Miss Reeve took Jane out in the afternoon to watch the men's progress. Jane ran ahead down the cleared path; paused at the pavilion to hang over the flaking balustrade and gaze down into the water: whispered something, shook her head and ran on.

"Hullo, Mr. Renshawe—*alone*?" she cried, as rounding a sudden twist in the path she came upon the old man hacking at the undergrowth. Renshawe started and cut short, and the blade bit into his foot. This accident stopped work for the day.

"It wasn't right, Miss Jane, to come on me like that," he said, as they were helping him up to the house. "You give me a real turn. I thought——"

"I know," said Jane, fixing him with her serious, puzzled eyes. "And she *was* there, too, watching all the time."

Whatever the killer was, it moved its hunting-ground that night. Two White Orpingtons were found dead beside the arks next morning, their feathers scattered like snow over the bare ground.

"And it's not an animal, neither," said Ron, the boy who carried the mash into the runs and had discovered the kill.

"What do you mean, it's not an animal?" asked Wakefield.

"I mean that their necks is wrung, Mr. Wakefield."

"Oh, get away!" said Wakefield.

But the following morning another hen was found lying in a mess of feathers and blood, and Wakefield reported to his master.

"It can't be it's a fox, sir. That head's not been bitten off. It's been pulled off, sir. . . . And there was this, sir, was found by the arks." It was a child's bracelet of blackened silver.

The path was cleared, but on the farther side of the lake the shrubberies that melted imperceptibly into the tall woods bordered it closely. Here Jane dawdled on her afternoon walk. At the bend in the path near the boathouse she waited until her governess was out of sight—and then called softly into the gloom of yew and rhododendron and laurel, "I think you're a beast, a *beast*! And I'm not going to be your friend any more, d'you hear? And you're *not* to come on Christmas Eve, even if you're starving."

There was movement in the shadows, and she glimpsed the staring blue eyes and pinched face and the tattered satin finery. "And it's no

use following us, so there!" Jane stuck her tongue out as a gesture of defiance, and ran away along the path.

"Are you all right?" asked Miss Reeve, who had turned back to look for her. "I thought I heard someone crying."

"Oh, it's only Florinda," said Jane, "and she can sob her eyes out now for all I care."

"Jane," said Miss Reeve severely, "how many more times have I to tell you Florinda is a naughty fib, and we shouldn't tell naughty fibs even in fun?"

"It's no fun," said Jane, so low that Miss Reeve could hardly catch a word, "no fun at all being Florinda."

A hard frost set in overnight. It made a moon landscape of the park and woods, and engraved on the nursery window-panes, sharply as with a diamond, intricate traceries of silver fern. The bark of the trees was patterned with frost like chain-mail, and from the gaunt branches icicle daggers glinted in the sun. Each twig of the bare shrubs had budded its tear-drops of ice. The surface of the lake was wrinkled and grey like the face of an old woman. "And Wakefield says if it keeps up we may be able to skate on it on Boxing Day. . . ." But by midday the temperature dropped and all out-of-doors was filled with a mournful pattering and dripping.

Towards evening a dirty yellow glow showed in the sky, and furry black clouds moved up over the woods, bringing snow. It snowed after that for two days, and then it was Christmas Eve.

"You *look* like the Snow Queen, but you *smell* like the Queen of Sheba. Must you go out tonight, Mummy?"

"Darling, it's a bore. We promised Lady Graves, so we have to."

"You should have kept your fingers crossed. But you'll be back soon?"

"In time to catch Father Christmas climbing down the chimneys, I expect."

"But earlier than that—promise . . . ?"

"Much earlier than that. Daddy wants to get back early, anyway. He and Wakefield had a tiring night sitting up with a gun to guard their precious hens. . . ."

"But she . . . it never came, did it?"

"Not *last* night. And now you go to lovely sleeps, and when you wake perhaps Father Christmas will have brought you Florinda in his——"

"No," cried the child, "not Florinda, Mummy, *please*."

"What a funny thing you are," said Clare, stooping to kiss her; "you were quite silly about her a few days ago. . . ."

Jane shivered and snuggled down in the warm bed.

"I've changed," she said. "We're not friends any more."

After the lights were out, Jane imagined she was walking in the snow. The snowflakes fell as lightly as kisses, and soon they had covered her with a white, soft down. Now she knew herself to be a swan, and she tucked her head under a wing and so

fell asleep on the dark rocking water.

But in the next room Miss Reeve, who had gone to bed early, could not sleep because of the wind that sobbed so disquietingly around the angles of the house. At last she put out a hand to the bedside table, poured herself water, groped for the aspirin bottle and swallowed down three tablets at a gulp. It was as she rescrewed the top, she noticed that it was not the aspirin bottle she was holding. She could have sworn that the sleeping-tablets had been in her dressing-table drawer. Her first thought was that someone had changed the bottles on purpose, but that, she told herself, would be too absurd. There was nothing she could do about it. The crying of the wind mounted to shrill broken fluting that sounded oddly like children's laughter.

The first thing they noticed when the car drew up, its chained tyres grinding and clanking under the dark porch, was that the front door was ajar. "Wait here," said Roger to the chauffeur, "there seems to have been visitors while we were away."

Clare switched on the drawing-room lights, and screamed at the demoniac havoc they revealed, the chairs and tables overturned, the carpet a litter of broken porcelain, feathers from the torn cushions, and melting snow. Someone had thrown the heavy silver inkwell at the wall glass, which hung askew, its surface cracked and starred, and the delicate frame broken.

"No sane person——" Roger began.

But already Clare was running up the stairs to the nursery and screaming, "Jane! . . . Jane!" as she ran.

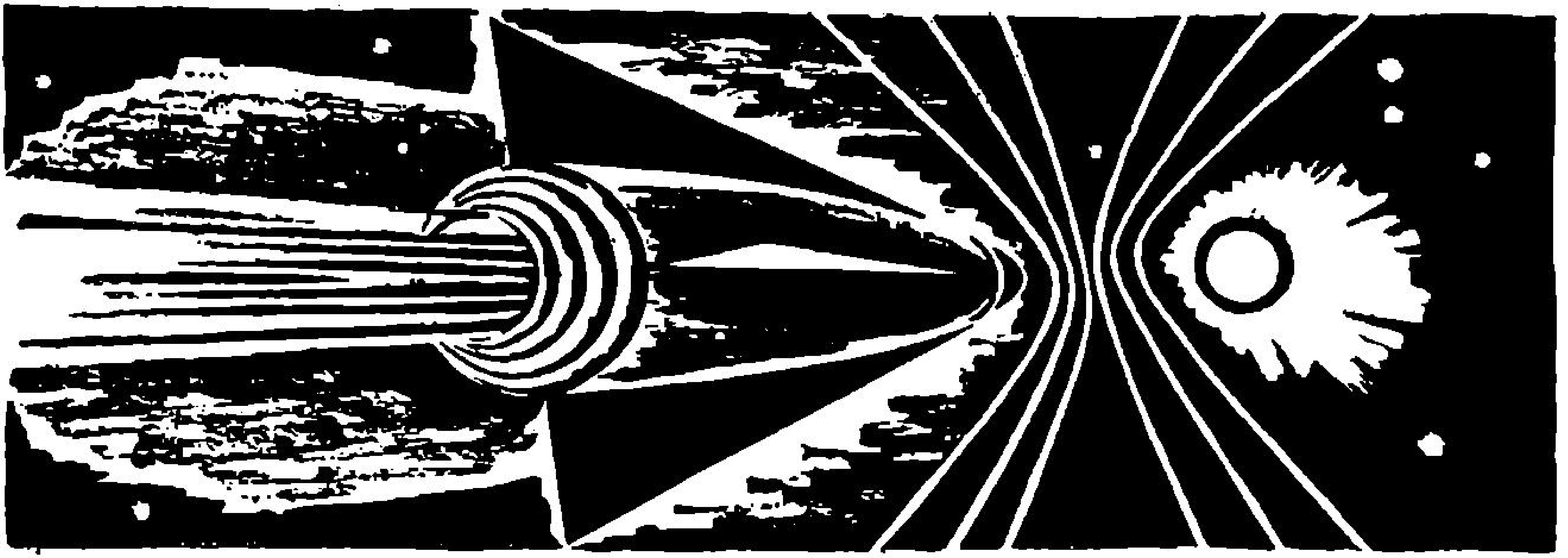
The nursery was wrecked, too—the sheets clawed in strips, the floor a drift of feathers from the ripped pillows. Only the doll Arabella, with a shattered head, was propped up in the empty bed. When Clare touched her she fell backwards and began to repeat, "Good night, Mamma!" as the mechanism inside her worked.

They found Jane's footsteps in the snow, leading over the lawn in the direction of the lake. Once they thought they saw her ahead of them, but it was only the snowman Roger had helped her to build during the afternoon. There was a misty moon, and by its light they followed the small naked footprints to the edge of the lake—but their eyes could make out nothing beyond the snow-fringed ice.

Roger had sent on the chauffeur to a bend in the drive where the car headlights could illuminate the farther bank. And now, in the sudden glare, they saw in the dark centre of ice the two small figures, Jane in her nightdress, and beside her a little girl in old-fashioned blue satin who walked oddly and jerkily, lifting her feet and stamping them on the ice.

They called together, "Jane! . . . Jane! Come back!"

She seemed to have heard, and she turned, groping towards the light. The other caught at her arm, and the two struggled together on the black, glassy surface. Then from the stars it seemed, and into their cold hearts, fell a sound like the snapping of a giant lute-string. The two tiny interlocked figures had disappeared, and the ice moaned and tinkled at the edges of the lake.



THE BUTTERFLIES

EDMUND COOPER

Illustrated by W. E. Jones

A robot survives a great horror. Human beings are more vulnerable, especially in outer space. Theoretically this is science fiction in Edmund Cooper's best manner. It is also a mystery whose theme is the grisly conflict between scientific sophistication and the oldest and most terrible compulsion of all.

THE SURVEY SHIP *Prometheus* dropped into orbit four hundred miles above the surface of Planet Five. Altogether, there were seven planets in the system. They belonged to the Companion of Sirius, a "white dwarf" which had the distinction of being the first star to be recognized by terrestrial astronomers before it could be seen.

Planet Five was twenty-two million miles from the mother sun. Sirius itself lay far beyond the confines of the tiny system, being another eighteen hundred million miles away. To the crew of the *Prometheus* it presented a bright blinding disc, no less impressive than that of its now relatively near Companion. Eventually the *Prometheus* would voyage closer to the great star to survey her single red planet. But meanwhile the Companion's system seemed infinitely more attractive—an explorer's paradise.

When the orbit manœuvre had been successfully completed, the crew of four took themselves to the mess-deck for a celebration. They had something to celebrate, for, so far as they knew, the *Prometheus* was the first ship to navigate satisfactorily under what was called the Relativity Drive—in mem-

ory of a very great man and a very imperfect theory.

As soon as they took their places at table, the electronic cooker disgorged roast chicken and a wealth of elegant trimmings, and the refrigerator surrendered a magnum of champagne. Only three of the crew, however, were able to savour the luxury of drinking wine eight and a half light-years away from the vineyard that produced it; for the fourth, a positronic robot, preferred to dine infrequently on a large helping of amperes.

Presently, Captain Trenoy, physicist, astronomer and Master of the *Prometheus*, gave a formal toast; while Whizbang, the robot, watched with red expressionless eyes.

"May our explorations be fruitful," said Captain Trenoy, raising his glass. "May our return be safe, and may the Time Drag not be too heavy on us."

"Amen," said Dr. Blane.

He and Dr. Luiss regarded each other gravely as they lifted their glasses in response. They were both thinking about the same thing. The journey of eight and a half light-years had taken the *Prometheus* eighteen *kinetic* months, but the ship had left the solar system fifteen earth-years before. By the time it returned, more than thirty-five earth-years would have gone by, though the crew would have aged a mere three and a half years.

Blane, who combined the duties of psychologist, surgeon and physician, was contemplating the spiritual effect of being cut off from one's time and generation. Fortunately or otherwise, it was a problem that would have no reality until the *Prometheus* touched down on earth once more.

Luiss, who held the departments of biochemistry and geology, stared at his champagne and wondered just how long it would take him to go mad.

But such disturbing thoughts slid rapidly into the background as Captain Trenoy, refilling the three glasses, turned the conversation to the immediate problem of touching down on Planet Five. After eighteen months of monotonous star-flight, during which there was little to do but make routine checks, routine researches, routine conversation, it was pleasant if unnerving to be faced with the necessity for action.

"Here endeth the first lesson," said the Captain, with obscure irony. "And now we'd better fix up some orderly procedure. I am assuming, of course, that you feel we ought to explore as soon as possible." He gazed at his companions enquiringly.

"No reason why we shouldn't," said Dr. Luiss. "I've checked Whizbang's preliminary findings. It doesn't seem as if there will be much difficulty."

"I haven't any objections," agreed Blane. Then he added with a dry smile: "But in view of our experience of the unusual effects of star-sickness, it might be advisable if we sent Whizbang by himself on the first trip."

"I was about to suggest that myself," said Trenoy. "It would be an elementary safety procedure. I think, too, that we should fix it so that we can control the landing-rocket from

here—just in case Whizbang comes to grief. It would be disastrous if we lost a ferry-rocket on the first landing."

"What makes you think I might come to grief, Captain?" boomed the robot. "The findings indicate that it's going to be a smooth job."

Trenoy laughed. "You're as logical as they come, Whizbang," he said. "But we poor mortals, lacking your mental equipment, tend to be just a little superstitious. To us, as to the primeval savages, the unknown is always a little magical—in spite of science, in spite of reason and in spite of infallible robots."

Whizbang made strange noises, which his companions had long since learned to interpret as robotic laughter.

"So I noticed," he retorted, "when we changed down to Planetary Drive out of R.D. Dr. Blane, our eminent psychologist, was, I recall, furiously stroking a rabbit's paw."

Blane smiled. "No need to feel superior, Whizbang. I saw you playing with a new set of logarithmic notations. It was the first time I've ever seen a robot doodling."

"All right, doodler," said Captain Trenoy. "Tell us what you've discovered about Planet Five, and we'll decide if there is likely to be difficulty."

Whizbang recited his information with monotonous efficiency. "Size equates approximately with terrestrial moon. Mass: one over eighty-three point two. Density: three point seven nine. Orbital period: ninety-eight days. Surface: three-fifths solid. Atmosphere: oxygen helium, forty-five fifty. Vegetation: low-type scrub with unusual predominance of blue. No evidence yet of animal life."

"Suppose we put you down," said Luiss. "What would you do?"

"Take out *Radiac* and test at ground-level," answered Whizbang promptly. "Collect samples and explore to a radius of one hundred yards. Radio verbal report to Captain Trenoy and await instructions."

"Fair enough," said Trenoy. "Down you go."

"I've already checked the ferry-rocket," announced Whizbang. "*Radiac* and sample jars are aboard." He stood up and stretched his nine foot of steel and duralumin. "Shall I make ready, sir?" he asked formally.

"No time like the present," said Trenoy. "Go ahead. Come back and tell us five minutes before point of exit."

The three men stood on the navigation deck of the *Prometheus*, watching the small ferry-rocket drift out of the orbit. As it receded in slow motion, Whizbang waved a metal arm cheerily to them from inside his plastiglass dome.

"Are we going to stabilize position over his landing-area?" asked Dr. Blane.

"Might as well," said the Captain. "There's no reason for playing safe on fuel. Thank God those days are over."

The ferry-rocket, gathering negative speed, dropped like a silver bullet to

the vast brown and crimson stretch of lava plains below.

"The atmosphere is a piece of cake," said Dr. Luiss happily. "It looks as if we shall be able to throw off our pressure suits and jump about freely at one-sixth gravity."

"It may be my natural pessimism," observed Dr. Blane, "but I have an odd notion that Planet Five is altogether too obliging. Something tells me that we are in for a few surprises."

"I think you're right," agreed Trenoy. "There always are surprises in this kind of work. It would be somewhat surprising if there weren't." He turned his attention to the two-way radio. "*Prometheus* to Whizbang. *Prometheus* to Whizbang. How are you doing? Over."

He turned a switch, and Whizbang's voice came loud and clear. "Whizbang to Captain Trenoy. I'm skating cautiously through the boundaries of the stratosphere at a hundred thousand feet. Velocity five thousand. Fin temperature fifteen hundred. Internal temperature one hundred and three. It's easy going. Over."

"What does the surface look like?" asked Trenoy.

"As expected, Captain. Blue vegetation areas change shade slightly, purple to crimson. But this may be due to invisible cloud. Over."

"Are you using the auto-pilot? Over," asked the Captain. He heard the robot laugh.

"I am more efficient, sir. The auto-pilot would take three minutes longer. Over."

"Watch that fin temperature!" snapped Trenoy. "It's more important than trying to beat the auto-pilot. Over and out."

"Yes, sir. Over and out." Whizbang did his best to sound metallically aggrieved.

Seven minutes later he touched the ferry-rocket down to a perfect landing.

"Whizbang to *Prometheus.* I have touched down on the agreed area on Planet Five. Landing normal. Fuel consumption subnormal. What are your orders? Over."

Back on the *Prometheus*, Captain Trenoy gripped the mike, glancing at the two men with controlled excitement. He flicked the switch and spoke to Whizbang.

"Do not move. Describe the landscape. Over."

"Sunlight strength four," said Whizbang. "Sky purple to deep blue. Horizon bounded by mountain range. Estimated height of highest peak nine thousand feet. Distance twelve miles. Planetary surface, rock; crimson, brown, black. Nearest vegetation three hundred yards away. Pampas-type grass, four to six feet high. Colour blue to crimson. Occasional bushes with tendril-type leaves, rising to ten feet. Colour, yellow to gold. Animal life: butterfly type, wingspan nine to fifteen inches, multicoloured, present in large numbers. Estimated cloud of twenty to thirty circling ferry-rocket. Large clouds in constant motion above pampas. . . . Over."

On the navigation deck of the survey ship, the atmosphere of excitement intensified.

"Butterflies!" exclaimed Dr. Luiss.

"This is going to be interesting. They're quite a reasonably developed evolutionary structure. Obviously there will be other examples of animal

life—even if they're only vestigial species relating to the butterflies' development."

Dr. Blane laughed. "Maybe we'll have to take nets with us and dash around like three bug-collecting schoolboys. At one-sixth G, we ought to be able to chase 'em on the wing."

"Not so fast," said Trenoy. "Let's see how they react to Whizbang, and he to them." He flicked the radio switch and spoke once more to the

robot, who sat patiently in the pilot's seat of the ferry-rocket four hundred miles below.

"*Prometheus* to Whizbang. Take out your *Radiac*, your atmosphero-meter and the cine-camera. Make five tests for radioactivity—one general and four specific. Find out the pressure and bulk gases, and bring samples back for lab work. Then take your camera and use fifteen minutes of film. Spread it out—panoramic stuff, telephoto, microphoto and general interest. Also get a butterfly if possible—without harming it. . . . Over."

"Yes, sir," answered Whizbang. "When shall I report? Over."

"Don't be lazy," said Trenoy. "Clip the transceiver on your chest. We'll want a record while you're operating. Over."

"As you say, Captain. Would you like commentary or question and answer? Over."

"Commentary will do. If I want to ask questions, I'll break in. Over and out."

The men on the navigation deck waited for the robot's monologue to begin. Dr. Luiss went to the manual telescope and began to search the landing-area with it. After a moment or two, fancying a shiny dot that he'd picked out was the ferry-rocket, he called Captain Trenoy to take a look. Then Whizbang launched into his commentary.

"Transceiver clipped on. I am now descending through oubliette with *Radiac*. . . . Pressure equalized at nine point nine. . . . Ladder down and entry-port released. I am going down the ladder. . . . General radioactivity normal for oxygen helium at nine point nine. Will now proceed fifty yards from rocket for four radial tests. . . ."

Trenoy switched across. "How are the butterflies reacting to your presence?"

"They don't appear to have noticed me yet. . . . Am now making first of radial tests. . . . The butterflies have just begun to notice me. The ones circling above the rocket aren't being tempted, but another cloud of about fifty has risen from the pampas. They're heading straight for me. . . . Now they're circling overhead. . . ."

"See if you can get one, but don't alarm them if it can be helped," said Trenoy.

"They're fast on the wing, Captain, and they seem to be able to estimate my range. They're concentrating about twenty feet above my headpiece. . . ."

There was a long pause, then: "Flutter by, butterfly! Flutter, flutter, butterfly. . . . Well, well, well! Cut off my co-ordinators and call me a computer. . . . I think that I shall never see a robot beautiful as me. . . ." For the first time in his existence, Whizbang sounded as if he were trying to sing. It was an unmelodious robotic howl. To the men on the *Prometheus* it sounded midway between ecstasy and insanity.

With a startled oath, Captain Trenoy switched in. "Whizbang! What the devil's happening?"

There was no answer for several seconds, then a slurred voice mumbled: "Steel, steel, glorious

steel! You'll never know how metallic I feel. . . ."

"Whizbang! Answer my question!" Trenoy put every ounce of authority into his command. The response was not encouraging:

"With nuts on his fingers and bolts on his toes, Whizbang needs oiling wherever he goes. . . ." The voice trailed away to a crooning whisper. Then silence.

The three men stared at each other in consternation.

"He's off his head," snapped Luiss. "Some damn silly short-circuit has given him D.T.s."

Dr. Blane looked thoughtful. "He was perfectly all right until those butterflies began to concentrate. I wonder. . . ."

"What are you thinking of—radiation?" asked Captain Trenoy.

"Something like that," agreed Blane. "It doesn't sound like a mechanical breakdown. I've never heard of a robot getting light-headed because of a short-circuit. It's as if something—some force—had disturbed his equilibrium."

"The ST-EX robots were proofed against every known type of radiation before we left earth," objected the Captain.

"I know," said Blane. "But obviously this is something they weren't proofed against."

"The simple solution is usually correct," said Luiss. "He's had a breakdown in the language areas. He was all right while he was in the rocket."

"I'll try him again," said Trenoy. He switched over. "Whizbang! Can you hear me? Over."

Silence.

"Whizbang! What's happening? Over."

Silence.

"Whizbang! I order you back to the rocket. Make ready to return to ship! Over."

Still silence.

"Where do we go from here?" asked Captain Trenoy at length. "Any suggestions, gentlemen?"

"Somebody will have to go down in the reserve rocket," said Dr. Luiss. "That somebody had better be me."

"Control your curiosity and be rational," reproved Dr. Blane. "What's the point of hazarding our only other rocket *and* a human being? Have another think."

"Total control!" exclaimed the Captain. "The servomechanisms for the oubliette and entry-port were synchronized with the auto-pilot before Whizbang went down. Even if we can't get him back to the ferry-rocket, we can bring the rocket back here. Then someone might go down and see what's happened to him."

Before Captain Trenoy settled down at the remote-control panel, he made a further effort to contact the enigmatic robot, but met with no success. While he was bringing the rocket back to the four-hundred-mile orbit, Drs. Blane and Luiss developed a quiet and friendly argument concerning the probable cause of Whizbang's failure to respond. Then, as Whizbang still presumably had the transceiver on his chest, Dr. Blane tried to break down his problematic silence by a series of commands, exhortations, trick statements and desperate

pleas for help. He met with no result.

"You see," said Luiss triumphantly. "It's a mechanical breakdown. If he won't even let out a bleat when you tell him it's a matter of life and death, it means only one thing: somewhere the circuit is wrecked."

Dr. Blane still shook his head. "Robots have certain powers of volition," he said slowly. "Weaker, of course, than human volition. . . . Now let us suppose, for the purpose of hypothesis, that something with greater than human volition was able to establish contact with him. Suppose it *willed* him to disobey orders. . . ."

"Moonshine," pronounced Dr. Luiss sceptically. "Are you suggesting that Whizbang got himself hypnotized? Because if so, you're getting unnecessarily melodramatic."

"One has to consider possibilities," said Dr. Blane evenly.

"But that's an impossibility! You might just as well consider the possibility of the ground opening up and swallowing him."

"It can't be ruled out," said Blane without humour. "Who are we to assume that the life-forms on Planet Five behave conventionally? Those butterflies, for example, might——"

"Might lay duck eggs," grinned Luiss. "Go take a sedative, Doctor. Your imagination is slightly fantastic."

"So very often is the truth," retorted Blane.

While he had been talking, Dr. Blane had watched the progress of the ferry-rocket by radar screen and visulator. He saw now that it was within ordinary visual range and, not wishing to prolong a useless discussion, climbed into the astrodome to watch it "dock" alongside the *Prometheus.*

"I still think one man only should go, and that he should not leave the rocket—unless, of course, he finds a reasonable explanation for Whizbang's silence." Watching the captain closely, Dr. Blane could see, even before he replied, that Trenoy was unconvinced.

"Perhaps you are letting superstition take precedence over scientific caution," said Captain Trenoy, with the faintest of smiles. "I think our arrangements will be quite adequate. We shall take u/s vibrators and H.F.C. beam apparatus. Unless there is an emergency, one of us will remain in the rocket all the time."

"You may encounter something against which the vibrators and H.F.C. weapon will be useless."

"In that case it certainly won't be physical," observed Dr. Luiss with irony.

"Exactly," said Blane. He wanted to add something else, but couldn't find the right words.

"We'd better get moving," remarked Trenoy. "We may have a small search on our hands before we find Whizbang."

Dr. Blane accepted defeat gracefully. "Good hunting," he said. "I'll be glued to the transceiver."

"We'll bring you back a couple of tame butterflies to play with," promised Luiss gaily, as he fixed the headpiece on his pressure suit.

When they had checked their pressure and personal radios, the two men left the navigation deck and made their way to the starboard airlock and entry-port. From the astrodome, Dr. Blane watched the small ferry-rocket fall out of the orbit as it gathered negative speed. Twenty minutes later he heard Luiss's voice telling him that they had touched down safely at the landing-area.

"We can see Whizbang," said Luiss excitedly. "He's about a couple of hundred yards away, balancing on one foot like a heavyweight ballerina. The butterflies are still circling over him." He chuckled. "Bet they're thinking that, if he's a specimen of alien culture, they did well to remain butterflies. . . . He looks, though, almost as if he belongs to the landscape."

"Any other signs of life—apart from the butterflies?" asked Dr. Blane.

"No, not yet. I'm going out to have a look at our petrified robot, so I'll hand over to Captain Trenoy."

Dr. Blane's hands were trembling, his face was white. He paced the navigation deck rapidly, casting suspicious glances now and again at the nine-foot robot, who stood waiting patiently.

"Tell me your story again," he commanded. "We will consider the inaccuracy in relation to the whole." It was no good calling the robot a liar, because Whizbang was mechanically incapable of lying. He was, however, quite capable of being inaccurate.

Responding to the order, he again related his story in a voice which faltered only very slightly when he came to the part which Dr. Blane was able to disprove.

"The first thing I remember, sir," said Whizbang, "was Dr. Luiss bawling at me for being what he called a broken-down cretin. Previous to that, my only recollection is of reporting back to ship as I began the first radial test and the butterflies came."

"Where were the butterflies when Dr. Luiss spoke to you?"

"They were circling the rocket again, sir, but there were none near me or Dr. Luiss. The clouds skimming over the pampas seemed bigger than before, but that was probably because Dr. Luiss had disturbed them. He told me he'd given the group circling above my head half a second of ultrasonic vibration, and that it had scared them away."

"Did he tell you his further intentions?"

"He said he was going to look around within a hundred yards' radius, and collect samples. Then he ordered me back to the rocket."

"What did Captain Trenoy do?"

"He questioned me and then spoke to you, sir, describing the landscape in detail and giving you a commentary on Dr. Luiss's activities."

"Why did Captain Trenoy leave the rocket?"

"Dr. Luiss called to him over the personal wavelength in a very excited voice. He said that he'd found the skeleton of a large quadruped with a cranial capacity of approximately one cubic foot. He said that the animals

on Planet Five must have reached a very high evolutionary stage. Finally, he suggested that Captain Trenoy came and had a look for himself, leaving me in the rocket. The captain said it didn't seem a very intelligent procedure, but Dr. Luiss replied that there were no living animals in sight, that the pampas was far enough away to give a reasonable safety margin, and that if the butterflies came near they could certainly be dispersed by ultrasonics."

Dr. Blane nodded. "That's true. I heard snatches of their conversation over the transceiver. . . . Did Captain Trenoy give you any instructions before he left?"

"He put me through a simple test to make sure that my memory and reasoning ability were not damaged. Then he told me to stay in the rocket and not leave it under any circumstances."

"At which point," said Dr. Blane thoughtfully, "you took over the commentary."

"That is so," agreed Whizbang, with a trace of hesitation. "I continued with the commentary until you gave me instructions to return to the *Prometheus*."

"But since I did not radio those instructions," said Blane, staring hard at the robot, "we are left with two possibilities. Name them!"

The robot was silent for a moment. Then he spoke slowly. "One: that my circuits are damaged. Two: that some other entity caused me to receive the message."

"Which do you think it is?" snapped Blane.

"If you would like to test me, sir . . ." began Whizbang.

"To hell with tests! Which is it?"

"I think my circuits are intact."

"Then you think the message originated elsewhere?"

"Yes, sir—if you are sure you did not send it."

Blane controlled himself with difficulty. "We'll leave that for the moment. Repeat verbatim your commentary to the point where I apparently ordered you to return."

"Whizbang to *Prometheus*," said the robot. "Captain Trenoy is now descending through the oubliette to join Dr. Luiss. Dr. Luiss is examining the skeleton of the quadruped. The nearest butterflies are about two hundred yards away. There is a small cloud of them rising from the pampas. They appear to be circling aimlessly at an altitude of a hundred and fifty feet. . . . Captain Trenoy has now joined Dr. Luiss. They are digging together by the side of the skeleton. . . . The butterflies are drifting slightly. Captain Trenoy glances at them every few seconds, while continuing his work. Now the cloud is almost above the skeleton at about two hundred feet. . . . Suddenly the two men stand up. They stare at the butterflies. Dr. Luiss remarks over his personal radio that it is the most incredible thing he ever heard. Suddenly the butterflies drop fifty feet. At the same time, Captain Trenoy and Dr. Luiss begin to unscrew their headpieces very slowly. . . ." Whizbang stopped.

"Go on! Go on!" urged Dr. Blane.

"Then, sir," said Whizbang, "I

heard your voice through the transceiver. You said: '*Prometheus* to Whizbang. Return to orbit immediately. Urgent! Return to orbit immediately. Over and out.' "

"What happened next?" asked Blane.

"I informed Captain Trenoy over the ground radio. He said: 'You must obey, Whizbang. You must always obey.' So I sealed the rocket and took off as rapidly as possible. . . . By the time I had equalized gravity, and was beginning to release power, the butterflies had dropped another fifty feet. Captain Trenoy and Dr. Luiss were standing motionless. They had taken off their headpieces. Then I had to let in power, and the rocket climbed."

"Was Captain Trenoy's voice normal?"

"No, sir. He spoke slowly and very quietly."

"Are you sure it was his voice?"

"Yes, sir."

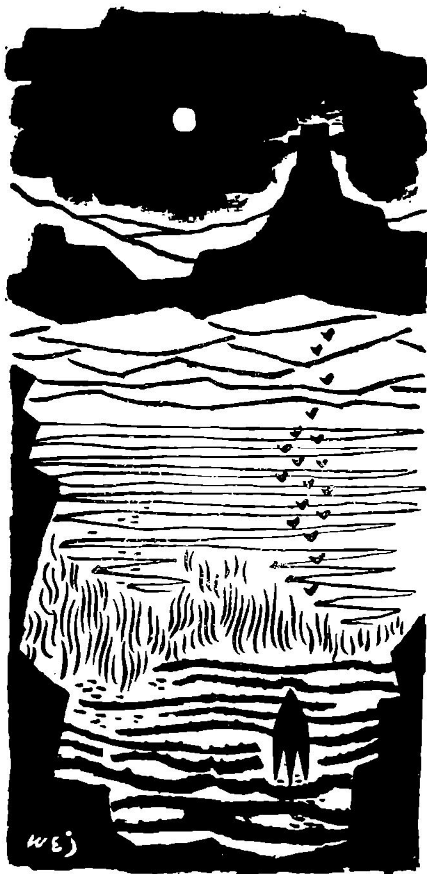
For two or three minutes Dr. Blane strode nervously up and down, tortured by indecision. Finally, he made up his mind.

"I am going down, Whizbang."

"Yes, sir."

"You will remain on duty here."

Dr. Blane set the rocket down gently. He unstrapped himself, stood up, and gazed through the plastiglass dome. A quarter of a mile away he saw two motionless figures standing erect on a stretch of brown and crimson rock. Focusing the binoculars, Dr. Blane made out a cloud of but-



terflies hovering about ten feet above the men. The heads of his two companions were strangely obscured, but dull sunlight glinted on the surface of a headpiece lying at the feet of one of them.

Grimly Dr. Blane reached for the two u/s vibrators. Placing them carefully in the pockets of his pressure suit, he descended through the oubliette. A few seconds later he stood on the strange surface of Planet Five.

Gripping a vibrator in each hand, he looked cautiously around him and then up at the sky. Apart from the cloud above the two men, a quarter of a mile away, and the endless activity on the pampas, there did not seem to be any immediate danger.

Slowly Dr. Blane walked towards his companions. At one hundred yards he stopped, stood quite still, took careful aim. He gave the cloud of butterflies a two-second dose of vibration. They scattered with much violent flapping, and a few dropped crazily down to the rocky surface. As they fell, another small cloud rose, and Dr. Blane knew then what had been obscuring the heads of Trenoy and Luiss. He fought back a sharp involuntary sickness and marched on.

At fifty yards he thought it was an illusion; but at twenty-five yards it became inescapable fact. Dr. Blane was approaching two men in pressure suits who were dead but still standing. Their clean-picked skulls were fixed in two barren grins.

In his own pressure suit Blane was sweating with panic. A sixth sense warned him to turn round and run. But it was already too late. For, to Dr. Blane's heightened perception, there came the first faint strains of a vast compelling music. It was the pattern, the experience, the mobility, the sheer harmony of a thousand symphonies condensed into a single chord.

Turning with a tremendous effort, he saw the butterflies rising from the

pampas, and knew—in the instant before that colossal theme of ecstasy blocked all thought—that presently the butterflies would begin to circle lower and lower.

There were tears in Dr. Blane's eyes. But they were not tears for his own approaching death. They were the only way in which he, and his companions before him, could react to an experience that was profound beyond any known to man; that was compelling and final, tearing its way past the flimsy threshold of human consciousness.

The vibrators dropped from his impatient fingers. Slowly, hypnotically, Dr. Blane fumbled for the release clips of his headpiece. And the music swelled like sacramental thunder, the soundless music of thousands of multi-coloured butterflies, thousands of insect carnivores closing in upon their selected prey. And across the pampas, across the brown and crimson rocks, myriads of flapping wings proclaimed their centralization of power—the submergence of the individual in a tremendous group identity.

Dr. Blane stood there, unable to think, unable to see, unable to move—waiting for the butterflies to descend. Waiting for the crunch of small but powerful mandibles. . . .

The short nine-hour day on Planet Five drew quietly to a close. Then the sun, known to earthlings as the Companion of Sirius, began to slip smoothly over a blue and purple horizon. Presently the butterflies rose, winging across the pampas to their nocturnal bat-like roosts. Presently there was only the solitude of night, the remote mystery of stars. . . .

The survey ship *Prometheus* remained in orbit for ten more days. Whizbang, the robot, kept a steady vigil by the transceiver on the navigation deck, in accordance with instructions. But the lack of response to his repeated signals forced him to the obvious conclusion.

He satisfied himself that there was one very sound reason why there could be no survivors: for men, unlike robots, cannot exist without water. Unfortunately, the water on Planet Five was different from its terrestrial counterpart, belonging to a different geological cycle. Its chemical symbol was infinitely more complex than mere H_2O.

So Whizbang brought in an open verdict, secure in the conviction that his masters could no longer be alive.

He had, however, no knowledge of the manner of their deaths. When he, too, had been a victim of the butterfly-mind, he had not heard the compelling music, for it was reaching to something far deeper than a synthetic brain. He had merely been positronically disturbed. He had merely been, for the first time in his robotic existence, asleep while his batteries were still powered. Nor could he know that, with a superior act of volition, the butterfly-mind had simply willed him to go away. Being metallic, he was not a possible source of food; and not being a source of food, he was only irrelevant.

But even a robot must rationalize

when forced to act without human command. So Whizbang had found it necessary to "invent" Dr. Blane's instruction to return to the *Prometheus.*

Standing now on the navigation deck, he stared with red expressionless eyes at the surface of Planet Five.

At last he reached a decision. The information would have to be given to other human beings, who would then assume responsibility.

Whizbang jerked himself up into the astrodome and began to take bearings. As he worked, he knew neither happiness nor anxiety, neither hope nor despair, neither regret nor relief.

He knew only that he could handle the Relativity Drive more efficiently than men.

All that part of the map that we do not see before us is a blank. The world in our conceit of it is not much bigger than a nutshell. It is not one prospect expanded into another, country joined to country, kingdom to kingdom, lands to seas, making an image voluminous and vast; the mind can form no larger idea of space than the eye can take in at a single glance. The rest is a name written in a map, a calculation of arithmetic. For instance, what is the true signification of that immense mass of territory and population, known by the name of China to us? An inch of paste-board on a wooden globe, of no more account than a China orange! Things near us are seen of the size of life: things at a distance are diminished to the size of the understanding. We measure the universe by ourselves, and even comprehend the texture of our own being only piecemeal.

William Hazlitt (1778–1830).

THE STICKS OF YEE CHENG

E. G. BROOKER

I MET LINDSTROM as the result of a combination of peculiar circumstances and an advertisement tucked away in the Personal Column of the evening paper. Not that I am in the habit of using the personal columns; it was his advertisement. And not that I am in the habit of reading them. But my train was late, thanks to thick fog. It crawled with many stops where it habitually ran fast and non-stop, so that I had exhausted the news pages, the feature page, and even the ladies' page, and was idly passing the last few miles of a tiresome journey by scanning the so-called bargain columns, when my eye caught the few intriguing lines that really led to this unusual experience.

It was commendably short, but interesting.

> "MAH-JONGG! Do you have a genuine Chinese set of Mah-jongg you no longer require? If so, ring POP 4345. I am willing to pay up to £100 for the set I want. MAH-JONGG!"

That was the advertisement. For the combination of circumstances I mentioned, a very few words will suffice. I was extremely short of money —almost broke. My new sports car had not proved to be the bargain I had hoped, and had cost me a pretty penny in unforeseen but essential repairs. My wife, from whom I was separated, had fallen sick and the resulting operation had been costly, an expense I felt in duty bound to meet.

And I did have a genuine Chinese Mah-jongg set!

David, my navigator on most of the motor trials I entered, was a war-time pal who had seen most of his service as a Squadron Doctor in Malaya. Among the "souvenirs" he brought back with him was a very fine set of Mah-jongg pieces, ivory-faced on black bamboo, complete with all the counters and frames. David had given this set to Linda and me as an anniversary present, and after discovering that the game was very like Canasta, which Linda played enthusiastically, we often had a "Mah-jongg" dinner party, when the set would be greatly admired. That it was valuable was obvious. The carved ivory seasons, dragons, and characters were inlaid with brilliant enamel, the bamboo backs had an ebony patina of age, and the winds themselves were inlaid with tiny jewels. Now Linda had gone, I never played the game. If the set would bring me a hundred pounds at a time when my bank manager was in almost weekly touch with me regarding my overdraft, I felt I could be forgiven for disposing of what had been a gift. I knew David would not mind.

Thus it was that during my lunch-time the following day, I 'phoned the number given in the advertisement.

To the voice that answered me I explained the reason of my call—I had a Mah-jongg set I was willing to sell. Oh! yes. Would I speak to Mr. Lindstrom? And in a few moments I was describing the set to a new voice. Lindstrom, who had a deep, pleasant 'phone voice, asked one or two questions about the set, said it appeared to be of the kind he required, and asked if I would care to bring the pieces up to town for him to examine more closely. One thing he was really insistent on—that the set was quite complete, with all the counters. On receiving my assurance, he gave me his office address, a place in the Minories, asked my name and set the time of our appointment to suit my convenience, which happened to be my lunch-time.

On the morrow, a few minutes before one o'clock, I was shown into Lindstrom's office, after making myself known to a very charming young lady, evidently his secretary.

On acquaintance, Lindstrom proved to be a tall, fair-haired chap, with a fine tanned complexion, pale blue eyes with a hint of the sea in them, a warm handgrip and a very friendly and engaging manner. On learning that I had already lunched, he hitched his hip on the corner of his desk, motioned me to a chair beside him and without further ado, got down to business.

"I see you've been good enough to bring the set with you," he said, pointing to the square parcel I had in my lap.

"I'm sure you won't mind my seeing it right away, for if it's not what I'm after, we can save both your time and mine."

He slid away from the desk, and gestured with a long tapering hand. "Care to unpack it up here?" he asked.

I put the box on his desk, and slipped the brown-paper covering from it. The outer box was some sort of Eastern wood, sandalwood maybe, and was locked. As I reached into my pocket for the key, I noticed that Lindstrom's eyes were eager and a little excited.

In a moment I had the box unlocked and withdrew the top two trays, which contained the bamboo bricks. With a touch of what I hoped was showmanship, I slid them across the desk, so that the beautifully carved bricks fell in a shimmering pattern on the desk-top, and then returned the empty trays to the box.

Lindstrom put out a tentative finger and turned one of the bricks face down, revealing the black polished-bamboo backing. His eyes were very bright and more excited, flickered across the display of ivory pictures and characters, then returned for a moment to the one upturned brick.

"Good," he said. "And now, may I see the rest of the set?"

"But that's all there are," I answered, putting a hand down and removing the empty trays. Then a thought struck me, remembering his repeated question over the 'phone the day before.

"Oh! You mean the counters. Yes, they're all here." And I drew out the bottom tray, and shook the counters out in a shower on the leather cover-

ing of his desk a few inches from his hand.

"Ah!" The exclamation seemed to whisper from his barely parted lips, and he reached out a hand that trembled just the merest trifle, and ran the ivory counters through his fingers for a moment. Then he stepped back and seated himself in the big swivel-chair behind the desk, leaned his elbows on the edge of the desk, and looked directly into my eyes.

"If you are not in a hurry," he said, "I would like to talk to you about these"—he gestured towards the tumbled bricks and counters. "I've been looking for that particular set of Mah-jongg for nearly fifteen years!"

He smiled at my evident surprise, and continued,

"Yes, that particular set. I know where it came from, and all about it. I know the name of the man who stole it from Johore. I know it was given to, or bought by, an English officer, and I was pretty sure it had been brought to this country."

He glanced at his wrist-watch, pushed a cigarette-box across the desk towards me and settled back in his chair, his eyes on the set of pieces sprawled across the leather in front of him. But I noticed his interest seemed to be confined to the counters, those thin slivers of ivory, carved or drilled to represent values, and used to score as the game of Mah-jongg is played.

"I am a Scandinavian," he said, "although my family, from the time of my grandfather, lived and traded in China. I was born there, and although I came first to Stockholm and then London for my education, I returned to China when I won my diploma, and took my place in the family business. We were importers and exporters, and dealt in almost anything, mostly tea, ivory, parchment and timber, and had branches in many cities besides Hong Kong.

"As I had a Chinese Ayah during my childhood, I naturally speak Chinese fluently. But, in addition, I always had a great interest in Mandarin, and I studied it as a hobby at first, and then, as I learned more about it, almost as an obsession. And I am one of the few Europeans who has a real ability to read the language. No! I'm not boasting.

"About 1935, while travelling in North China, I came across an old parchment manuscript, an obscure ideograph that almost defied translation. I took it back with me to Hong Kong, and at a later date showed it to a Chinese friend of mine, a very erudite old man, who had devoted his whole life to Chinese writings. Although he failed at the time to identify my find, he promised to study it at leisure in his own home, and later, was able to tell me about it.

"It was a fragment of the Book of Numbers, a fabulous Chinese writing by a very famous mathematical expert called Yee Cheng.

"Wong Lee, my friend, was very excited about the discovery, and with his help, I got the manuscript roughly translated. I won't go into details of all we had to do, but the work took all my spare time for nearly a year.

"When we finally had it rewritten in modern script, it revealed that Yee Cheng had devised and constructed a set of Immutable Counting Sticks that possessed peculiar powers. Perhaps I should explain that the Chinese have, for many centuries, done quite involved calculations by means of sets of sticks, bearing numerical characters engraved on them. Sort of prehistoric computing machines, I suppose one might call them. Anyhow, the manuscript set out all the details of the Yee Cheng sticks. They were supposed to bring the one who owned them good luck in business, and—they could be used to foretell the future by reading them off against a chart! I have the tabulated chart in my safe at this moment.

"But what I did not have was the sticks themselves. Perhaps you will think I'm a little crazy, but with my Chinese background, my knowledge of the people and their writings, I have a confirmed and sincere belief in their ability to do things we Westerners think impossible.

"I determined to get hold of those sticks if it were humanly possible. That was in 1936. It took me about four years to find out what they looked like. Chinese calculating sticks are usually about a foot long, carved ivory or bamboo, and go in bundles of a dozen or so. But it was only after a long and painstaking investigation that I found out that the Yee Cheng sticks were much smaller."

Lindstrom's eyes were fastened on the counters of my Mah-jongg set, as if hypnotized.

"They finally proved to be about two and three-quarters inches long, a set of ten, made of thin ivory strip, engraved on one side, and each bored with a small hole, though no hole was in the same relative position on any two sticks."

I glanced at my counters. In all the games we had played with those pieces, I had often wondered why the thousand counters had had holes in them. There was nothing we could use them for.

"It was about two years after the war started," continued the quiet voice of Lindstrom, "that I got a bit of really important information. The Japs had just overrun Hong Kong and I had been lucky to get into the Central Provinces without being captured. I went to ground in a little village hundreds of miles up the river and managed to make friends with some Chinese monks who resided in the local monastery. They gave me shelter, and it was from one of them that I got the key to the whereabouts of the sticks. It appears that during a Tong struggle, about a century earlier, the sticks were being fought over by two rival Tongs, and for safe-keeping had been hidden. The hiding-place was superbly clever. They had been substituted, in a Mandarin Mah-jongg set, for the ten-thousand counters, which they resembled very closely. And there they had been ever since. I won't go into details why I knew that they were still there, but the monks produced almost definite proof.

"And from then on, I chased that Mah-jongg set as assiduously as I had previously chased the sticks. By the time the Japs had been thrown out of China and Malaya, I had tracked down the set. It had been given to a high-ranking priest in payment for unspecified and doubtless unsavoury favours. He, in turn, had disposed of it to a prince of the faith, and by 1948 I had tracked it down to a palace in Johore. After incredible difficulties, I managed to get there, to find that the palace had been looted by the Japs some time earlier, and the loot distributed over a pretty wide area.

"But I was lucky. An American missionary had seen the Jap commander with a Mah-jongg set, and from his description, it seemed probable that this was the set I was after. By now, the Japs had themselves been stripped of their ill-gotten gains, and I had another struggle to trace the set.

"All I could be sure of was that it had been sold, or exchanged amongst many other Eastern curios, to an officer in the Air Force, who had left for England shortly after it had come into his keeping.

"I followed to England, and after many fruitless inquiries, decided upon the advertisement you saw. I hate to think how many sets I've been offered, it must be hundreds. Quite a few were Mandarin black bamboo, but the counters always showed that I hadn't found the right one. Now I have."

Lindstrom's fingers had been playing with the counters while he had been telling his story. He sifted them again and again through his fingertips, gradually separating the ten long ivory splines from the rest. Now he held them in his left hand, and looked across at me.

"These are what I want. You can keep the rest of the pieces if you like and I'll pay anything in reason for just these ten little bits of ivory. Are you prepared to sell?"

What could I say? The damn sticks meant little enough to me, and the hundred he had offered certainly did. But I felt a curious reluctance to say "yes" right away. I found myself wanting to know more about their strange power: I wondered what use Lindstrom was going to make of them.

"Tell me something," I asked, after a few moments' thought. "If I sell them to you, what use are you going to make of them?"

I hesitated. "I don't believe in all this nonsense about being able to foretell the future, but I am curious to see the things work. If I agree to sell them to you, will you agree to show me what they can do?"

Without a word, Lindstrom got up from his chair, still holding the counters in one hand, turned to a safe set in the wall behind his desk. He played with the combination for a few seconds, I heard the click of tumblers, then the safe door swung open. He reached in and withdrew a thick parchment envelope, turned and seated himself again at his desk. With the counters still clipped beneath the last two fingers of his left hand, he opened the envelope and shook out its contents. A long faded fold of parchment, indited with brownish

characters and squiggles, which I recognized as Chinese brush writing; three or four thin sheets of flimsy paper, covered in a similar sort of writing, but looking fresh and black; and a couple of sheets of English script. That was all.

Lindstrom leaned back and took up the parchment. "This," he said, "was the original I found all those years ago. It seems rather wonderful to think that this was written nearly twelve centuries ago by one of the most able mathematicians in the world."

He put the parchment to one side, and picked up the flimsy.

"These are the original translations, in modern Mandarin," he said, "and they represent hundreds of hours of delving in old and abstruse books, thousands of questions to the teachers and writers of the Chinese language and further hundreds of hours sifting and analysing their answers."

The thin sheets joined the parchment, and he picked up the paper in English.

"This," he said, "is the tabulated chart of the sticks of Yee Cheng, written in plain English. It gives each pattern that the stick can form, and an interpretation of what that pattern foretells. There are very many possible patterns in a set of ten sticks. Each one has a special meaning and"—he tapped the paper against the little bundle of sticks still held in his left hand—"these are the sticks. I now have no doubt about that."

For a moment his eyes looked past me, as if he were seeing the hours of labour he had just described. Then his glance returned to my face. "If you are still interested, I will explain how these are used." He held the sticks out towards me, and after a few seconds, I nodded, but did not speak.

"According to Yee Cheng, the ten sticks were to be taken in the left hand, squared so that all the ends coincided, and then flung up in a bunch so that they fell freely on to a flat surface." With his right arm he swept a clear space on the leather top of his desk, and a few of the bricks of my set fell to the carpet. But we neither of us stooped to retrieve them. With the fingers of his right hand he settled the little ivory slips in an orderly bunch, and then, with a flirt of the fingers of his left hand, flung them up and across the desk, so that they pattered down in a pattern of criss-cross and meaningless straight lines.

Lindstrom looked up at me. "Now, as you can see, some are lying with their unengraved faces upwards, and some have their characters visible. One then has to separate them, without turning any of them over, and slide them into a side-by-side pattern of parallel sticks. He suited the words by gently sliding the sticks apart, careful not to turn any face for face or end for end. His thin fingers lovingly pushed the counters together, so that they lay side by side, and touching each other, their ends level.

"Now," he said again, "you will notice that the holes already make a pattern. Those sticks that have characters visible have to be discarded." He deftly drew out four sticks that had their golden characters upper-

most, and pushed the remainder together. The holes formed an undulating line up and down the patch of white ivory.

Lindstrom smiled. "That pattern means something," he said, "and that something is listed on the tabulations of which I have the full translation." With a sweep of his finger-tips, he jumbled the set sticks into a heap, and picked them up. "Like to try?"

I hesitated. How could those silly bits of carved ivory foretell anything, I wondered? Yet I was reluctant to find out for myself. Lindstrom himself seemed so sure, so confident, that it was hard not to believe there was something in it.

Then a thought suddenly struck me!

"I'm not sure there's anything in it after all. I think there's a fallacy somewhere. Suppose you were to throw the sticks up and they all came down with the characters showing? Then, according to what you've just told me, you'd have to take them all away, and have no pattern left. What would that show?"

Lindstrom's smile faded, his face went blank, and for a moment he remained still and silent. Then he gave a peculiar laugh.

"I was intrigued by the same thought, soon after we had translated the original manuscript. We examined the tabulations for that condition, but it wasn't prescribed. The smallest pattern is a singleton hole which can occur in any of ten places, each of which has a finite interpretation on the chart. I've forgotten what any of them are, but"—his hand slid out to the document—"we can soon see, if you are interested."

I shook my head. "No, it was the condition of 'no pattern' that I was talking about. It seems as if there's something wrong."

He looked at me quietly for a second or so.

"Wong Lee had the same question to ask," he said at last. "Wong Lee thought it strange that the Yee Cheng charts didn't provide for every pattern that might occur, for obviously, there was the possibility that all ten sticks might come down 'butterside down.' He decided that there must have been an additional page of the book dealing with that eventuality, a page that I had not found. Anyway, prompted by a curiosity similar to yours, we did a lot more delving, reading up obscure manuscripts and old ideographs, but without much success. Then the war came, and I lost touch with Wong Lee.

"But, in between dodging the Japs, he continued his researches, probably prompted by an academic desire to prove Yee Cheng right. I learned what he had found out, and the suppositions he had made when I met him on my way out of China after the war.

"You must remember that Wong Lee, in spite of his learning, was what I like to call the essential Chinese, steeped in tradition and what we regard as superstition. He thought that should the sticks ever come down for anyone in that particular pattern, then—as they were supposed to foretell the future—for that person, well! there would be no future!"

As he had been speaking, Lindstrom had been playing with the sticks collected in his left hand, squaring them off, and patting them into a neat bundle. With a sudden gesture, he flung them in the air, and they scattered as they fell on to the top of his big desk. Instinctively, we both glanced down at them.

Then, for me at least, the glance became a stare.

I leaned over the desk and checked what I thought had happened. It was true! Every one of the ten sticks of Yee Cheng lay with its face upwards! Every stick bore a script of golden characters, all plainly visible. The "no future" pattern had formed itself from Lindstrom's casual throw.

I found I was watching my companion breathlessly. He stood, tall and straight, looking at those damned sticks with a peculiar whimsical, half-smiling expression. And he stood so, silent, as if he had forgotten where he was, forgotten all about me, forgotten everything, for more than a minute.

And I stood silent, also.

Then he gave a short laugh, seemed to wrench his eyes from the pattern of sticks, then turned away from the desk and looked at me.

"Well," he said softly, "the impossible pattern, after all. But never mind that," and he turned and swept the ten sticks in a small bundle and clenched them in his hand.

"Impossible pattern or not, I still want these things. You can keep the pieces, if you like. But these are mine." He paused. "I've shown my hand, put myself in a bad position for bargaining, and you can ask almost any price, can't you?"

But I wouldn't have that. I'd brought the set to sell, and I would be grateful for the hundred pounds of his advertisement. And so it was agreed. Lindstrom was saying something about sending out at once to get a cheque cashed when I happened to glance at my watch. I was shocked to see that it was after three o'clock; I didn't realize how the time had flown. At that moment, I was more concerned with my absence from my office than even the hundred pounds. As I picked up my hat and coat and made for the door, Lindstrom turned with me.

"Leave the set with me," he said. "Call tomorrow at any time you find convenient, and I'll have the money waiting for you. You can trust me."

I nodded, and dashed out.

I called at his Minories office at about one o'clock the next day. Once again, I met the charming young lady I thought to be his secretary, and this time she recognized me and handed me a fat envelope, on which my name was written. I presume it was Lindstrom's hand-writing, but I shall never find out.

The envelope contained twenty five-pound notes. "I'd like to see Mr. Lindstrom personally to thank him," I said. She looked at me with a funny, sad sort of expression, and I fancied she was near to tears.

"I'm sorry, sir," she whispered, "but Mr. Lindstrom was knocked down by a taxi outside the office last night. He's dead!"

THE LOCKED ROOM

CELIA FREMLIN

Illustrated by Pat Moody

A DOOR banged in the empty flat upstairs. Margaret felt her fingers tighten on the covers of her library book, but she refused to look up. As long as she could keep her eyes running backwards and forwards along the lines of print she could tell herself that she hadn't given in to her fear—to this ridiculous, unreasoning fear that had so inexplicably laid hold of her this evening.

What was there to be afraid of, anyway? Simply that the upstairs flat had been empty all this week, and that Henry was on duty tonight? But she had often been alone before—if you could call it alone, with Robin and Peter in bed in the very next room. Two little boys of six and eight sound asleep in bed can't really be called company, but still. . . .

"Leonora hesitated, wondering which way she should turn."

Margaret realized that she was still reading the same sentence, over and over again, and she shut the book with an angry little slam. What *was* the matter with her? Was it that murder in the papers—some woman strangled by a poor wretch who had been ill-treated in his childhood? He had a grudge against women or something—Margaret hadn't followed it very carefully—had locked himself in an empty room in this woman's house, and then, in the middle of the night, had crept out. . . . All very horrid, of course; but then one was always reading of murders in the papers—anyway, they'd probably caught him by now. Now, what had she better do to put these silly ideas out of her head once and for all?

Go upstairs, of course. Go upstairs to the empty flat, look briskly through all the rooms, shut firmly whichever door it was that was banging and come down again, her mind set at rest. Simple.

She put her book down on the little polished table at her side. But why was she putting it down so softly, so cautiously . . . ? Margaret shook herself irritably. There wasn't the slightest need to be quiet. Nothing ever seemed to wake the boys once they were properly off, and poor deaf old Mrs. Palmer on the ground floor certainly wouldn't be troubled. Just to convince herself, she picked the book up again and dropped it noisily on the table. Then, with a firm step, she walked out on to the landing.

The once gracious staircase of the old house curved down into complete blackness. For a moment Margaret was taken aback. Even though old Mrs. Palmer was often in bed before ten, she always left the hall light on

for the other tenants—perhaps, too, for her own sake, from a deaf woman's natural anxiety not to be shut away in darkness as well as silence. Margaret stood for a moment, puzzled. Then she remembered. Of course; the poor old thing had gone off that morning on one of her rare visits to a married niece. Tonight the downstairs flat was empty too.

Margaret was annoyed to feel her palms growing sticky as she gripped the top of the banisters, peering down into the darkness. Whatever difference did it make whether Mrs. Palmer was there or not? Even if she was there, she would have been asleep by now, deep, deep in her world of silence, far out of reach of any human voice . . . of any screams. . . .

Snap out of it, girl! Margaret scolded herself. This is what comes of reading whodunits in the evening instead of catching up with the ironing as I meant to! She turned sharply round and walked across the landing to the other staircase—the dusty, narrower staircase that led up to the empty flat.

The hall stairs were in bad enough repair, goodness knew, but these were worse. Margaret turned the bend which cut her off from the light of her own landing. She could feel the rotten plaster crumbling under her hand as she felt her way up in the darkness.

The pitter-patter of plaster crumbs falling on to the stair boards was a familiar enough sound to Margaret after six months in this decrepit old house; but all the same she wished the little noise would stop. It seemed to make her more nervous—to get in the way of something. And it was only then that she realized how intently her ears were strained to hear some sound from the empty rooms above.

But what sound? Margaret stood on the top landing listening for a moment before she reached out for the light switch.

Bother! The owners, who in all these months had never raised a finger to repair rotting plaster, broken locks and split window-frames, had nevertheless bestirred themselves in less than a week to switch off the electric-light supply to the empty flat! Now she would have to explore the place in the dark. She felt her way along the wall to the first of the four doors that she knew opened on to this landing. It opened easily; and Margaret again silently cursed the owners. If only they'd take the trouble to fix usable locks on their own property she would have been spared all this—the top flat could have been properly locked up the moment the Davidsons left, and then there would have been no possibility of anyone lurking there. Her annoyance strengthened her, and she flung the door wide open.

Empty, of course. Accustomed as her eyes were to the complete blackness of the landing, the room seemed to her quite brightly lit by the dim square of the window, and she could see at a glance into every empty corner. The next room was empty too, and the next, except for the twisted, shadowy bulk of the antique gas

cooker which Mrs. Davidson used so often to declare had "gone funny on her," and might she boil up a kettle on the very slightly newer cooker in Margaret's flat?

The fourth door was locked. Nothing surprising in that, Margaret told herself, turning the shaky china knob this way and that without success. Not surprising at all. All the rooms ought to have been locked like this—probably this was the only one which *would* lock, and the owners had lazily hoped for the best about the others. A perfectly natural explanation: no need to turn the handle so stealthily. . . . To prove the point, Margaret gave the knob a brisk rattle, and it came off in her hand. Just like this house! she was thinking, and heard the corresponding knob on the other side of the door fall to the ground with a report like a pistol in the silence of the night.

But what was that? It might have been the echo of the bang, of course, in the empty room. Or—yes, of course, that must be it! Margaret let her breath go in a sigh of relief. That scraping, tapping noise—that was exactly the noise a china knob would make, rolling lopsidedly across the bare boards. Wasn't it? Yes, of course it was. Margaret was surprised to find how quickly she had got back to her own flat—to her lighted sitting-room—to her own fireside, her heart beating annoyingly, and the dirty china knob still in her hand.

"Leonora hesitated, wondering which way she should turn."

Margaret pushed the book away with a gesture of irritation. She had thought that by facing her fear—by going up to the empty flat, looking in all the rooms and shutting the doors firmly so that they couldn't bang, she would have regained her peace of mind. Yet here she was, sitting just as before, her heart thumping, her ears straining for she did not know what.

What *is* it all about? she asked herself. Has anything happened today to make me feel nervous? Have I subconsciously noticed anyone suspicious lurking about outside? God knows

it's a queer enough neighbourhood! And leaning her chin on her hands, her thick black curls falling forward on to her damp forehead, she thought over the events of the day.

Absolutely nothing out of the ordinary. Henry had gone to work as usual. The boys had been got off to school with the usual amount of clatter and argument—Peter unable to find his wellingtons, and Robin announcing, at the very last moment, just as they were starting down the steps, that his teacher had said they were all to bring a cardboard box four inches across and a long thin piece of string.

Then had followed the morning battle for cleanliness against the obstinate old house. The paintwork that collapsed into dry rot if you wiped it too thoroughly. The cobwebs that brought bits of plaster down with them, when you got at them with a broom. They weren't going to be here much longer, that was one thing, reflected Margaret. They would be moving to the country soon after Christmas, and it hadn't seemed worth while to look for anywhere else to live for such a short time. Besides, if they *had* to live in a flat with two lively small boys, this ramshackle old place offered some advantages. Among all this decay no one was going to notice sticky fingermarks and chipped paint; no one was going to complain about what games the children played in the neglected garden, overgrown with brambles and willow herb. No one minded their boots, and the boots of their numerous small friends, clattering up and down the stairs.

Margaret smiled as she thought of the odd assortment of friends her sons had managed to collect during their six months here. Such an odd mixture of children you got in a neighbourhood like this, ranging from real little street toughs to the bespectacled son of a divorced but celebrated professor. Always in and out of the house—Margaret couldn't put a name to half of them. That crowd this afternoon, for instance—who *were* they all? Margaret wrinkled her brows, trying to remember. Alan, of course, the freckle-faced mischief from the paper shop at the corner. And Raymond—the fair, sly boy that Henry said she shouldn't let the children play with—but what could you do? And William — stodgy, mouse-coloured William—who simply came to eat her cakes, it seemed to Margaret, for he never seemed to play at anything in particular with the others.

Oh, and there had been another one today—a new one, for whom Margaret had felt an immediate revulsion. About eight or nine he must have been, very small for his age and yet strangely mature, with a sharp, shrewd light in his pale, red-rimmed eyes. He had a coarse mop of ill-cut ginger hair and the palest of pale eyebrows and eyelashes, almost invisible in his pale, pinched face. And he was painfully thin. In spite of her dislike, Margaret had been touched by this—and puzzled, too. Real undernourishment is so rare in children nowadays. She had pressed on him cakes and bread and jam, but he had not eaten

anything—indeed, he seemed scarcely aware that anything was being offered him. In the end Margaret had given up and left the others to demolish the provisions with their usual speed.

Margaret shivered, suddenly cold, and leaned forward to put more coal on the fire. The memory of this queer, ginger-haired child had somehow made her feel uneasy all over again. She wished she'd made more effort to find out who he was and where he came from, but the boys were always so vague about that sort of thing.

"What, Mummy?" Peter had said when she asked him about the child that evening. "Mummy, you said *I* could have the next cornflake packet, and now Robin——"

"Yes, yes, darling, but listen. Who was that little ginger-haired boy you brought in from school today?"

"Who did?" interrupted Robin helpfully.

"Well—Peter, I suppose. Or do *you* know him, Robin? Perhaps he's *your* friend?"

"Who is?"

Margaret had sighed.

"The little ginger-haired boy. The one who hardly ate anything at tea."

"*I* didn't hardly eat anything, either," remarked Robin smugly.

"Ooo—you story!" broke in Peter indignantly. "I saw you myself, you had three cakes, and . . ."

Margaret had given it up, and determined to ask the child himself if he ever turned up again.

Then, to her surprise, when she had gone across the landing to put on the boys' bath, she thought she caught a glimpse of the little creature in the hall below, darting past the foot of the stairs and out through the back door. But she couldn't be sure; dusk always fell early in that dim, derelict hall, and the whole thing might have been a trick of the light. Anyway, when she had gone to the back door and called into the damp autumn twilight there had been no answer, and nothing stirred among the rank, overgrown shrubs and weeds.

Margaret picked up her book again, slightly reassured. All this could quite reasonably explain her nervousness tonight. She was feeling guilty, that's what it was. There was something peculiar about the child, and she should have made more effort to find out about him. Perhaps he needed help—after all, there *were* cases of child cruelty and neglect even nowadays. Tomorrow she would really go into the matter, and then there would be nothing more to worry about.

"Leonora hesitated, wondering which way she should turn."

Sometimes, on waking from a deep sleep, one knows with absolute certainty that something has wakened one, but without knowing what. Margaret knew, with just this certainty, that something had made her raise her eyes from the book. She listened, listened as she had listened before that night, to the deep pulsing in her ears and to the tiny flickering murmur of the coals. Nothing more.

But wasn't there? What was that, then, that faint, faint shuffle on the landing outside? Shuffle, shuffle, soft as an autumn leaf drifting—shuffle, shuffle—pad, pad . . . silently

the door swung open, and there stood Robin, blinking, half-asleep, and treading down the heels of his bedroom slippers in the way he was always being told not to.

Margaret let go her breath in a gasp of relief.

"Robin! Whatever's the matter? Why aren't you asleep?"

Robin blinked at her owlishly, his eyes large and round as they always were when just wakened from sleep.

"I don't like that little boy in my bed," he observed.

"What little boy? Whatever are you talking about, Robin?"

"That little boy. He's horrid. He pinches me. And he's muddling the blankets. On purpose."

"Darling, you're dreaming! Come along and let's see."

Taking the child's hand Margaret led him back into his own room and switched on the light.

There was Peter, rosily asleep with his mouth open as usual; and there was Robin's little bed, empty, and with the clothes tumbled this way and that as if he had tossed about a lot in his sleep. This confirmed Margaret's opinion that he had had a nightmare. After all, what was more likely after her cross-questioning about the mysterious little visitor that evening? In spite of his apparent inattention, Robin had no doubt sensed something of the anxiety and distaste behind her questions, and it was the most likely thing in the world that he would dream about it when he went to bed. However, to reassure the child, Margaret embarked on a thorough search of the little room. Under both the beds they looked, into the clothes cupboard, behind the curtains—even, at Robin's insistence, into the impossibly narrow space behind the chest of drawers.

"He was such a *thin* little boy, you see, Mummy," Robin explained, and the phrase gave Margaret a nasty little pang of uneasiness. The hungry, too-old little face seemed to hover before her for a moment, its eyes full of ancient, malicious knowledge. She blinked it away, shut the lid of the brick box (what an absurd place to

look!) and bundled Robin firmly back to bed.

"And do you promise I won't dream it again?" asked Robin anxiously; and Margaret promised. This was the standard formula after Robin's nightmares. So far, it had always worked.

Nearly twelve o'clock. There was nothing whatever to stay up for, but somehow Margaret couldn't bring herself to go to bed. She reached out towards her library book, but felt that she could not face Leonora's indecision yet again, and instead picked up yesterday's evening paper. She would look for something cheerful and ordinary to read before she went to bed. The autumn fashions, perhaps —or would it be the spring ones they'd be writing about in October? It was all very confusing nowadays. . . .

But it wasn't the autumn fashions she found herself reading—or the spring ones. It was the blurred photograph of the wanted man that caught her eye—a man in his fifties, perhaps —from such a bad picture it was difficult to tell. A picture of the murdered woman, too—a Mrs. Harriet somebody—and a description of her . . . Margaret's attention suddenly became riveted, and she read the report from beginning to end, hardly daring to breathe. This man, at large somewhere in London tonight, had escaped from a mental institution where he had been sent some years ago for strangling another woman in somewhat similar circumstances to this Mrs. Harriet . . . Margaret felt her limbs grow rigid. Both women had been the mothers of small boys . . . both had lived in tall, derelict houses let off into flats . . . both had had black hair done in tight curls. . . .

Margaret fingered her hairstyle with damp, trembling fingers, and tried not to read any more, but her eyes seemed glued to the page. Why had the man not been hanged that first time? There followed the story of his childhood—a story of real Dickensian horror. Brought up in a tall, ruined old house by a stepmother who had starved him, thrashed him, shut him in dark rooms where she told him clawed fiends were waiting . . . her black, shining curls had quivered over his childhood like the insignia of torture and death. The prison doctors had learned all this from him after the first murder—and had learned, too, how the sight of a black-haired woman going up the steps of just such a derelict house as he remembered had brought back his terror and misery with such vividness that: "I didn't just *feel* like a little boy again —I *was* a little boy . . . that was my house . . . that was *her*"—that was the only way he could describe it. And he had crept into the house, locked himself in one of the empty rooms until the dead silence of the night, and then crept out, with a child's enormity of terror and hatred in his heart, and with a man's strength in his fingers. . . .

Margaret closed her eyes for a second, and then opened them again to read the description of the murderer: "About fifty years of age, medium height, ginger hair growing grey, eyebrows and eyelashes almost invisible. . . ." With every word the

face leapt before her more vividly—not the face of the ageing, unknown man, but the little, malevolent face she had seen that afternoon—the ill-cut ginger hair, the little red-rimmed eyes filled with the twisted malice of an old and bitter man. . . .

"I didn't just *feel* like a little boy again, I *was* a little boy. . . ." The words beat through Margaret's brain, on and on, over and over again.

She thrust the paper away from her. Don't be so fanciful and absurd, she told herself. After all, if I *really* think anything's wrong, all I've got to do is call the police. There's the telephone just there in the hall. She walked slowly to the door and out on to the landing, and stood there in her little island of light, with darkness above and below. She tried to go on telling herself what nonsense it all was, how ridiculous she was being. But now she dared not let any more words come into her mind, not any words at all. For she was listening: listening as civilized human beings rarely have need to listen—listening as an animal listens in the murderous blackness of the forest. Not just with the ears—rather with the whole body. Every organ, every nerve is alert, pricked up, so that, in the end, it is impossible to say through which sense the message comes, and comes with absolute certainty: Danger is near. Danger is on the move.

For there was no sound. Margaret felt certain of that. No sound to tell her that something was stirring in the locked room upstairs—that dark, empty room so like the locked room where once a little boy had gone half-mad with terror at the thought of the clawed fiends. The clawed fiends who had lost their terrors through the years and become his friends and allies, for now at last he was a clawed fiend himself.

Still Margaret heard no sound. No sound to tell her that the door of the empty room was being unlocked, silently, and with consummate skill, from the inside. No shuffle of footsteps across the dusty, upstairs landing. No creak from the ancient, rickety steps of that top flight of stairs. And in the end it was not Margaret's straining ears at all which caught the first hint of the oncoming creature; it was her eyes. They seemed to have been riveted on that shadowy bend in the banisters for so long that when she saw the hand at last, long and tapering, like five snakes coiled round the rail, she could have imagined it had been there all the time, flickering in and out and dancing before her eyes.

But not the face. No, that couldn't have been there before. Not anywhere, in all the world, could there have been a face like that—a face so distorted—so alight with hate that it seemed almost luminous as it leered out of the blackness . . . as it seemed to glide down towards her a foot or two above the banister. . . .

There was a sound now; a quick pattering of feet, horribly light and soft, like a child's, as they bore the heavy adult shape down the stairs, the white, curled fingers reaching out towards her. . . .

A little frightened cry at Margaret's elbow freed her from her paralysis. A

little white face , . . a tangle of ginger hair . . . and an instinct stronger than that of self-preservation gripped her. In a second she was on her knees, her arms round the small trembling body; she felt the little creature's shaking terror subsiding into a great peace as she held him against her breast.

That dropping on her knees was her salvation. In that very second her assailant lunged, tripped over her suddenly lowered body, and pitched headlong down the stairs behind her. Crash upon crash as he fell from step to step, and then silence. Absolute silence.

Then a new clamour arose.

"Mummy! Mummy! Who . . . ? What . . . ?—a tangle of small legs and arms, and in a moment her arms seemed to be full of little boys. She collected her wits and looked down at them. Only two of them, of course, her own two, their familiar dark heads pressed against her, their frightened questions clamouring in her ears. . . .

And when the police came, and Henry came, and the dead man was taken away, there was so much to tell, so much to explain. It could all be explained quite easily, of course (as Henry pointed out), with only a very little stretching of coincidence. The little ginger-headed boy must come from somewhere in the neighbourhood—no doubt he could be traced, and if necessary helped in some way. Margaret's obsession about him would explain Robin's dream; it would also explain why, in that moment of terror, she imagined the strange child had rushed into her arms. Really, of course, it must have been one of her own boys.

And yet Margaret could never forget the smile on the face of the dead man as he lay crumpled at the foot of the stairs. They say that the faces of the dead can set in all sorts of incongruous expressions, but it seemed to Margaret that that smile had not been the smile of a grown man at all; it had been the smile of a little boy who has felt the comfort of a mother's arms at last.

Dark house, by which once more I stand
Here in the long unlovely street,
Doors, where my heart was used to beat
So quickly, waiting for a hand.

ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON (1809–1892).

MAKE IT RAIN

MAURICE JAMES

HEN YOU ARE hanging about with nothing to do all day, it's strange how you start thinking about yourself. It's nearly two months now since the accident and, although I feel as well as ever, apart from the headaches, of course, Dr. Williams won't let me go back to work.

"You must rest, you know . . . plenty of rest."

"But, Doctor, I feel pretty good now. . . ."

"Yes, yes, I know . . . but you've had a shock and you must rest. . . . I'll call in next week."

Same old thing every week.

After a bit you get tired of reading, the novelty of doing nothing wears off, and you get restless. I mean restless in the mind. When I lounge in the old easy chair my brain starts hopping around like a wild thing, racing here and there until I can almost *hear* the throbbing in my head. Then the clatter of dishes will suddenly stop the mad scamper and I am left with only the ache.

I always feel guilty then and peer about to see whether Olwen, that's my wife, has noticed that I have been "star-gazing" again, as she calls it. If I am alone in the room, without moving, I study myself. I see my hands, the knuckles white, still grasping my knee. My other leg is curled awkwardly around the leg of the chair. I can feel my mouth hanging slightly open, and I think I must look very foolish.

Not that I am an impressive sort of chap at the best of times. My face is long and thin, my chest narrow, and my knees show bony through the well-worn trousers. I am what the books describe as " insignificant."

It was only yesterday that little Huw came running to me, his mouth agape as if prepared for the rush of words which gushed from him in one long breathless stream. "Daddy—Johnny — Roberts — next — door—says — his — father — calls — you —old—Meek—a—Mild—what's——Meekamild?"

Old Meek and Mild! Yes, I suppose he's right, tallies with my physique, anyhow. It would be unwise for anyone my size to be otherwise. Old Meek and Mild!

Aye, this business of doing nothing makes you ponder on things which you have taken for granted before, like my "insignificance" and my mildness and the way I hate quarrels and rows and talk of war and beastliness. . . . I'm not white-washing myself, it's . . . well God made me that way, I suppose.

All this worries me, too, because of the dreams I've been having since I've been away from work. They don't come every night. I remember the first time. In my sleep I heard a

voice screaming and Olwen's calling my name and I awoke and I knew that the screaming voice had been my own. I don't know who was the more frightened.

"For goodness' sake, Edward, what's the matter?"

"It was a dream," I gasped.

"Dream! Sounded more like a nightmare to me." Olwen doesn't like to be awakened suddenly, and she was a bit snappish now. "You nearly frightened me to death."

"Ugh, it was horrible . . . I had an axe . . . there were children and . . ."

"All right, don't tell me . . . what did you have for supper?"

Long after Olwen had gone to sleep I lay beside her, afraid to close my eyes.

I feel so useless, sometimes, and unwanted, that if I weren't afraid of Olwen or one of the children seeing me I should cry, just like a baby. I've thought about that, too, but it gets me nowhere. If that damned doctor would only let me go back to the office . . . I *could* go, of course, despite what he says . . . but . . . then he'll be upset and there'll be words . . . and I hate scenes . . . how right little Huw and his Meek and Mild! Goodness knows I should be used to Olwen's briskness by now, but even that makes me wince nowadays.

One day, last week, after she had told me to go for a walk so that she could clean the room, I went slowly along the hillside behind the house.

It was a lovely day, and as I climbed higher I saw that the ugly old valley seemed softer and even beautiful through the haze. Far away I heard a dog bark, the birds chattered in the trees that lined the brook. I threw a stick at some sheep and laughed to see their tails bobbing madly as they ran. I clapped my hands, and a cloud of birds rose from the branches. There was a feeling of suppressed excitement inside me and I felt well and fit again. Then I discovered I was no longer walking aimlessly but had crossed the brook and was making steadily for a spot some distance higher up the mountain we called Mardy Gate.

I was breathless and perspiring when, at last, I threw myself down upon the grass. There was no valley now, only the fields and the trees in the distance and the old Roman wall striding steadily up and down the hillocks and over the crest of the mountain. I watched a lark rising, singing as he soared far above me, until I lost him in the sun. It was all so familiar, as if I had been there a short time previously, whereas many years had passed since I sat there. The strange urge of excitement persisted within me until I reached the house.

"Well," said Olwen, "that walk seems to have done you a lot of good . . . got quite a colour . . . your eyes a lot brighter, too. . . ."

I dreamed again that night.

The doctor refused again to let me go to work. "Wait another week or two. . . ."

"But I feel fine, Doctor, really I do. . . . After all, I didn't break any bones, did I? and . . ."

"Mr. Rowlands, when you snatched your youngster from in front of that car, you had a blow, a pretty severe blow too, when the mudguard hit you. At least, your head was hard enough to dent the mudguard. What with bruises and cuts I should say you had a shaking, so . . . I want you to rest."

"More rest, Doctor?"

"More rest."

At the door he turned. "How are you sleeping?"

I glanced at Olwen, but she wasn't looking at me.

"All right," I said.

The house is very quiet without Olwen and the children. They wanted me to go with them to the cinema, but I said my head hurt. I am lonely and depressed—and I don't know why. I cannot think any more. Nothing has happened—nothing, to make me feel as low as this, nothing but my idleness and my thoughts . . . and behind everything, my fear. I don't know why I am frightened. . . .

I still dream . . . the same dream. I don't scream now, so I needn't have worried about Olwen telling the doctor—she doesn't know.

Perhaps I am getting used to it . . . used to the horror . . . the shrieks of children . . . the bloody axe . . . the woman . . . used to that awful sense of power and the excitement. Edward Rowlands—old Meek and Mild—glorying in blood and beastliness! Of course, it's fantastic. I wonder what they'd say in the office if I told them. What would Olwèn say? I've never told her the whole of it . . . only a little that first night . . . and she hasn't asked me about it . . . funny she hasn't asked . . . she'd probably laugh and tell me not to eat a heavy supper. I wish I could laugh. Because it *is* rather funny, I suppose, to imagine that I should be able to do those things.

I must go out more. I'll go up to Mardy Gate again. I felt wonderful that day I was up there . . . strong, excited and powerful . . . like I do in my dream. The Mardy Gate! Was *that* why it appeared so familiar to me, as if I had been there recently? Because I see it every time that nightmare comes upon me?

I wish Olwen would come home.

I don't know how long I have been standing at the window. The sky is bright with a million stars, the moon is round and yellow. I can hear a cricket chirping somewhere.

And all the time I can still hear Olwen's voice saying, "We'll all go for a picnic tomorrow, Edward. You and me and the children and the two Davies' nippers. If it's fine we'll go as far as Mardy Gate . . . oh, and Edward, don't forget to bring that little axe to chop some firewood to boil the kettle."

There's not a cloud in the sky.

Dear God, please make it rain!

WHERE THE BEE SUCKS

F. J. BROWN

" EARLY THERE NOW, sir," said the Sergeant to the Detective - Inspector as the car turned off the main road into a side lane.

Detective-Inspector Harvey nodded in silence and glanced out of the window. "Beautiful day," he said.

"Just the same yesterday," said the Sergeant. "I went up to the house at just about this time yesterday. The housekeeper had just found the old boy *in extremis* and 'phoned the doctor. He got there at once, but still too late. So he took one look at the old man and rang us."

Harvey nodded. The car stopped on a gravel drive outside a beautiful Georgian manor-house. The two detectives climbed out of the car and stood for a moment absorbing the atmosphere of the gracious house, its trim hedges and sun-drenched lawns. On that September morning the autumnal mist had already fled and a late summer's day had begun. The Detective-Inspector looked morose as he took in this picture of an archaic grace.

"Not the place for violence," he commented. "The mind of violence doesn't fit into this!"

"Ah!" agreed the Sergeant. "But what a motive!" and his arms spread out as though to embrace the lovely period piece, it's garden, and its estate. "A jackpot like this and you don't have to go much farther than the person who scoops it to find a motive."

"Is it as simple as that?" asked Harvey quietly.

"No," confessed the other gloomily. "That's why the Chief Constable insisted that we call in the Yard. Not that we mind," he added generously. Harvey smiled as he followed the sergeant round to the back of the house and they came upon a group of men standing round a table and chair under a brightly-striped sun umbrella.

With a few brief words, Harvey was introduced to the local Superintendent, an Inspector, a gardener, and Dr. Fox. At mention of the gardener, Harvey raised his eyebrows at the Superintendent. "Better let him stay for a while," muttered the Superintendent. "If we don't get down his story pretty quickly we shan't know how we stand over the housekeeper." Harvey nodded; he was always prepared to leave points like this to the guidance of the local people.

Dr. Fox opened the narrative. "I was just about to open my morning surgery yesterday," he said, "when I was rung by Mrs. Widgerry, who told me that Mr. Pearce had had some sort of stroke and seemed to be dying. I got here in about twenty minutes—it's a damned roundabout route from the village—and found Mr. Pearce dead when I arrived. Mrs. Widgerry said he had died just as she finished ringing me. The old man was lying

there," and the doctor pointed to a patch of grass a few yards from the table. "Fortunately, Mrs. Widgerry had had sense enough not to move him, so your people were able to get to work."

"Yes," interjected the Superintendent. "We've got photographs, measurements, and so on, and everything has been sent for analysis."

"Give!" ordered Harvey laconically. "Remember, I know nothing. Who is Mrs. Widgerry? Who was Pearce? What's gone for analysis, and why?"

"Mrs. Widgerry is the housekeeper," explained the Superintendent. "She's been with old Pearce for donkey's years. Pearce was a rich man," he indicated the house and grounds. "Rich enough for the death duties on the estate to be covered without the lucky heir having to sell this little lot to the Ministry of Bubble-blowing!"

"H'm," murmured Harvey. "And the analysis?" he asked the doctor.

"It was obviously strychnine," said Fox, and a shadow passed across his face. "The poor devil had tied himself up in a hoop to die. Whoever killed him hadn't had much pity. He's not likely to have done it himself, either. He was halfway through his breakfast when he died. Just tea, toast, and honey. He had just poured himself out another cup of tea and finished one slice of toast and honey when he was poisoned. Mrs. Widgerry said she was just coming out of the house with some more hot water when he jumped to his feet and began to stagger about in what she thought was some sort of stroke."

"Just what she told us," commented the Superintendent morosely. "Told it to our man when he arrived. Told the Inspector an hour later. Told me when *I* arrived. Sounds all right."

"This breakfast," asked Harvey. "Did Mrs. Widgerry prepare it?"

For answer, the Inspector turned round and beckoned the gardener to join them. "That's right," said the Superintendent, "He might as well tell you what he saw."

Looking acutely uncomfortable, the gardener obliged, speaking at first in a voice so low that the Superintendent had to bark "Speak up, man!" before he could make himself understood. Shorn of its repetitions and circumlocutions, his narrative was simple and significant. He had been trimming the hedge just behind the garden table when he had seen old Mr. Pearce sit down and Mrs. Widgerry bring out the breakfast things. He insisted that she had put out the toast-rack, a jar of honey, and the tea-things. Mrs. Widgerry had, he said, poured out a cup of tea and had stood a yard or two from his chair while he drank it. She then picked up his cup and saucer and took it into the house and *washed it out* before he had his second cup of tea.

"Are you sure?" asked Harvey.

"Certain!" asseverated the gardener. "Old Pearce seemed a bit surprised too, I can tell 'ee. He were proper flabbergasted like and say to 'er, 'Where the devil are you going with that there cup?' and she says, 'I'll just rinse it out before you 'as another cup.' 'That ain't necessary,'

says old Pearce, testy-like, but she either don't 'ear him or makes out she don't, 'cos she runned off with it just the same."

"What did he do after that?" asked Harvey. "It's a bit of a bind to have your cup dragged out of your hand just as you've started breakfast."

"Oh, 'e didn't fuss much," replied the gardener. "Just muttered something about it being a silly lot of nonsense, and then he opened his pot of honey and spread a slice of toast with some of it. He didn't eat nothing, though, until she brought the cup and saucer back to him. Then he poured himself a second cup and started eating and went on at it until 'e was took bad. Just as I wondered what was wrong and whether to call Mrs. W. she came running up with a kittle of 'ot water in 'er 'and. She takes one look at 'im and then 'ollers to me to get hold of 'im and lay 'im down while she gets the doctor."

"You had been watching this the whole time?" asked Harvey.

"I were cutting the 'edge facing that way," explained the gardener with dignity.

"Our men found the string and paper with the broken seal off the honey," explained the Superintendent. "There's no doubt it was a fresh pot opened yesterday morning. It was one of his own."

"He kept bees?" asked Harvey.

"Lord, yes; and what a paraphernalia he made of it," exploded the Superintendent. "Did all the work himself, old as he was. Every jar had to be sealed and its label marked by himself according to the flowers his bees had been at. It was a regular sight at Church fêtes to see jars of old Pearce's honey labelled 'Apple Honey,' 'Clover Honey,' and every other damn sort of honey. Never missed a prize, either."

"Looks as if we can leave the honey out of it for now," said Harvey. "What explanation does Mrs. Widgerry have for washing out the old man's cup between his first and second cups of tea?"

"A fairly good one," said the Superintendent gloomily. "She says he took salts in his first cup and she rinsed the cup out because she didn't like the idea of his tasting them again, second time round, as it were!"

"Could be," said Harvey thoughtfully. "Whether the strychnine was in the tea or not, I've no doubt a good strong dose of salts would prevent him tasting it, whatever it was in. If anything tasted bitter he'd just think the salts were 'repeating'."

"The difficulty is," said the Superintendent, "if Mrs. Widgerry did it by means of the tea, how did she? If it was in the first cup, how did the old boy live so long? And if it was in the second cup, why bother to wash out the cup the first time?"

"Mrs. Widgerry is not the heir, I suppose?" asked Harvey.

"No," said the Superintendent. "But old Pearce's lawyer says she'll be very comfortable on what she *does* get. The heir's a nephew living next door."

Harvey raised his eyebrows.

"A cottage over there," explained the Superintendent, indicating the middle distance. "Nice little place, a

bit of garden and a few trees—you know the sort of place!"

Harvey nodded. "And this nephew is poor?" he asked.

"Not rich. Comfortable enough most of the time, but nothing up to old Pearce's standard, of course."

"You said he was 'comfortable most of the time.' What happened at other times?"

"Oh; he stepped beyond his income occasionally and old Pearce used to help him out. Not very gracefully, I must admit, but he always did it. Young Randall—that's what they all call the nephew, although he must be turned fifty—young Randall is a bit of a recluse. Lives for his books and collects them on a pretty big scale; that's where his money goes."

"I don't see why you've concentrated on Mrs. Widgerry with a suspect of that magnitude next door," commented Harvey.

"Opportunity's the thing," said the Superintendent, leading the way towards the house as a telephone began to ring. "You can see just what chance Randall would have had to creep up to the old man's breakfast table unseen! Old nosey, the gardener, would have seen him at once."

A stout, pleasant-faced woman appeared at the french windows of the morning room. "Dr. Fox!" she called. "The hospital for you on the telephone."

With a murmur of apology, Fox dashed on ahead and Harvey and the Superintendent continued their discussion.

"Randall wasn't even here yesterday," explained the Superintendent. "He was in London, staying at his club."

"A scholarly recluse with a London club?" asked Harvey in surprise.

"Well, it's not much of a club, from all I gather," said the other. "Not one of the really posh ones, I mean. He stays there when he's busy at the British Museum."

When the policemen entered the morning room, they found Fox just replacing the receiver. The doctor turned round and pursed his lips up in a noiseless whistle and thrust his hands deep into each trouser pocket.

"That was the path. lab. of the County Hospital," he explained. "They had a few shocks for us, I'm afraid. It was strychnine, all right, and it was in the honey!"

"What?" said Harvey in amazement.

"It's a fact," said Fox seriously. And, what's more, it wasn't just shoved in anyhow from the top—the strychnine, an enormous dose of it, was evenly distributed from top to bottom of the jar!"

"There is only one person could have doctored old Pearce's honey," said the Superintendent, "and that was old Pearce!"

"If he was going to poison himself," suggested Harvey, "there was surely no need for him to tamper with a whole jar of honey?"

A few hours later, Harvey was no nearer to explaining the enigma. In the pantry, he examined pots of Pearce's honey, each one of them with its provenance described on the label and sealed with the old man's signet. "No living soul could touch

that honey, sir," Mrs. Widgerry had asserted, and Harvey was inclined to believe her.

That afternoon, the police officers, minus the Superintendent, who had gone back to his office in the county town, went to the much more modest home of the nephew. Nobody responded to their knocks, so they lifted the latch and went inside. "You said he was in," commented Harvey to the Sergeant.

"So he is, sir," answered the Sergeant. "Leastways, he's back from London and he ain't gone up to the village."

While Harvey continued to peer about him in the gloom, for the cottage was very dark by contrast with the sunlit world outside, the Sergeant called Randall's name upstairs and then went to investigate.

"He must be out in his bit of garden," he said at last, returning to Harvey in the little sitting-room. "He's not up there."

Harvey just grunted and went on glancing at the mass of books forced into the bookshelves that lined every wall and stacked in untidy heaps on the floor. Harvey grinned as he looked at the books and was reminded irresistibly of the description of Charles Lamb as having been "possessed of more first-rate books in second-rate condition than any man I know." Few of the books were true collectors' pieces, being volumes obviously collected for use rather than ornament. As though to confirm this, some books lay on the table alongside a packet of opened typing paper. The Inspector picked up the first volume casually; it was the *Anatomy of Melancholy*, and Harvey opened it where it fell naturally and glanced with amusement at the improbable anecdote confronting him. Laying down the *Anatomy*, he picked up the book beside it and raised his eyebrows to find that it was *Quintillian*. He was still absorbed in this book when the Sergeant returned and glanced over his shoulder. "Latin!" commented that worthy subordinate sagaciously.

"Hm," murmured Harvey, and read aloud: *"Linivit flores maleficis succis in venenum mella convertens."* He then turned back to the *Anatomy* of *Melancholy*, opened it at the same place as before, and compared it with the page of *Quintillian*. "Interesting coincidence," he murmured. Closing both books at length, he handed them to the Sergeant, saying: "Hang on to these, my lad. They may be needed in evidence." He then began to glance through the rest of the books on the table as though in search of one particular volume.

After opening every volume on the table and two more that had fallen to the floor, Harvey had still not found another one to hand over to the Sergeant. In silence, and with a gloomy face, he led the way through to the little kitchen. As Harvey began to open cupboards and peer inside, the Sergeant reminded him uncomfortably: "You remember, sir, we haven't got a search-warrant yet."

"No," admitted Harvey, "but we can soon get one. Meanwhile, if we mustn't look around, let the invisible owner leave whatever he's doing and come in and tell us so!"

"He must have heard us come," murmured the Sergeant.

"Must have," agreed Harvey. "What do you imagine he's doing that is so important that he can't spare the time to come in and see us?"

The Sergeant remained silent on this point whilst Harvey went on rummaging. He grunted in triumph when he found the contents of one cupboard to consist of several alembics, a length of rubber piping, and a couple of dozen empty bottles that had once contained a proprietary brand of tonic. "When you get your warrant, Sergeant," he said "come prepared to pick up this little lot."

A soft sighing sound drew the eyes of both men to the open window. They stared down the lengthy garden to a clump of apple trees at the end, from whence the long, soft sigh came again. Then a man came into view. A stout, baldish man of middle age, carrying in one hand a large bucket and in the other a big garden syringe.

"For Gawd's sake!" ejaculated Harvey inelegantly. "Get him, quickly. He's destroying the evidence!"

Calling to the other police officers to follow them, Harvey and the Sergeant pulled open the back door and raced down the garden towards the man among the apple-trees. For a moment he turned to glare at them with a look of mingled rage and fright, then turned back to the bucket and filled the syringe hastily. Just as he pulled it out and aimed it up at the tree, Harvey cannoned into him and he went sprawling, the contents of the syringe squirting out over the ground.

The Sergeant still did not understand what was going on, but the savagery with which Randall fought them all, the oaths which he discharged at them, together with unsolicited denials of guilt and his snarling challenges to them to prove anything, convinced him that he was arresting the right man. Only when Randall's struggles had exhausted him was it possible to take him into custody and drive him to the police station to be charged with the murder of his uncle.

"I said that if they were both impossible, then he was more likely to have done it than Mrs. Widgerry," said the Sergeant illogically, "but what the hell put you on to it, sir?"

"A sordid little case," commented Harvey. "Just a greedy man hurrying a fellow-creature out of life in order to inherit his wealth a few years earlier than he should. A sordid, ordinary little case, Sergeant, and if we had found the old man with his head bashed in we should have been in very little doubt who the culprit was. But this case was rather an inversion of the normal routine. It was the penniless nephew who was the bookish recluse and the rich uncle who was the tough, earthy character. A bookish murder, I'm afraid.

"You see, somebody, I think it was Mrs. Widgerry, said 'No living soul touched that honey' except old Pearce himself. The more I mulled that phrase around the more I thought it might be the keynote of the whole case. 'No living soul' was quite right if, by that, we meant *no human being*. But if we meant literally *no living*

creature, then we were hopelessly wrong, because *eighty thousand living creatures touched that honey*!"

"Eighty thousand!," ejaculated the Sergeant.

"Certainly," said Harvey, as they continued to stroll towards Pearce's house, at which the police car would pick them up to follow their prisoner into the village. "Certainly; the bees who made the honey!"

Harvey crammed and lit his pipe. "Don't forget," he continued, "only the bees themselves could have distributed the strychnine so neatly throughout the jar. It was easy to see what *could* have been done, but it looked as though it would be damned difficult to prove it. Then we picked up these two books," and he indicated the volumes under the Sergeant's arm. "I said it was a bookish murder and he got the idea from there. When I picked up the *Anatomy of Melancholy* I found it opened naturally at the story Barton quotes from *Quintillian*: *'that rich man in Quintillian that poisoned the flowers in his garden, because his neighbour's bees should get no more honey from them.'* Next to Burton was the volume of *Quintillian* that opened naturally at the original story."

"What was the other book you were looking for and didn't find?" asked the Sergeant with interest.

"I thought there might be a handbook on practical chemistry alongside," admitted Harvey. "He would have had to look up the technique of distilling the strychnine out of that tonic in order to have something lethal enough to spray his apple-blossom with."

"But you didn't find it?"

"I didn't find it," agreed Harvey. "But that need not worry us. I expect he was too cunning to buy such a book and have it in his cottage. But the counterfoils of the books he has been reading at the British Museum should prove very interesting."

"I suppose he was squirting that insecticide on to cover up any excess of strychnine on the branches," said the Sergeant. "But what made him leave it to the last minute like this?"

"Simple," chuckled Harvey. "He couldn't do it at the same time as the original poisoning for fear of making the whole trees so obnoxious that the bees left them alone. Ever since the blossom finished he has had to spend night after night in London so as to be absent when old Pearce ate the poisoned honey. After carrying out such an elaborate plot it would have been too bad if he had been on the spot and under suspicion of having crept up to the house and bunged the strychnine in the honey himself. He couldn't know that there would be a gardener hanging around to give him an alibi at the time."

As they came up the back path towards the lovely house, a figure that had been stooping over the beehives rose and scurried away before them.

"Mrs. Widgerry," said Harvey in surprise. "What the hell was she doing?"

"Telling the bees," said the Sergeant comfortably. "Just telling the bees that their master is dead. It's a custom in these parts."

NEIGHBOURS BY NIGHT

KATHLEEN PHILIP

Illustrated by E. de Souza

We often wondered if Dracula and his ilk were safely dead to the world. The author convincingly assures us to the contrary in this grisly etching of a village life. What happens to the new arrivals is terrible indeed.

I SAW THEM FIRST as they helped unload their furniture from a shiny, dark-red van outside Lyndene Cottage. Carefully I took stock of them. It mattered very much to me, a newcomer myself, what these strangers were like. I hoped for much from the newcomers.

As neighbours they looked quite promising. She was a slight, fragile little thing. I noticed her green dress matched her striking greeny-grey eyes and set off her copper-gold hair. Her husband was a different type, more stockily built. A man, I thought, with plenty of good red blood in his veins.

Just then Sam Short came up towards me, his official post-bag dangling from one shoulder.

"Good morning, Post," I hailed him. "New people moving into Lyndene Cottage, I see."

"That's right, sir," he replied. "Name of Branker. I've some post here for them," and he made as if to turn in at the gate.

Suddenly he tripped. With an exclamation, he fell headlong on the path. I rushed forward.

"Goodness, man! Have you hurt yourself? What on earth happened?"

"Fell over something, I think," he said in a puzzled voice. "All the years I've come in this gate I never noticed that pot-hole in the road before." And he carefully flexed an ankle.

"Look," I said, "stay here quietly a minute. I'll take the post in to them and come back and give you a hand. That ankle seems to me to be swelling."

That was how I met them. By the time I had explained my temporary job as postman and Mr. Branker had come to help Sam up, we were well enough introduced. Mrs. Branker came out and insisted that we all go in and have a drink.

"We could do with one ourselves, if we can find the glasses," she said, laughing.

"Never again will I go through a removal," he remarked as he filled the tumblers.

"Well, here's to a long and happy stay," I toasted. "It's a quiet village, but no doubt you know that."

"That's right," Branker's hearty voice agreed. "Brenda here's been ill. Country air and quiet is what she needs. Thank goodness I can look after my business from here for a bit, although I'll have to travel up and down to Town soon."

"Oh! well, sir, the train service is real good," put in Sam, who was recovering from his jolt, although his ankle was still very swollen. "I'll have to be getting along now. Thank you very much indeed. Never fell like that before, I didn't. Good thing Mr. Marcham was here. And glad I was of that pick-me-up, as you might say." The old man laughed at his own joke.

"I'll lend you a hand as far as the village," I said, rising. "Thank you both very much. Perhaps I can come and give you a hand later, if you'd like me to," I added.

"Please do! We'd be most grateful. I can't lift much," and Brenda waved a hand as we went down the flagged path.

So it was not surprising that I soon came to know John and Brenda Branker very well. John and I shared a common interest in chess. Brenda was even more delicate than I had at first thought. Many's the evening John and I pored over the board long after she had gone up to bed. Sometimes we strolled to the "Wagon and Horses" to refresh ourselves, more often we sat with our tankards at our elbows and played on into the small hours.

In fact so late did we play that frequently John fell asleep while I was contemplating a move. On these occasions I slipped out and went home.

The morning following one such occasion I came down to find my housekeeper quite disturbed.

"You'll be sorry to hear, sir," she said, "that your friend Mr. Branker had a queer turn in the night. It

seems he staggered into his wife's room at two o'clock in the morning as white as a sheet. She told Sam to ask you to go up as soon as you'd finished your breakfast."

"Of course I'll go," I replied. "Funny! He was all right when we were playing chess."

After a hasty breakfast I hurried up to Lyndene Cottage. At the gate I met Doctor Franklyn just coming out.

"Good morning, Doctor," I said. "I've just come round to see how John is. Brenda sent me a message that he had taken ill in the night."

A worried frown creased the doctor's brow.

"Can't make it out," he said in a bewildered tone. "He seems shaken and shocked and his pulse is a bit erratic. Otherwise I can find nothing wrong." He stopped and looked at me in a questioning way. "Tell me! Has he ever said anything to you about having any of these Eastern diseases—malaria or anything like that? There's a strange bite on his neck.

Like a gnat or a mosquito. I wonder if he's susceptible to the bite of some insect?"

I shook my head. "Not that I know of. Have you asked Brenda?"

"No! I didn't want to frighten her. She's none too robust herself, poor girl."

At that moment Brenda herself appeared at the door.

"Hullo, Evelyn," she called. "I'm glad to see you. Come in and see John. He's been asking for you."

Bidding the doctor "good morning" I went in. John was sitting in his chair, more or less as I had left him.

"I thought you'd be in bed," I said in surprise. "Whatever happened to you?"

He looked pale. His usually ruddy cheeks had a grey look about them. His eyes were sunk into his head.

"What happened to me? That's just what I've been wanting to ask you. I remember moving my bishop just after you took my knight. The next thing I know I seemed to wake from a long way away. I felt like death and just managed to stagger upstairs."

"Well," I said truthfully, "I thought you were asleep when I left you. You must have had a bad dream."

"I know, that's the funny part," Brenda remarked as she came into the room carrying a tray of coffee and cups. "He says he had, but he can't remember what."

John chimed in, "Something queer happened, something horrible," he shuddered. Seeing the troubled look in Brenda's eye I said, as cheerfully as I could, "Well, next time you fall asleep over the board I shall carry you up to bed before I go."

My matter-of-fact tone had the desired effect. They cheered up a bit. Gradually the worried look went out of Brenda's eyes.

After this incident a strange thing began to happen before my very eyes. Their positions gradually became reversed. The country air and quiet seemed to be making Brenda stronger and healthier every day, while John was restless and, for him, pale.

One evening after Brenda had gone to bed I taxed him with it. "I know," he replied. "I can't sleep properly, I fall asleep all right, but I seem to waken up more tired than when I went to bed. I've taken to reading late, even after you've gone, in the hope that I'll get a really sound sleep. Luckily we've got twin beds and Brenda's a sound sleeper, otherwise I might disturb her."

"It can't go on like this," I objected. "Why don't you see Franklyn again and get him to give you some sort of stuff to make you sleep?"

"That's just it. I can sleep after a fashion, but I wake up every so often aware of just having had a horrible dream—some weird, infinitely devilish nightmare."

Thoroughly alarmed by now I leant forward. "What kind of nightmare?" I asked, searching his face.

He thought for a moment, obviously trying to recall some impression from deep in his consciousness. At last he said slowly, as though talking to himself: "I just can't put it into words. It's a vague, weird feeling

of someone bending over me. Someone I know, but for the life of me I can't tell you who. Nor can I think why it is so horrible." He twisted his hands together, tightly as if to wring the memory from himself.

This was really disturbing. Worse than I had thought. For a moment we both sat silent, immersed in our anxiety.

"By the way," I asked, to try to take his mind off trying to remember, "what about that sore on your neck? I see you still have a plaster on it. How is it?"

He put a hand up and fingered the round pink plaster on his neck. "It isn't sore, but it doesn't seem to heal properly." He got up. "Still, this isn't getting on with our game. You get the board and I'll run some beer to earth."

That was the last time we played chess together. The following day I had to go to Town on business for a few days. On my return I called in at Lyndene Cottage to see how they were. Brenda opened the door. Her eyes were red with crying. Her face was pale.

"Evelyn," she cried, "I'm so glad to see you. I didn't know your address in London or I'd have let you know. John's had an accident. He's in hospital."

Gently I drew her in and closed the door. "Sit down and tell me. What happened? How bad is he?"

"It's good to have you back to talk to. He was cycling into Marton for the evening paper and a car ran into him. He's hurt his head. He doesn't know me or anything. There's a nurse always with him."

This was indeed bad news. "Isn't anyone allowed to see him?" I asked.

"Well, I can go and sit beside him, but it's not much good. They're letting me stay at the hospital tonight. I just came back for some things," and she indicated a suitcase. "In fact, I must go now in case he has recovered consciousness."

I rose as she stood up. "Let me come with you," I suggested.

"No, thank you. It's very good of you, but I'll be all right. Perhaps he'll be better when I get there. They were maybe going to give him a blood transfusion."

As she got into the car to drive the couple of miles to Marton, she added: "It's seeing him lying there so pale. He used always to be so healthy."

Thoughtfully I went home. He must be bad. A blood transfusion. I recalled my first impression of him, a man with plenty of red blood in his veins.

I spent a restless and lonely evening. How I longed to go and sit opposite John, like I used to do, and get out the board and the tankards! I had not realized how much I had come to rely on him. I telephoned the hospital for news. A nurse answered. "He is a little better. His wife is with him. He regains consciousness for a few minutes at a time."

I spent a sleepless night and tried to occupy myself the next day by helping my housekeeper's little daughter make some puppets in papier mâché for her school. I became quite

absorbed in the sticky business with paper and paste. In fact, I was becoming quite expert when I heard Brenda's voice at the door asking for me.

One glance at her face told me she felt more cheerful. "Come in," I called. "How's John? Half a minute till I wash some of this mess off my hands."

"He's much better," she said, following me to the scullery. "He knew me all right today. They say I needn't stay tonight. There isn't a nurse with him all the time, either, so he must be getting better." Her voice sounded quite elated.

"Let's go and drink to his recovery, then," I cried as I dried my hands. Her news had lifted a weight from my mind.

"And," she went on as we entered the sitting-room, "the sister says you can go and see him in a few days. He's been asking for you."

How little we thought, as we sat there laughing and rejoicing in our relief, that we would not laugh again for a long, long time!

Still feeling jubilant, I was just lighting my after-breakfast pipe the next morning when I heard Sam's voice.

"Sorry I'm late with the post this morning, Mr. Marcham. It's that dratted grandson of mine. Joined the boy scouts he has, and insists on sleeping outside in a tent. As though his bed wasn't good enough. Last night he comes rushing in at four o'clock in the morning with a face like a ghost, and tells us a long story about seeing a great white face bending over him. Fair startled us all, he did." By this time he had arrived in by the french window in the sitting-room.

My hand shook a little as I took the letters from him. Somehow the thought of a ghost frightening boy scouts in the night made my blood run cold.

"Is he all right?" I asked.

"Oh, he's all right now. Young fool's got bitten by a gnat. If he was mine I shouldn't let him sleep outside." Sam turned as if to go. My heart stood still. Bitten by a gnat. Like John.

"Hold on, Sam. I'll come and see the kid. He must have got a terrible fright."

"No! You'll do no such thing," Sam ejaculated. "He's had enough attention for one day, although I'm grateful for the thought; sir. Now I must be getting along. All this nonsense has kept me back."

Half my mind laughed at Sam describing his morning as unofficial newsvendor as "all this nonsense," while the other worried at his queer story. While I was contemplating my next move the telephone rang. It was my lawyer wanting me to go to Town as soon as I could and sign some papers. I replied I'd come at once. I wanted to be on hand in case I could see John later in the day.

I spent a hot and muggy morning in London and returned in time for an early tea. As she brought in my meal, Mrs. Whitehead, my usually imperturbable housekeeper, appeared nervous and fidgety.

"How's the boy scout?" I asked, to open the conversation.

"Oh! Young Matthews! He's all right. Better than he deserves to be," she replied, with a sniff. Evidently she agreed with Sam about the folly of outdoor camping. "It's not that, sir! It's my niece, Betty, I'm worried about. You know she's a nurse at Marton hospital. Well *she* saw it too." Whether it was her words or the horrified tone of her voice I don't know, but I suddenly felt ill. My knife fell with a clatter on my plate.

"Oh! I *am* sorry, sir, I didn't mean to startle you like that. You drink up your tea. Mercy me! You've gone quite white," and the good soul fussed around me.

"It's all right, Mrs. Whitehead. Just the heat of Town, I think," I replied as calmly as I could. "Go on, tell me more! Where did your niece see the face? Surely it didn't get to Marton too?"

"Well," her desire to tell her story overcame her anxiety about its effect on me. "She was on night-duty, like. One of the people she had to watch special was your friend Mr. Branker. Just about two o'clock she looked in on him. He was awake and she promised to bring him a cup of something hot. Just as she was turning to go out of the door she saw it. Like a great white moth it was, she says. Peering and fluttering at the window, trying to see in. Without stopping to think, she rushed at the window and shoved her hand at it. Her hand went right through the glass. It's all cut. They've sent her home for a day or two."

Trying to sound calmer than I felt, I said: "But it couldn't have been the same. Someone's been trying to frighten the girl."

"Well, that's as may be, but they've sent a London detective to try and find out. You see," she lowered her voice, "Betty says the gnat bite on Matthew Short's neck looks the same as the bite on Mr. Branker's."

For one startled instant our eyes met. My heart stood still. My mouth felt dry with the horror of it.

"But what do they think it is?" I gasped.

"I don't know, sir, what the police think, but my Bert he says he once saw a film about a man called Dracula who went round at night sucking people's blood. A vampire they called him."

This was too much. I could bear no more. Leaping to my feet I seized my cap and stick and was rushing out of the house when Mrs. Whitehead laid a hand on my arm.

"Where are you going? I shouldn't tell Mrs. Branker if I was you."

In surprise I turned to her.

"Why ever not?" I ejaculated in surprise.

"Well, sir, mebbe she doesn't know about it and," she came close up and whispered, right into my face, "and mebbe she *does*."

The hair on the back of my neck crawled. A shudder went through me. I tore myself from her grasp.

"Nonsense," I all but shouted. On shaking legs I strode down the lane, away from the village. I must think. So the village gossip had got round to a vampire! Evil things connected

with old castles in the Middle Ages, not with peaceful English villages in the twentieth century. Worse, the village suspected Brenda. Brenda, John's delicate little wife with the lovely greeny-grey eyes. The wife John had looked after so carefully.

Phrases of his came back to me as I strode along. "She must have country air and quiet." I could hear him true. Something must be done. But what?

On and on I walked, not knowing or caring where I went, my mind twisting in and out of its miserable maze of horror. At an inn somewhere I had a glass of beer and some bread and cheese. The sun had set in a blood-red blaze, the great black night clouds were coming up as I returned.

say it. "She's been ill." He hadn't wanted to bother her with his sleeplessness and nightmares. He had taken such care of her.

What would happen to her? What could the police do? Charge her under that old witchcraft Act? Or have her put in a hospital for the insane? I shuddered. But *Brenda*? The whole thing was too ghoulish to be

As I turned the corner of the lane I caught sight of someone in a light frock just leaving my gate. Brenda!

"Hullo!" I called, quickening my pace. She whirled round. Over her arm she carried a bunched-up coat. For a long minute she just stood there and looked at me with strange staring eyes, eyes wide with terror. Then she turned and pelted down the lane as

though all the devils in hell were after her.

"Brenda! Stop! What's wrong? Is John worse? Stop, Brenda!" But it was no good. I was exhausted and she was younger than I. Mrs. Whitehead appeared at my door just as I put my hand on the latch of the gate.

"There you are, sir. Mrs. Branker's been looking for you. She waited in the study. She said Mr. Branker was better and she'd had a long talk with him. I think she must have just gone. Come in! You look fagged out. Have you had any supper?"

Too tired to speak, I nodded and brushed past her. I flung myself down in an armchair in the coolness of the darkened study. Why had Brenda run away from me? What had been the meaning of that long, panic-stricken stare? Was it something to do with John? I felt crushed, oppressed with all those problems. Unanswered questions nagged me on every side.

As my tired eyes fell on my bureau, my heart turned over. Someone had been at it. The top drawer was half-open. Feverishly I felt in my pocket for my key. My shaky fingers met its familiar hardness. I clearly remembered locking the drawer before I went out. I felt runnels of sweat on my brow as I jerked it open. All among the top papers my trembling finger fumbled. It was not there. In a frenzy, I threw all the papers on the floor. It had gone. I straightened. I felt done, old, exhausted.

My eyes went to the french windows. Then I saw it. Outside, staring in at me as I stood there shaking as with palsy. In one stride I reached the window. Seizing the curtains in both hands I drew them together in one mighty sweep.

I tumbled into my bureau chair. I must finish my diary while time remains to me. In a minute she will be here.

What was that? Is that shrilling electric bell in my brain, or is it outside? Mrs. Whitehead is talking to someone. A man. A man with a deep bass voice. Footsteps approach, heavy official footsteps. And Brenda is outside with it. The curtains move. I can bear it no longer. She is standing there. Her green-grey eyes bore into my face. In her hands she holds my mask. My beautiful white mask. Her white fingers trace the cut of the hospital glass window. She is ruining it. My precious mask. I must stop her. My precious mask.

They are neither man nor woman—
They are neither brute nor human,
They are Ghouls.

EDGAR ALLEN POE (1809–1849).

THE DOLL'S HOUSE

S. MALCOLM KIRK

Well-known as a London publisher, the author is at home in every branch of literature. Here, in macabre mood, he evokes an evil thing that you may find among the toys in your own nursery. The tale does not end happily.

IT CERTAINLY WAS a wonderful doll's house—and what a bargain! Martin Green had only popped into the Sale Rooms to have a look round—he loved poking about among second-hand furniture, books and all sorts of junk. As soon as he saw the doll's house, he knew it was just the thing for Joan and Margaret. It really was a gem. He went in the next day prepared to bid up to five pounds, but to his great surprise it was knocked down to him for two pounds, ten shillings.

Proudly, he smuggled it into the house and showed it to his wife, smirking slightly, as if to say, "Look how clever I am!"

It looked rather dirty when he opened it up and Martin decided that he would give it a thorough spring clean before they gave it to the children on Christmas Day. During the week-end, after the children were in bed, he got down to the job. Somehow that evening he didn't feel so pleased with his purchase, he felt just a little uneasy about it. What was the source of his unease he couldn't have said, but for a moment he almost wished he had never seen it.

When he opened the back he had a horrible feeling of nausea, and even wondered if he wasn't going to be physically sick. It passed, but it still seemed to him as if there was a faint but unpleasant odour coming from the doll's house. If he had wanted to be fanciful, he would have said that it was the smell of death.

The doll's house appeared to be an exact replica of a Victorian villa. When the back was opened you could see four quite large rooms and a charming little staircase up the middle. The rooms were furnished exactly in the Victorian period, with heavy curtains, a red velvet sofa and chairs with little antimacassars, and on the sideboard was a tiny bowl of fruit. There were thick carpets on all the floors, and the wallpaper in the downstairs rooms was a heavy design in crimson.

In spite of the shaking the doll's house must have had, most of the furniture seemed to be in place. Martin took it all out and cleaned it thoroughly.

When he came to put the furniture back he found that, almost without any volition on his part, each piece seemed to go back into its original place. When he decided that a certain chair should go in the dining-room, his arm seemed to decide for itself

that it should go in the drawing-room.

When he had finished, he noticed that in one of the upstairs rooms there was a reddish mark on the wooden floor, near the edge of the carpet. He remembered having noticed this mark when he started cleaning, and was quite sure that he had cleaned it off. He must have been mistaken, it was still there. Never mind, it was soon remedied—a damp cloth took it away in no time. As he was closing up the side of the doll's house, he thought he saw something move in the upstairs room. He looked hard but could see nothing. There were not even any dolls in the house yet. He *was* imagining things. Still, there was that smell. Faugh! It was sickening.

Christmas Day came. The doll's house was a grand success. The children were wildly excited and all their other presents were as nothing. It was the doll's house that delighted them all day long.

One little thing worried Martin, though. When the doll's house was opened on Christmas morning, he looked in the upper room and there was the red stain on the floorboards, just as it had been before.

He laughed to himself. He must be fancying things.

That night when the children were in bed, Martin went into their playroom to fetch a book he had left there. He looked at the doll's house and, to his surprise, light seemed to be coming from the windows. There were little lamps in the house, certainly, but no way of lighting them. It must be a trick or reflection.

Again the odour seemed to rise from the house and make him feel quite faint. He shut his eyes. He opened them with shocked surprise. He was no longer in the playroom—he was somewhere he had never been before in his life. Or had he? The pattern of the wallpaper looked strangely familiar. It was heavy; it was crimson. The sofa on which he was sitting was of crimson velvet. He looked at the paired vases on the mantelpiece, at the light beneath the dark shade of the lamp, at the very small fire in the grate.

He began to laugh almost hysterically. He was dreaming he was in the doll's house. For a moment he heard nothing except the slight crackle from the fireplace; then there was the sound of a movement over his head. He was in the doll's house and he was not alone.

Suddenly he felt that he must go upstairs; he must explore and see who was up there. But at the same time he felt a cold, sickly feeling of fear in the pit of his stomach. There was something upstairs, and he knew it wasn't something friendly.

With a gasp of terror he shut his eyes and as he opened them knew he was back in his children's playroom.

"Must be going mental," he muttered to himself. "No use saying anything to Madge. It would only worry her."

When his wife commented on the fact that he didn't seem very well, he admitted he had a headache and took an aspirin before he went to bed.

Rather to his surprise he slept well,

and with no unpleasant dreams.

Next day he puzzled about it all morning. Was it an hallucination? He must get the doctor to give him a tonic. It must be that he was run down. Still, he felt all right—all right, that is, except for the horrible memory of last night. He could no longer look at the doll's house without a shudder. He wished to heaven he had never bought the blessed thing.

The next night he felt he had to go and have another look at it. He opened it up. Yes, there was the reddish stain, which he had cleaned off now at least three times. It came off easily enough but it wouldn't seem to remain off.

Nothing happened that night, and he went away convinced that it was just a vivid hallucination.

A week went by. Martin had almost forgotten the misadventure. Then, one night, it happened again. One moment he was in the playroom, the next he was walking across a thickly piled carpet to the stairs. He could hear steps in the upper room. There were at least two people up there and their footsteps had a decidedly furtive sound.

Above everything he wanted not to go up those stairs, but he could not help himself. Step by step he went, fighting every inch of the way. He was half-way up before he was whisked back into the playroom. He was shaking so much that he had to clutch at a chair to support himself. There was something wrong with him, there was no doubt about that. He would see his doctor next day and he would get rid of that damned doll's house.

Seeing the doctor was easy. He gave Martin a thorough examination and said he was as sound as a bell. A little run down, perhaps; he'd give him a tonic for that. Plenty of fresh air, exercise, good food and sleep, and he would soon be as right as rain. Martin made his way home wondering if it was as easy as that.

Getting rid of the doll's house certainly was not easy—it was well-nigh impossible. The trouble was he couldn't explain why he wanted to get rid of it. His attempts to say that he just did not like it, that he thought it had an unpleasant atmosphere, did not even convince his wife, and the children wouldn't listen to him. It was their doll's house and they loved it. They would not let it go. Panting, Martin gave it up. He was frightened, terribly frightened, and there was no one he could tell about it. He didn't want to finish up in a mental home, and it was much easier to get the reputation of being a lunatic than to get rid of it.

It was almost a week since he had been inside the doll's house. He fought against going in the playroom, but it fascinated him and he couldn't keep away.

With the same sickening feeling, he found himself that night at the top of the stair and opening the door into the upper room. He looked on a room he had never seen before but knew so well from his knowledge of the doll's house. It was a kind of combined bedroom and sitting-room.

There was a big double bed with brass knobs and a patchwork quilt. There was a dull red fringe with tassels on it hanging from the mantelpiece. There was a rocking-chair by the window.

It was the room of the stain. He looked at the spot on the floor. The stain was not there. Something inside him seemed to say: "The stain hasn't been made yet!"

Then he was conscious of the creak of the rocking-chair. Backwards and forwards it rocked and seated in it was a little old lady dressed all in black. Standing at her side was another old lady, very tall and also dressed all in black.

The old lady never stopped rocking as she said invitingly, "Come along in. We were waiting for you, weren't we, sister?" There was nothing in her words, but the gloating of her voice and the glint of her eye shot terror into his soul.

At that moment he was back in the playroom, but the terror was not gone. He felt almost mad with it. But how could he escape? The words, "We were waiting for you!" beat over and over in his brain—the chair creaked as he staggered from the room.

There was a sense of doom over Martin all that week. Some time soon the drama would be played out, and he one of the protagonists. The time would come when he would find his way back to the playroom and then——

It was Mrs. Green's screams that brought in the neighbours. They found him lying on the playroom floor with his head against the doll's house. His throat was cut and a pool of blood was soaking into the boards. As they moved him they found he was lying on a small doll. No one knew where it had come from. It was made like a little old lady, all dressed in black. She had a most malignant expression on her face, and in her hand there was a broad-bladed knife.

I have almost forgot the taste of fears.
The time has been my senses would have cool'd
To hear a night-shriek, and my fell of hair
Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir
As life were in 't. I have supped full with horrors;
Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,
Cannot once start me.

William Shakespeare (1564–1616).

"Shouldn't like to meet that on a dark night!"

THE EVIL EYE

H. LITTEN LOWNDES

Illustrated by L. Domeny

O ONE IN the village knew how old she was or where she had come from. Old Josh said she was an accredited witch when he was a youngster. But then Josh didn't know how old *he* was—and couldn't remember much else unless it was to earn a pint of ale from some unsuspecting wayfarer.

She was called Ma Peggotty. Such a name was a thing of wonder but nobody wondered much in Hardon Manor—that would be too much bother.

Some derided the old crone as a half-wit; the younger people regarded her with impatient distaste. But some spoke in whispers about strange lights and incantations at her ramshackle hovel standing apart from the rest of the village. One thing was certain though; no one could speak with authority on Ma Peggotty because not a living soul could recall her ever having spoken an intelligible word—not even old Josh, sitting on the bench outside the Dog and Badger with a pint of free beer in his hand.

Nevertheless, Hardon Manor took a sneaking, if fearful pride in the old woman. What other village in the West Country could boast its own particular one-eyed witch? Harassed mothers would quieten their rowdy children with a hefty swipe and a "Ma Peggotty will get you as sure as . . ." Late drinkers too, returning uncertainly from the Dog and Badger, had wit enough to clamber through the hedge if they heard the mutterings and dragging feet of the rheumy old crone after dark and wait, with bursting lungs, until her gibberish was wafted away with her malodorous old person to the hovel over the rise.

You risked the evil eye if you faced her after dusk, that was sure. The village had good cause to remember how old Fred Parsons had laughed at her one roisterous night after some mild successes at the County Show. She had turned her one good eye on him, with her head inclined downwards so that she could focus him the better under her bedraggled brows, and gibbered one of her spells. Fred considers that it sobered him up right away and swears that he ran all the way back to Parsons Gate. He certainly must have taken fright because the Gate is near on three furlongs from the Badger as certain as Fred tops fourteen stone.

It's true he thought little about it the next day until one of his girls ran into the dairy in the afternoon and cried out that three of his prime milkers were lying stiff in the lower lea.

The veterinary man said it was ragwort; but Fred knew otherwise and said nothing else but suitable swear-words for three dead cows and 'phoned up the insurance.

We all know what a particular dairy man Fred is. There hasn't been a sight of ragwort on Parsons Gate since the war. He said nothing about it, but Tom Bates saw him walking up to Ma Peggotty's with a bottle of gin sticking out of his pocket a week later. Other strange things have happened from time to time. But we keep quiet about them in the Manor and leave Ma Peggotty to herself.

Then the Marsdens came to the village. They bought Mill Towers, which had been empty since peppery Colonel Hardy tripped over his twelve bore in 'forty-nine. Mill Towers was a largish cottage of mellow sandstone on the brook at the opposite end of the village to Ma Peggotty's. One of its outstanding peculiarities was its high-walled garden. The Colonel had built the wall after the first world war. An eight-feet-high wall of sandstone and ample supplies of water from the brook had enabled the Colonel to grow some of the finest fruit and flowers for miles around. Entirely encompassing the half-acre garden it was a monument to keen gardening, and after some years of neglect the village was glad to see it taken in hand again.

The Marsdens fitted in with the life of the village from the start. Marsden used to come down to the Dog and Badger two or three evenings a week for a few beers and a game of "tip-it." The game amused him immensely and soon he became uncannily proficient in turning up the penny.

Then one day word went round the village that Ma Peggotty spent her evenings at Mill Towers while old Marsden was in the Badger. We were all inclined to regard the story as so much talk. Marsden had certainly been drinking more of late than was usual during the week.

One night, when he was winning constantly at "tip-it," he had more glasses of beer in front of him than he could respectably deal with. His head nodded uncertainly and his eyelids kept fluttering down over his mild orbs. Fred Parsons winked at the company round the table and started talk about Ma Peggotty.

At the mention of her name Marsden raised his head and blinked uncertainly. Then he growled at Fred.

"Parshons, my dear feller," he blabbed, "if that unsavoury old hag'd put the eye on Clara an' shurrer up for a week or two she'd be doin' me an immensh service."

His chin dropped on his chest and his lids closed. He was certainly drunker than he had ever been in his respectable life. We all looked at him expectantly, anxious to hear of any trouble at Mill Towers but afraid to raise the question in case he lapsed into his normal reticent self again. After a few minutes, with his chin still resting on his chest and his eyes still closed, he mumbled under his breath.

"Pshycical researsh; ectoplashms . . . smelly old hags. . . ." Then he dropped off to a sudden slumber. It

was apparent that he knew very well that Ma Peggotty visited Mill Towers in his absence and that his wife made no secret of her interest in the unknown. We hadn't got much to go on, but he seemed to accept his wife's activities and association with some distaste. I think we all felt sorry for him; and Fred agreed that we ought to take him home—it was near closing time, anyway.

I felt a little apprehensive as we dragged Marsden up the path to his cottage. There was a light gleaming through the diamond pane in the front door. We stood nervously in the porch after Fred rang the bell. The door was opened with a vigorous pull and Clara Marsden glared at her husband with scorn. The situation needed no explanation. With an imperious gesture she indicated the front parlour and switched on the light. We dragged Marsden in and laid him on the couch. Normally we would have had a quick look round the room to satisfy our curiosity; but the knowledge that the Marsden woman stood in the doorway watching the proceedings with a distasteful curl to her lips made us feel rather afraid.

As soon as we had relieved ourselves of the burden I unconsciously doffed my cap and twiddled it in my hands. Fred was lucky as he never wore one.

Mrs. Marsden switched off the light as we stood awkwardly in the small hall. She turned round from the parlour door and gave a cold smile by way of appreciation and politely asked if it was foggy. Fred mumbled about a bit of a breeze, while I looked at the woman very closely. She was rather striking, above average height for a woman and robustly built. She was much better preserved than her husband. Her hair, still black and shining, was neatly drawn back to the neck and her over-dominant brows emphasized her flashing silvery-blue eyes. She was a formidable woman.

There was an awkward silence for a few seconds before she firmly bade us good night and opened the front door; but in that short time we had heard the unintelligible mutterings from the rear of the cottage and smelled the unmistakable, nauseous, frowsty odour. When the door had closed behind us, Fred clutched my arm and whispered fiercely; he was immensely excited, but master of the moment.

"Walk down to the gate as if we were going, Ted; be casual like. Ma Peggotty's there!"

"I know," I muttered; "I could smell the old hag!"

"What are they up to?" queried Fred as we carefully pulled the gate shut behind us and marched into the dark of the street.

After a dozen or so paces he laid a restraining hand on my arm and whispered excitedly.

"We're going to have a peek round the back, Ted. We'll crawl back past the cottage under the shadow of the front wall and nip over at the far end. Then we'll go behind the rhododendrons up to the wall. With a bit of luck the side door might be unlocked."

I would normally have folded up with mirth at the prospect of old

Fred crawling before a low wall on all fours at his age and handicap, but he did it as stealthily as any deer-stalker—and I accepted it as a matter of course. We were schoolboys again.

At the door in the high wall leading to the gardens at the rear of the cottage we paused to regain our breath. Then Fred tried the latch. He gave a chortle of triumph: "We're in, Ted!"

Soon we were standing to one side of the large french doors of the living-room. The light from a solitary candle gave an eerie yellow glow and served rather to conceal the outlines of furniture in the room than to illumine them. The Marsden woman had just taken her seat at the table opposite Ma Peggotty. The old hag was peering into a crystal, her chin pressed into her withered chest, her one good eye frowning under her beetled brow. If ever I'd had doubts before, I was convinced then; she *was* a witch.

I tried to shake off the cold finger of fear that ran persistently up and down my spine. We were undoubtedly the first in the village to actually witness the old crone practising her loathsome art. It wasn't a very comforting thought. I felt repelled yet strangely fascinated. I watched the toothless jaws compressing as her hairy, protruding chin worked up and down. The ugly wart on her upper lip fell into shadow and out again as she mouthed her gibberish, the spittle from her grimy mouth shining on the coarse, dark hairs on her chin.

Fred and I jumped in unison as the old woman suddenly shrieked like a cat in the kennels and feverishly flung the table-cover over the glass ball as if it were some venomous reptile. Mrs. Marsden started from her chair and placed her hands on her ample bosom, her face, even in the dim glow of the candle, pallid with fear. We waited in a dreadful silence.

"What does it say? What does it say?" Mrs. Marsden shouted across the table at Ma Peggotty, a look of disbelief and fearful apprehension striving alternately to express her mixed feelings.

Ma Peggotty stood well away from the table, alternately muttering and caterwauling, her scrawny, filthy hands shaking and scrabbling at her bedraggled brow. Nobody had ever understood her gibberings and, for all her association with the black art and mysticism, it was apparent that Mrs. Marsden was as much at a loss. Dubiously, and with some attempt to regain composure, she walked round the table past the old woman and whipped the cover off the crystal ball, while Ma Peggotty, in genuine fear, raised her grimy talons to her toothless gums. The scene was fantastic. Fred and I, rooted with fear, watched and wondered.

Slowly the Marsden woman brought her eyes to rest on the crystal as if drawn by some fearsome, irresistible force. Then her eyes widened with horror, mouth sagging open and arms raised to the ceiling. Then she screamed. It wasn't just a frightened scream, but there was a high-pitched, impersonal wail of despair about it. It had Fred and me

rubbing shoulders with each other for comfort.

Within a few seconds the door from the hall burst open and Marsden himself rushed in, his eyes puffed and dazed with drink, hands clasped to his head and a look of absolute bewilderment on his face.

Mrs. Marsden gave him no time to collect his wits. She recoiled from him to the other side of the room shrieking.

"Murderer!" she yelled. "Murderer! I've seen it in the crystal. You horrible tyke. You murderer! Murderer!"

Poor old Marsden, now somewhat sobered by the violence of his wife's fantastic accusation, looked dumbfounded.

"Perhaps you'll explain who I've murdered and why!" he asked, very mildly.

His half-demented wife continued her high-pitched wail.

"Me!" she screamed, beating her breast. "Me! You drove a stake through my heart and burned me like a witch!"

Old Marsden looked at her with incredulity in his homely little face. Then, as understanding began to dawn, he started to laugh, not loudly, but deeply, his whole frame vibrating and his shoulders shaking. Then the tears rolled down his cheeks. After the paroxysm had passed, he dabbed his face with a handkerchief and regarded his wife with some concern, addressing her with an indulgent, gentle severity.

"Really, Clara; I gave you credit for more intelligence. I told you you'd become neurotic if you persisted in dabbling with this sort of thing." He indicated the crystal and

then Ma Peggotty: "And what's this flea-bitten old harridan doing in my house? Get her out and keep her out. I've always chosen my company and intend to carry on that way."

The old crone either couldn't understand plain English or else she was incredibly thick-skinned or deaf. She merely shuffled over to the crystal and gingerly took another look. Within a few seconds she had shuffled back from the table, her arms shaking more than ever. It was obviously something unpleasant she saw in the crystal.

"What is it this time?" asked Mrs. Marsden, her voice low and tense with the effort of self-control.

Ma Peggotty raised a palsied claw to the ceiling and then drew it down to the level of her bent shoulders in a straight line. With a horrid grimace she encircled her neck with her hand and then pointed a shaking finger at old Marsden.

The mummery was completely informative. No further elaboration was required. Marsden turned pale, his hair seemed to stand from his head and, with a shriek, his wife crumpled to the floor.

For all his lack of stature Marsden was not without strength of character. Within a few seconds he had recovered sufficiently to stride across the room and switch on the electric light. Dousing the candle, he picked up the crystal and, with a contemptuous glance at Ma Peggotty, he shattered it in the hearth. He looked witheringly at the old woman, her mysticism had gone in the harsh glare of the electric light.

"Go!" he said loudly, pointing to the door. "Go, and don't you dare to come to my house again; if you so much as set foot in the garden I'll have the constable lock you up!"

The old crone scuffled to the door and paused. Marsden was already attending to his wife. There was no doubt about his devotion to her. Then he sensed that Ma Peggotty was regarding him under the slant of her gnarled forehead. He looked up at her, turning his head slowly, as if reluctantly answering a loathsome request. He met the full stare of that one, fearsome eye. I heard Fred hiss in his breath as we saw the look in that gleaming eye. It was full of a malevolence rare in civilized beings. It was enough for both of us. We fled.

We hurried up the village street. There was not a soul to be seen and barely a light in a cottage to cheer the way, although it had only just struck eleven in the church tower. At the crossroads we stopped for a breather and Fred pulled a flask from his pocket and handed it to me silently. I gulped the fiery alcohol gratefully and returned the flask. Fred took a swig and smacked his lips appreciatively.

"That's better," he whispered.

"Going off now, Fred?" I queried.

Fred scoffed at the idea.

"We'll wait for Ma Peggotty. Soon as she comes we'll nip into the hedge and follow her to her cottage. Then we'll have a peek inside and see what she gets up to. Now that we know she *is* a witch we might as well see the thing through. Poor old Marsden got the eye all right tonight. I often won-

der as how these happenings aren't psychological and sort of brought about by dwelling on them. You take my cows that time. I reckoned that the old crab'd put the eye on me, but there's every chance that Eb Sawyers fed ragwort to them. Looking back I can remember how I chaffed him at the Show after I beat him in the two milk classes and he muttered something about 'You can't come out on top all the time.' Still, I'm not worrying about that now."

We stayed our tongues for a while to listen to Ma Peggotty's shuffling gait. There wasn't a sound on the still night air. The earlier breeze of the evening had died out and the November mist was swirling up from the ground in cold searching wraiths.

Ma Peggotty should have been at the crossroads by now. There was no other way to her cottage unless she skirted the Manor parks and went the four miles round by Helswood, which was most unlikely. As the village constable, albeit out of hours now, I considered it my business to find out what was happening. A country policeman is really on duty twenty-four hours a day.

To pass another ten minutes or so away we talked in low voices. Fred pulled my leg about having Ma Peggotty as the occupant of the neat little cell in the Constabulary Cottage. There hadn't been an occupant there for twelve years or more, and he was a tiddly American officer from the Badger whose temporary behaviour had compelled me to put him inside for his own good and the peace of the work-weary villagers. I certainly had no wish to house Ma Peggotty for any length of time. Five minutes of her presence and the

whole quarters would need airing for a week.

When the church clock struck the first quarter after eleven I felt more concerned than ever. I suggested to Fred that we walk back to Mill Towers and see how the land lay.

"Not on your life, Ted. What if we bump into the old girl herself? No, if we go anywhere at all we go over the rise. She might've gone by without us seeing her."

He sounded a little doubtful about his suggestion. I knew that it was impossible for the old hag, wheezing and puffing and trailing her rheumaticky old leg behind her, to pass in the narrow village street without us hearing her. If she went round by Helswood she would take three or four hours at the rate she shuffled along. She certainly wouldn't be at her hovel. But to get warm again and home to bed I agreed with Fred that we should walk over the rise and then, after assuring ourselves that she hadn't arrived, call it a night.

When we topped the rise the mist cleared a bit and the valley the other side was comparatively clear. You couldn't see her cottage until you were right on top of it because of the undergrowth which shrouded it like bead curtains. But we saw a dull glimmer through the switch and trees as we approached the gate—or rather the few rotten timbers that hung gloomily from the decaying post. We stopped to listen for movement. The old woman was deaf and wouldn't hear us.

"Must have left a candle burning," Fred whispered uncertainly. But I could smell wood burning. A wood fire doesn't give off smoke unless it has recently been rekindled.

We crept up the overgrown path, thin twigs whipping into our faces and the deadwood cracking underfoot. I would have bet Fred his best porker that he wasn't at all happy about approaching the cottage. He stopped and stiffened like a pointer. I bumped into him and stood stock still. We were less than ten yards from the cottage and could see the lurid reflection from the fire through the grimy panes. But it wasn't the light that had stopped Fred. I could hear it myself, a monotonous, unintelligible droning interjected at intervals with a shrill, dry cackle. The blood left my head so suddenly that my ears sang and I felt dreadfully afraid. The old woman was there. How she had got there I didn't know, but she was there all right.

Fred had some courage, but I suppose you have to have guts to be a successful farmer. Anyway, he patted my forearm and crept purposefully to the window with me close in the rear. We peered through the smears and grime. The old crone was standing arched over a despicably filthy table, bare and dirty but for a stub of candle on an inverted tin and a huge black cat stretched out lazily, its long claws extending and retracting and the slit of an eye glowing emerald in the glimmer of the candle and the flashings of the fire. She was kneading and shaping at something with her trembling talons. I bit my lip as I gradually made out the objects she was working on. One she had already fin-

ished. It was the clay effigy of a woman. Then she finished the second —a crude travesty of a man. I felt very sick and worried. This was an evil night for the Manor.

I touched Fred on the arm and inclined my head towards the road. He nodded his assent and we retraced our steps. We were both very glad to leave.

Fred and I said not a word of our experience to a soul. We didn't even mention it to each other for a few days. Then, about four days later, when I had called in the Badger for my usual, Fred turned round from the bar and walked over to the fire. He nodded his head and closed one eye for a private word or two. I sauntered over and we passed a few loud words on current happenings and the weather before he whispered:

"Seen anything of Marsden or his missus?"

I tried to appear casual and drank from my tankard easily before I gave an indifferent answer.

"Can't say I have, Fred, have you?" I knew very well he hadn't, either.

"No, Ted. Neither has anyone else in the village! The old boy hasn't set foot in here since Tuesday night—you won't forget what happened then?" Fred was obviously in possession of some information and I allowed a suitable pause before putting in an airy suggestion.

"Perhaps he's got a chill and is lying up for a few days. Anyway, I bet he had a wicked head on him on Wednesday morning and thinks a rest from beer will do him good."

Fred nodded owlishly and gave me a condescending smile.

"The village constable, and you

haven't heard! The curtains at Mill Towers were drawn all day yesterday and today. What d'you think of that, Fred? After what we saw the other night I reckon you ought to call in and see if everything is all right. After all, you're the constable and you have to keep law and order in the village, even if there isn't any to keep." He sounded excited, as if he expected the worst.

"Look here, Fred," I protested, "I can't go up to the Towers and say 'Good afternoon, I've just popped in to see if you've done your missus in!', can I? Or perhaps you'd like me to say 'Pardon me, but Fred Parsons and I were snooping round here the night your husband got drunk and we saw one or two very unpleasant things. Then we followed on by snooping at Ma Peggotty and discovered her making a couple of dolls of clay. We thought perhaps she'd put the eye on you and I popped in to see if you were both dead!'?"

Fred laughed at me outright and called for another couple of pints. When he came back to the fire he spoke very seriously.

"You really ought to go down there tomorrow if we don't see anything of them, Ted. I know it's unlikely anything has happened, but for our own peace of mind call in and ask how the old boy is. You can truthfully say you were worried about the old boy's behaviour the other night—and not having seen him for a few days you thought perhaps he was ill. No harm done, you know."

He was right, of course; and I reluctantly agreed to call in the following afternoon, Fred promising to call in the Constabulary Cottage before dusk, if possible. Then we could go together, like anxious friends.

All the following day I fretted to myself about my prospective mission of the afternoon. I had a great deal of office work to do and decided to leave it all to the afternoon. So I did my daily round as early as possible, and the first call took me past the Mill Towers.

The windows were closed and the curtains drawn, but as it was barely seven-thirty I tried to pretend there was no significance attached to it. I went right round by Helswood and back to the Constabulary Cottage by the crossroads—so I didn't know whether or not the curtains had been drawn at the Towers.

I tried to concentrate in the afternoon on my reports and form-filling, but it was a trial. About four o'clock the 'phone rang. It was Fred.

"I shan't be able to make it, Ted," he said. My heart sank. That meant I had to go to the Towers on my own.

"Sorry, but I had to come over to Beristock for the market as Jim Peters has sprained his ankle. I drove past Mill Towers an hour ago. *The curtains were still drawn!* Looks like there *is* something afoot."

"All right, Fred; thanks for calling and sorry you can't make it. I shall miss your moral support."

Fred chuckled, but he didn't sound lighthearted.

"Cheerio, Ted; I'll see you at the Badger as soon as I can; perhaps old Marsden will be there too." I fer-

vently hoped he would, and hung up.

Putting on my helmet I went down to the cross-roads and walked slowly along the village street. One or two lights were already gleaming in cottage windows and the dull grey November light was fading sombrely as the night fog started creeping from the sodden earth. As I turned the bend which brought Mill Towers into view I was startled to see a bent old figure hobbling down towards it. What was Ma Peggotty doing? What was her business this time? I had an uncanny feeling that she was going to call on the Marsdens too—but for what purpose I did not know. I quickened my pace and arrived at the front gate as the old woman disappeared through the door in the high wall at the side.

I had a good reason for calling on the Marsdens now, apprehending Ma Peggotty as a trespasser.

As I strode through the gate I noticed, with a quickened pulse, that the windows were still closed and the curtains drawn. I carefully shut the heavy gate in the high wall behind me, locked it with the large, old-fashioned key and slipped it in my pocket. I hadn't any right to do that, but once in the back garden, behind those high walls, I was afraid.

Ma Peggotty was struggling down the garden under the rose pergola which completely covered the path by the side of the lawn to the vegetable garden. I could glimpse occasional blurs of her as she passed the gaps in the rustic screen where autumn had already stripped the russet leaves. I hesitated for a second or two before knocking on the kitchen door. There was no answer. The Marsdens must have been down the vegetable garden. But how had Ma Peggotty known? I walked down the path under the dripping screen. Suddenly I came to the end of the pergola and stood still in the moody, grey dusk, straining my eyes to see to the end of the garden.

The witch was plodding on. Then I saw Marsden right at the end of the garden in the dark shadow of the tall beeches. I breathed deeply, relieved that our fears were unfounded. Still, I had a commission to carry out, so I followed behind the old woman. All I need do was to ask if she was making a pest of herself and all would be well.

Marsden appeared to be engrossed in the very ordinary task of piling the fallen leaves into a huge mound. I could hear the whisper of the dry foliage and hiss of the old-fashioned birch broom as he busied himself, apparently anxious to get the fire going before nightfall. He certainly intended to make a job of it judging by the size of the paraffin drum.

I was a few paces behind the old hag and ten yards or so from the heap of leaves when he saw us for the first time. His reaction was startling. With amazing speed for his age he ran to the front of the pile and took a stance like a sentry on guard, the broom held in his hands in a defensive attitude, the twigs bristling bayonet-fashion. With a yell and shriek which sounded half fear and half revulsion he shouted at the old woman.

"Get out, you old hag! Get out, you old witch. You put the evil eye on us and brought us to our doom. Get back

to your Lord and Master. Get back to the devil and tell him to pickle you in brimstone!"

Then he started prancing and gesticulating at Ma Peggotty, but she still tottered towards him, muttering to herself all the time. I followed the old woman, wondering what to do. Suddenly he stopped his prancing and viciously threw the broom at her. With a surprising deftness she caught it in one hand. Then Marsden seemed to lose his spirit. His shoulders drooped, his chest heaved and a look of utter despair spread over his normally bland features.

The old woman went over to the heap of leaves, dribbling and gibbering and, with a few feeble strokes which brought a bronchial wheezing from her sunken mouth, she scattered the leaves. She looked at the levelled pile and cackled, then, beckoning me with a claw, she pointed down and looked significantly at Marsden.

Uncomfortably I walked to the old woman, increasingly conscious of the rancid smell of her clothes, anxious not to breathe the vapour of her fetid breath. I looked into the pile. It was Clara Marsden, a stout ash stake driven through her heart.

Slowly and sorrowfully I turned to Marsden. He nodded dismally and, with a helpless shrug of my shoulders, I turned my back on him and the cackling witch and walked towards the cottage. There was a telephone inside and this was a case for the Inspector at Beristock. I knew that Marsden would stay where he was, abject misery and hopelessness in every sag of his dejected frame. As for the old hag, she just stood grimacing at the body, her mouth working in triumph, and neither of them could climb the high wall to the gloomy but sane world outside.

After I had related the story to a sceptical Inspector I tramped back down the garden. I could barely make out the outline of the high wall now. But as I neared the scattered leaves and the still, unhappy figure of Marsden I felt a shudder of fear down my spine. There was no sign of Ma Peggotty or the broom.

Hurrying up, I stopped and looked at Marsden's face and saw that he was staring in horror at the body. I turned my gaze and saw what he was looking at. On top of the body stretched a huge black cat and, as it turned to regard me insolently, I almost dropped in my tracks. One of its eyes was closed up, by an old injury, while the other glared at me triumphantly in hate.

By the pricking of my thumbs,
Something wicked this way comes.

Macbeth.

MY FELLOW PASSENGER

DENYS VAL BAKER

WHEN, AFTER eluding the grasp of an irate ticket-collector and sprinting at full speed down half the length of Chester railway station, I managed to bundle into the very last compartment of the afternoon Liverpool express, my first inclination was to collapse into a comfortable seat and gulp back some of the precious wind I had lost through my unusual exertions. It was only as the train gathered speed and rattled through the dwindling suburbs of Chester that I looked up and saw there was another passenger in the compartment, occuping the far corner seat. Even then it needed a second, startled, half-incredulous look before I realized that the passenger, a stout, middle-aged business man, was huddled in his corner in a most unnatural position—his clothes torn and dishevelled, his face a mass of bruises and cuts, a thin line of blood trickling out of the corner of his mouth.

My first reaction was a refusal to believe the evidence of my own eyes, a desperate wish to remain seated in my safe, far-away corner, confident that the sunshine and shadows were playing tricks with my view of the man's face, that the red trickle was merely a trace of some beetroot eaten for lunch. My second reaction, arising out of the terror with which I had to reject my first, was a complete panic. I jumped to my feet, grabbing my suitcase from the luggage rack, and leapt across the compartment to what I assumed would be a corridor door. The gust of fresh air that blew in when I pulled back the handle, demonstrated my mistake, and increased my alarm. For a moment I was tempted to bang wildly on the partition separating me from the next compartment. Probably common sense would have prevailed on me not to attract attention in such an embarrassing manner; but before common sense could operate, something even more decisive intervened. This was a voice, a rough, jerky man's voice. It said: "I shouldn't if I were you, really."

I turned, forcing myself to look down at the battered piece of humanity, and I saw the eyes, under their puffed eyelids, half open and shut again.

"Are you—are you . . . ?" I began. I broke off awkwardly, realizing that it was hardly tactful to ask a man if he was still alive.

"Yes—for the moment." The eyes fluttered slowly and painfully.

I looked round anxiously, a little cooler, already somewhat ashamed of my first instinctive cowardice. "But isn't there something I can do? . . . You're badly hurt—I'll call the guard." I looked for the inevitable communication cord.

The head moved slightly. "No—no,

no! It's no use." My eyes followed my upstretched hand and saw, in round surprise, the tattered ends of the communication cord, ripped to threads, impotent.

"Perplexing, isn't it?" said the voice. It was a pleasant voice, now rather harsh with strain, but carrying traces of geniality and kindliness. I thought I detected a note of sardonic impatience, as if its owner found my naïve astonishment and inaction somewhat irritating.

I threw down my suitcase and bent over the man, feeling that I must do something. Loosening his collar I gingerly propped his lolling head into a more comfortable position. With my handkerchief I dabbed at the trickle of blood, wiping some spots from his lips. His faced looked an awful mess.

"Thank you—thank you!" said the man, hissing the words rather than speaking them, his swollen lips hardly moving. "It's very good of you to want to help me. But I am afraid it is really not much use. Apart from all the external damage so apparent to you, I should mention that I have several ribs broken, possibly a collar-bone—and a slight matter of a knife wound in the lower part of my back."

Aghast, I put my arm under his shoulder and felt a rough hole torn in the cloth of his coat. It was wet and sticky; my fingers, when I looked at them, were covered with blood.

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed, helplessly. Seeing the blood coming out of the man's mouth I dabbed at it with my handkerchief.

"I am dying—not slowly, but quickly," said the man, trying to get the words out more rapidly, as if in a race against menacing oblivion.

I put my hand on his head. I did not know what else to do.

"So," continued the man, in between pauses for breath. "So the problem, the only thing remaining, is how to avoid implicating you in an affair which has really nothing to do with you. I should be most sorry to think that I had been the unwitting cause of dragging you into the unpleasantness of police-court proceedings—perhaps, one never knows, the police can be so stupid, perhaps into facing a murder charge. And all because you happened to jump out of the blue into this, of all possible carriages. What a pity you didn't get in farther up the train!"

"I—er, I was late, nearly missed the train," I murmured rather fatuously.

The eyelids fluttered, whether in impatience or acknowledgement I never knew.

"The journey to Liverpool will not take long. The communication cord is cut. You have no way of getting out unless you open the door and jump out—and I wouldn't advise that, for you. We will have to work fast—but first I had better explain how all this has come about."

"In brief——" the voice paused wearily. Hastily I dabbed at the blood, pushed back some falling hair, rested a cool hand on the lumpy forehead.

"Thank you. In brief, I have, as you can see, been assaulted—in fact, literally speaking, murdered — by

some person who must remain unknown."

I made a protesting sound.

"No!" The inflection in his voice was compelling, yet politely so. I could almost imagine him raising an admonishing finger. "No, it would be utterly pointless for me to burden you with further complications. The problem is difficult enough as it is.

"The fact is that I have been attacked by—an enemy of mine. He appeared at my carriage door while the train was standing at Chester station, got in, and violently attacked me—with the results you see. It was all over in a few minutes, with no one the wiser, and I must have fainted, or become unconscious. During the remainder of the time I imagine he sat by the window and frowned away any one who looked like getting in the carriage. He must have jumped out of the carriage just before the train left—he could not have bargained on a person such as yourself making a last-minute dash and boarding the train when it was already moving. He would have reckoned that by the time my dead body was found on arrival at Liverpool it would be impossible for the police to trace responsibility for the crime. And, indeed, such is still the case."

There was another silence, this time a longer one. When the man resumed talking it was with considerable difficulty.

"Excuse my slowness," he said. "Dying is not a comfortable business, not even under the best of circumstances, I imagine."

"You are facing it bravely, sir," I said with sincerity.

"Thanks. . . . Where are we now?"

I looked out. We were slipping through the quiet country, but on the horizon there were signs of roof-tops and factory chimneys.

"We must be approaching Runcorn," I said. "But we don't stop there."

"Still, we have to hurry. Listen to me carefully. . . . For you to be found here with my dead body, on arrival at Liverpool, would be both dangerous and futile."

I motioned weakly with my hands. "But—perhaps, at Liverpool—a doctor—I could have you rushed to hospital——"

"Please—you're wasting time. The point is—the train doesn't stop before we reach Liverpool, which means there is absolutely no way out for you. You cannot be got out of the carriage—the only alternative, then, is for *me* to be got out."

I stared. "But how . . . ?"

The voice trembled.

"In a few moments, a very few moments, I fancy, I shall be no more. Oh, it's no use wasting words about it. . . . This is what I want you to do. Wait till we have passed through Runcorn and are well out into the open country again. When you are quite sure the train is passing through a fairly isolated part—push me out through the doorway."

"Oh!" I ejaculated, in instinctive horror.

The eyelids flickered irritably; a speck of blood fell on to the man's crumpled white shirt.

"Don't—be—a—fool! It's the only way." He took a sudden heavy breath. "It—frees you from all implication. By the time my body is discovered and its connection with this train traced, you will have vanished. It will be too late for the police to do anything."

"But——" I wanted to say something, to protest, if only to satisfy my conscience. But there seemed to be absolutely nothing I could say.

"No buts. . . ." The voice suddenly weakened, trailed away. "No buts. Do . . . as . . . I . . . say."

I bent down. "But, please—have you no messages? Don't you want me to tell anyone? What about your relatives?—are you married?"

My urgent questions went unanswered, the words echoing hollowly in a sudden loneliness that filled the carriage. I looked closer to the blood-speckled face. It seemed curiously still. The eyelids were closed, as if with an air of finality. I felt for the man's pulse, pressing my fingers deep into the flesh of his wrist. There seemed to be no movement at all.

The factory buildings of Runcorn loomed around me, like menacing shadows. Startled out of my original shock by this new danger, I quickly sat down beside the dead man, leaning forward slightly so that if anyone should chance to look into the carriage as we went through Runcorn station they would see only myself. In this manner we glided safely through Runcorn, and on towards open country again.

The precious minutes were slipping by. I looked out at the grey houses of Runcorn's suburbs, wished that I could change places with any of the occupants. I looked up at the torn communication cord, helplessly. What the man had said was frighteningly correct, to attract attention would be the worst possible thing. I looked across at the man; neat, dark, well-dressed, surrounded by an air of prosperity; now sprawling incongruously in his corner seat: suddenly such a vital part of my life, yet such a stranger, such a mystery. On an impulse I searched through his pockets. They were empty, devoid of identification; and his luggage, if he had any, was gone, gone into the same impenetrable void as himself. It was hopeless, fantastic, inexplicable. . . . I looked out of the window, seeing peaceful country landscapes again, but in the distance I thought I could see, already, the smoky horizon of Liverpool. Then, the ultimate panic swept over me, the panic of self-preservation that makes ordinary people murder and thieve and tell lies and perform a hundred and one other contrary acts that would normally prove beyond the bounds of their credulity.

With a swift movement I bent down and got my shoulder into the pit of the dead man's stomach. Grunting at the effort, I slowly raised him out of the seat. Moving one foot at a time in order to keep balance with the swaying of the train I dragged him over to the compartment door nearest to the passing fields. With a jerk of my knee I lifted the door handle and the door swung open, caught in the rushing wind. For a moment I stood poised, watching the gold and

green colours swirling by; then, awkwardly, I tumbled the body out through the doorway, pointing it downwards so that there would be no chance of its catching the eye of passengers in the forward compartments. I watched it fall into thick grass and roll away down a slope, a strange, dark, doll-like object . . . it had disappeared from sight before I succeeded in closing the door again.

It was not long before the train edged in under the great dusty dome of Lime Street Station. As I rose to my feet my eyes fell on where the man had been sitting. On the floor beneath there was a small dark pool; the blood was still dripping in slow, inevitable drops from the edge of the cushioned seat. I looked from the floor to the cushion, and then, as if mesmerized, I looked down at myself. There was blood on my coat lapel, blood spots on my shoes, a red stain on my trousers—the tips of my fingers were red and sticky. My clothes were disarranged from the effort of throwing the man out of the train; they held an obvious connection with the general dishevelment of the carriage, the many evidences that a struggle had taken place. . . . Before the train had come to a final stop I opened the door and jumped out on the platform, ignoring the deterrent shout of a porter. I wanted only to get out and away into the safe anonymity of Liverpool's streets. Discarding any pretence at normality I hurried across to the exit barrier, thrust my ticket at the collector and half-fancied I saw a porter opening the door of my carriage. It could be as quick as that, I thought in alarm.

I did not bother about my business in Liverpool that afternoon. For a time I walked about the streets, wondering whether there was any way in which I could inform the police that a man had been murdered. Then I realized how incomplete and unfinished any such statement would seem. . . . Next I went into a public washplace and scrubbed the blood off my hands. As I was putting on my coat again I saw the attendant eyeing it queerly, his eyes dropping with increased surprise to the blood-stains on my trousers. That settled it. I caught the next bus out to Southport and there wandered the side streets until I found a little second-hand clothes shop. I managed to purchase an old suit and a decrepit raincoat, and with these tucked under my arm I set off along the Southport sands. When I had gone far enough to lose sight of other stray walkers I went behind a sand-dune, took off my own suit and put on the second-hand clothes. My own clothes I buried in the sand, pushing them deep down. Then, relieved, I walked back into Southport and caught a bus to Liverpool.

When I arrived at Liverpool it was quite late. I went to an hotel and booked in, taking care—with the seemingly automatic ingenuity that is given to the newest criminal—to make it well known that I had only just arrived in town. I ordered a hot meal and a stiff drink of whisky to be sent up to my room. While waiting I went for an idle stroll around

the hotel block and, on the way, prompted by some queer twinge of curiosity, bought an evening newspaper. When I got up to my room I was aching with hunger; only when I was reasonably satisfied by the meal and the drink did I at last sink back into an armchair and open the paper.

I hardly expected to see anything so soon, but my eyes were at once caught by the heading of one of the main front-page stories. The heading ran: WELL-KNOWN LIVERPOOL BUSINESS MAN THROWN FROM TRAIN. I read on, uneasily. The opening paragraph was more than enough. It said: "A well-known Liverpool cotton-broker, Mr. Alexander Smith, was to-day thrown out of his compartment on a London–Liverpool express train, just before the train reached the outskirts of Liverpool. Although the train was travelling at about 50 miles per hour, *Mr. Smith was uninjured save for minor cuts and abrasions.* His fall was seen by men working in near-by fields and he was quickly rushed to the city infirmary, where he was stated this evening to be progressing very well. In an interview with the police, Mr. Smith stated that he was suddenly attacked by a young man who was the only other occupant of his carriage. Before he could make any effective resistance, he had been lifted up and thrown out of the carriage. Mr. Smith is convinced that he would recognize his assailant again. Meanwhile the police are making widespread inquiries, and are particularly anxious to trace a young man who was seen to jump from the train when it reached Lime Street and make a hurried exit from the station. It is believed he may have some knowledge of the crime."

The same night, half an hour later, I checked hurriedly out of the hotel. It was no use staying. . . . I could feel, looming around me, the huge circle of burly, painstaking policemen, each one methodically following up his little task of investigation, each one carefully building the unshakeable foundations of a fantastic mountain of accusation . . . each one ferreting out his proud discovery . . . the lavatory attendant who remembered attending a certain young man, the 'bus conductress who remembered selling a ticket to Southport to a certain young man, the second-hand clothes dealer who remembered disposing of an old suit and a raincoat to a certain young man . . .. solid, insurmountable obstacles.

I caught a late 'bus into Manchester, thankful for the black-out and the dim lights. I slept the night in a doss-house, got up early and caught a train back to my home in London. My father and mother were surprised to see me, I hadn't been due back for some days. I told them I was off on another job, a long job, didn't know when I would be back. I changed my clothes again, packed a suitcase, gave the old clothes to my mother, and told her to be sure to burn them. I said they weren't to tell my sister or anyone else that I'd been back. I said if any strange men called they were to say I'd been away for weeks and they didn't know where I was. I said if anyone asked if I'd been in Liverpool on such and such a date the

answer was "No." My mother and father looked at me queerly, their eyes reflecting the struggle between anxiety and suspicion. Soon, I reflected, the snowball would catch them up, take them bounding along with it, poisoning their minds with an endless stream of unanswerable questions. I said good-bye and walked out of the house and down the road. On the corner I bought a newspaper. The Stop Press column carried a paragraph headed "Express Train Attack." It said that the police had received important information from a Liverpool 'bus conductress who remembered, etc. . . . I hailed a taxi and disappeared into the maze of London. I had begun moving on.

I have been moving on ever since. For a long time I wandered about London, but always, wherever I went, I felt uneasy, haunted by the sight of policemen, standing on corners, hidden in shop entrances, walking up and down with ponderous curiosity. Next I went down to the West Coast—then up to Wales—then through the Midlands. Wherever I went I kept myself buried in anonymity, eating in cheap little street cafés, sleeping in doss-houses, in air-raid shelters, sometimes in fields. Once or twice, when I still had a fair amount of money left, I tried staying at hotels, but each time something in the way the clerk looked at me made me clear out. I became ultra-sensitive to people around me, I could always feel when someone was looking at me, watching me.

I am never able to stay more than a few days in one place. I can never forget the snowball, the monstrous mountain looming over my shoulder. There is no need for me to find out whether the search is still on, for I know, implicitly, that it is. Each time I move on I take the most detailed precautions to obliterate my traces, and each time, helplessly, I leave another clue. Looking back I imagine, vividly, the questing finger coming out of the darkness, pouncing on the clue, storing it away—the scrap of paper with my name on it, the specimen of hand-writing, the unguarded remark to a waiter. And always at the back of it all, I sense the ultimate, the frightening climax, the final possibility. . . . "Mr. Smith is convinced that he would recognize his assailant again." Would he? *Could* he? Or would he perhaps tumble the whole crazy edifice to pieces with a single, glassy unrecognizing stare?

It would be so simple, so easy to prove or disprove. I have only to go to Liverpool, to make straight for a certain cotton-broker's office. I have only to walk through a harmless gilt-plated glass door, stamped with the name "Mr. Alexander Smith." I tell myself I will go—now, today, this morning, this afternoon. I force myself to prepare for the journey, I set out for a station, or to meet a 'bus. But always my footsteps falter, hesitate, and turn back: always I am stopped by the same thing, an idea, looming before me like a towering, and now insurmountable, wall.

For you see, with each passing day I find it increasingly difficult to decide which story is the true one—mine, or Alexander Smith's.

"CHANGE OF SHIFT"

PETER EDWARDS

" ERE YOU ARE, George, you sign here, That's right. There, that completes the hand-over."

The younger of the two men slid his pen into a small pocket designed to receive it, and looked around the control-room. The whole room measured only 40 square feet, with two walls of a transparent substance that at night glowed brightly, making further illumination unnecessary. The end wall facing him had fixed into it an orderly array of glass-covered dials, each with figures of a different colour. The wall behind him had merely a door opening straight on to a small lift.

Furniture was at a minimum—one large desk and one comfortably padded chair.

"I suppose," the older man said, "you feel rather excited at your first shift." He was a man of about forty years, his figure made even bulkier by his grey-coloured anti-radiation suit.

The young man grinned. "I still can't get used to this fish-bowl," he said.

Both wore transparent globes over their heads and sealed to their suits. Verbal communication was performed by a small two-way radio receiver fitted to the top of the globe, and being comparable in size to the thumb of a man.

John Order looked down at his grey suit, and then across to the other's white. He didn't reply to the remark, but said, "Watch the colour of your suit. If it starts turning pink, phone the hospital immediately. It'll grey within a week, but don't let that worry you. Pink and red are the two colours to worry about. It means, as you have been told, that radiation is beginning to penetrate the suit. Believe me, you only want to see one man die of radiation poisoning and you'll never want to run the risk yourself."

Young George glanced apprehensively down at his suit, as if expecting the fatal pink to glow there and then.

John Order chuckled to himself, and thought, "That's sobered him up."

"Well," he said aloud, "I'll leave you now. Good luck." He ignored the youngster's proffered hand, and George dropped it and felt ashamed that he had forgotten already the law of "Personal contact can contaminate."

The lift deposited John in the vestibule, and he walked out through the main entrance and turned to look at the wording above the doorway of the eight-storeyed building,

EARTH CONTROL POINT NO. 48
(Furnace Group 4.)

"Well," he thought, "that finishes another month on this God-forsaken planet."

His remark was justified, for the earth lay, a stagnant thing, near de-

void of human life, except for the men who came for one month in four years to run the network of factories, which were robot-controlled to a large extent and fed by power from the great nuclear furnaces such as the one that John Order had just left.

The stricken remnants of earth's civilization had forsaken the world shortly after the last global war had ended. This exodus to a new life on strange planets had been necessitated by the sudden change in the earth's climate, which had reduced two-thirds of the world's surface to an ice-covered wilderness. The power-producing furnaces poured into earth's atmosphere the deadly fumes of radio-activity, for as each man working was protected from the fumes there was no need to safeguard the air from pollution.

So, then, the power of man had become such that he could use the remnants of a whole planet purely as a factory. Its produce was ferried out in great space-going cargo-ships, and the cities which had produced history lay smashed and rotting. Their stillness made journeys to them frightening, and so the men who came through space to use the earth no longer visited them. They left the descendants of those who had been too maimed by the war to take part in the selective evacuation in sole possession, and these things had adapted themselves to the foul air and the cold, and grew in the cities like slow-moving mushrooms.

John Order reached his flat by means of air-car—a comfortable machine to seat one, which flew usually about nine feet off the ground, but which could, if needed, operate up to a height of 500 feet for cross-country work.

The flat had everything a human being away from home could want, except a companion. That was forbidden. Television, cinema, a tele-radio line through to his wife on Mars, and a compact well-equipped kitchen. The flat also contained a large room, reached through a system of airlocks, where at last one could take off the helmet and relax in the purified atmosphere. But even here, one hour was the most a wise person would spend without a suit, and that hour was usually taken up by a meal and a shave. Sleep was on a bed constructed to allow a man slumber despite the handicap of an anti-radiation suit.

His flight back to Mars was scheduled for eight hours' time, and as his few belongings were already packed, he carted them down to the car and flew to the space-terminal. He felt tired but didn't want to sleep.

The view at the space terminal of superbly designed space-ships taking off and landing was such that even after many visits he still felt excited at being there, and took a seat overlooking the main launching platform.

After an hour or so of watching, he got up and moved over to a newspaper stand, and for the second time only in a month he spoke to another human being face to face. But his desire for conversation was very little, and after a few conventional phrases he bought a paper and went back to his seat to read.

From his point of view it was a bad choice, for the two main news items on the front page dealt with two space disasters. The first was that all hope of survival had been abandoned for the crew of the space-freighter "Divider," missing on a flight between Mars and the moon. Her crew numbered fifty, and the total weight of her cargo amounted to 5,000 tons of ore that was to have been shipped to earth via the moon.

The second item hit even nearer home, and John felt somewhat queasy after reading it. The facts were that a space-liner had radioed that her engines were useless, and that she was approaching Terminal 5 on Mars at a speed of 6,000 miles an hour, with no hope of slowing down. There is of course no remedy for such a situation, but to destroy the ship before she could hit and wreck the terminal. This had been done, and John sat there trying to visualize the last few seconds on board before the radio-controlled nuclear war-heads struck the ship and disintegrated her completely.

He turned the page hurriedly, and the news clerk, who had wanted to prolong their conversation, grinned maliciously at John's obvious discomfiture.

The news on page two was mainly fashions interspersed with society column jottings. John read that the annual Miss Spaceways competition had finished, and after reading the preliminary ballyhoo, he noticed that the young lady loved music and just adored books on astrophysics.

"It's strange," he thought, "she looks no different from last year's winner, or the one before, for that matter."

The fashion news he skipped, for it brought to mind the bills no doubt awaiting him at home.

A long preview of a new movie filmed in Solarscope decided him that this indeed would be a film to see. Entitled "The Last Hours," it dealt with the death of the planet Pharos which had collided so disastrously with Jupiter a hundred years ago. The death-roll had been stupendous, and the review claimed that the final hours of that disaster, filmed of course in four dimensions, brought vividly to life the horrors of those last few hours.

"Will all travellers for Flight No. 7 please report to the decontamination centre at once?"

The announcement startled John, and he got up hurriedly.

In the decontamination centre he took off his suit and underwent the usual rigorous medical examination to determine whether or not, during his spell on earth, he had been exposed at all to the deadly air. Meanwhile the contents of his small suitcase, consisting only of his shaving-kit, two mounted photographs—one of his wife and the other of himself taken with his wife and two children—were being checked into a locker to await his next visit to earth. The clothes he had arrived in a month ago were being prepared for him to put on when his examination was completed.

John received his clearance certificate from the doctor and, going first for a shower, he put on his freshly

laundered clothes and left for the space-liner by means of a tunnel leading directly to the liner.

The ship lay horizontally in her cradle, and John climbed the steps of the metal tunnel linking the ship with the ground. With the air of an old traveller, he made his way to the take-off deck and, seating himself in one of the heavily padded chairs, he waited for the green light to flash from the bulkhead ahead of him.

The light flashed abruptly, and its green glow lit the whole deck. There was the faintest of jolts, and the giant cradle lifted the ship until it was in a vertical position and ready for take-off. From a port-hole beside him John could look out over the terminal, for he was now a hundred feet off the ground. A voice crackled over the loudspeaker fixed next to the green light, warning passengers to sit still, as take-off would be in fifteen seconds.

As the voice intoned the passing of these seconds and the faint whine of the power units rose to a higher key, John looked across at the great granite obelisk set at the edge of the terminal.

"How different it all could have been," he thought.

The voice called seven—six—five—four—three—two—one—zero, and in an instant the mighty obelisk became but a speck, and then disappeared as the liner hurtled outwards.

But John's thoughts were still with the obelisk, and he recalled the inscription mounted on a plaque at its base. Written by a famous Martian historian who had investigated the causes of the last war on earth, it read:

"It is inconceivable that a planet possessing life, gifted with imagination and intelligence, should have developed both for the sole purpose of self-annihilation."

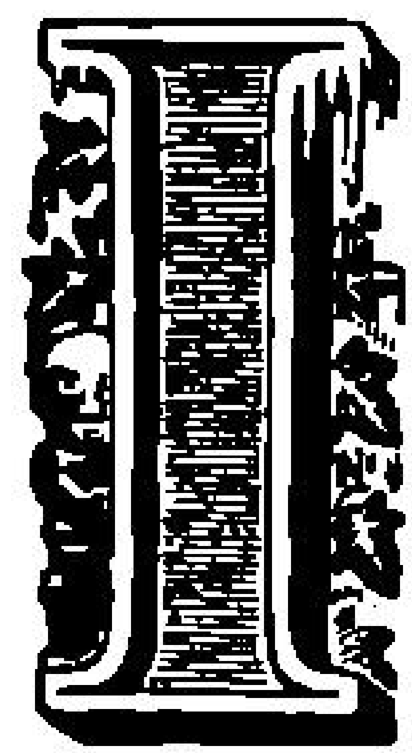
And a man shall be as an hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.

Isaiah xxxii. 2.

THE INTRUDER

KATHERINE NEUHAUS HAFFNER

The most traditional of the ghost stories in this issue of the LONDON MYSTERY MAGAZINE *comes from Fort Wayne in Indiana. The author is novelist, essayist and poet, but before all these she is the proud mother and grandmother of a large American family. It is not surprising then that her style is homely and direct. It makes her tale the product not necessarily of a quiet corner of America but of any gentle domestic scene where mysterious and ghostly happenings may not be excluded. Here is the perfect family ghost story.*



I AM NOT a woman who frightens easily. In fact, I cannot remember ever having known real terror until the night I encountered the intruder. But ever since I have not been able to spend many evenings alone, and, although I dislike intensely being among strangers, now I am the first one to have my hat on when someone mentions going out. And since that night, I have not offered to baby-sit with my small niece and nephew again, no matter how expedient for all concerned.

My somewhat extended stay with my sister and her family in a remote section of Northern Michigan was nearly at a close, and, when her older children were invited to a dance and she and her husband to a party a few miles away that autumn evening, the question arose as to whose turn it was to stay at home with the babies.

I had been asked to the party, too; but they had all made my stay so pleasant, and, since I did not want to go, anyway, I volunteered to act as baby-sitter. Besides, the train left early the next morning and I still had packing to do. So, although they all protested politely, it was a mutually agreeable arrangement.

My nieces and nephew left first in the family car. Some friends were to call later for my sister and her husband. I don't know whether it was the becoming new dress or the expectation of an evening out that made my sister's eyes so bright, but it was a pleasure to see her so happy.

There were high spirits all around, but, before he went out of the door, my brother-in-law turned to me and asked again, "Sure you're not afraid to stay alone?"

"Don't be silly. What is there to be afraid of?"

"Nothing, only I'm just sorry we don't have a telephone yet."

"What would I want with a 'phone?" I asked lightly. "I don't know anyone to call up, anyway."

"Emergencies do arise," Bob countered.

"Be off with you!" I waved magnanimously. "Have a good time! Your old maid sister-in-law can take care of two babies without a tele-

phone—or a man around to help her, either." There had always been some banter between us concerning the relative usefulness of a man about the house.

"Okay, okay," Bob laughed. "See you later, Kate."

We were as cosy as could be. I settled down to my knitting, four-year-old Michael was engrossed in his colour book, and baby Diane slept in her bassinet in the living-room with us. The pot-bellied stove hissed pleasantly as a tongue of flame licked a green log.

When Michael tired of colouring pictures, I laid the knitting needles on the table, pulled him on to my lap, read to him until he was sleepy, then took him off upstairs.

After her ten-o'clock feed, I put the baby back in her crib, and she promptly went to sleep.

Before I started upstairs to pack, I stood by the window for a long time looking out over the countryside. The night was clear; and the corn stocks, which would soon be covered with hoar-frost, waved pennants at the spectral, black pine forest looming up in the moonlight. The lights went out half a mile away in a farmhouse where the nearest neighbour lived. A bobcat yowled in the distance. It *is* desolate, I thought.

I turned from the window, satisfied myself that Diane was all right, then went upstairs. When I had nearly finished packing, I thought I heard the back door open. I was about to call out when I remembered that there were often unusual sounds in and about the old house, for it was situated on a hill where the wind could have its way with shutters and doors. I chided myself for a jittery fool and snapped the suitcase shut.

On the way downstairs an uneasiness settled over me, a feeling of apprehension. The stairway opened into the kitchen, and although I could not shake off a feeling that I was not alone, I was relieved when I saw that the back door was closed. I crossed over and tried the latch. Then, not wishing to brave my brother-in-law's teasing when he got home and found the door locked, I discarded my impulse to turn the key. No one in their neighbourhood ever locked his doors.

You ninny, I thought, when the east wind tried the door and rattled the kitchen window. You're as bad as a child afraid of spooks, I thought, when a log fell into the grate, making me jump. I chuckled as I strode through to the living-room. The chuckle turned into speechless terror when I beheld a gnarled old man bent over the baby's crib, a bright, sharp object in his upraised hand.

I did not scream; horror held my throat muscles in a vice. But I moved. I seized one of the knitting needles and rushed towards him. I missed, and, his attention diverted from the baby, he turned upon me with the dagger. I dodged. He plunged with the knife—once—twice—his slippered feet making no sound as he danced about him like a grotesque prize-fighter, his yellowed white hair flying wildly around his pleated face. A lamp tottered and fell. He circled warily; whenever I thrust the needle he wasn't there. My blood pounded

in my ears while I jumped aside. Then he was so close his breath like a musty cellar flowed over me as he backed me towards the wall, shrewdly, into the corner. I stretched to my full height, put strength I was unaware of possessing into one final attempt, then felt a keen, wild thrill as my weapon found its mark. His knotted hand grasped his neck where the long, steel needle had penetrated, but he showed no other sign of pain. His eyes held a strange, startled expression for a moment, and he dropped the knife. He made a clumsy motion to retrieve it; I flew to a position between Diane and the old man. I turned to glance at the baby, then heard the back door, and, when I whirled about, the intruder was gone. No word had passed between us.

When my sister and her husband returned, they found me holding tightly to both children, rocking to and fro in a state of semi-shock, still fascinated with the red eye in the dragon's head of the dagger as it had winked in the lamp-light while he thrust it at me again and again. I do not know when I straightened up the room. I was only half aware of my sister taking Michael to bed and Bob rekindling the fire I had let go out.

Now the words came rapidly, though incoherently, and I must repeat what happened. They examined the knitting needles, and I sensed their incredulity when they found no blood on either one. Then, when my sister glanced anxiously at her husband and he took a soothing tone with me and suggested that I take a good, long rest after I returned home, I knew that neither of them believed me. Indignation traded places with fear.

"You don't need to act as though I were a psycho!" I cried. "There's a lunatic loose in the neighbourhood. Surely you must know someone who answers his description!"

Bob spoke quietly. "You know, it's a funny thing. If I didn't know better, I'd say it was old Joram Willoughby who lived in that abandoned house down the road—you know, Kate—the rickety old shack with half the window-lights out that we pass on the way to town."

"We'll have to find him before he kills somebody!" I urged.

My sister put another cold cloth on my head.

"I'm afraid that will be impossible," Bob said. "Joram Willoughby died last year—right about now, as a matter of fact. I remember, because there was still some late corn out; but there was so much to be done down at Joram's that I had to wait with the corn cutting until after the funeral."

I could only whisper, "Who was this—this Joram? Tell me about him."

"Not much to tell. He was a queer old coot. I don't think he owned any shoes—went about in a pair of dilapidated house slippers. He hated children. I heard him say once that babies should never be allowed to grow up—they just turned into mean brats, anyway. Must have had some bad experience with kids some time or other. Not our youngsters—that's for sure—they wouldn't go near him. He never bothered anyone that I know of, though.

He was poor as they come, lived alone, and nobody knew much about him. He had only one thing that he seemed to care anything about, a stiletto that some old sea captain had given him when he was a boy."

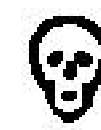
I had not mentioned the type of knife, and I could feel my hysteria mount as Bob continued, "It was an evil-looking little instrument. There was a dragon's head on the hilt with one red eye. Old Joram thought it was a ruby—probably only glass. The old codger never failed to show it to anyone who happened to call at his house."

"It *was* Joram Willoughby," I whispered. "Or somebody who looked just like him—and it *was* the same stiletto. It has to be!"

"That's impossible," my sister put in. "You see, dear, they buried the dagger with him. I saw it in his hand when they closed his coffin."

Three cups of coffee apiece later, the headlights shot into the drive. My brother-in-law flicked on the gate-post light, and we soon heard the laughter of the young people as they neared the house. A few moments more and they burst through the back door, all chattering at once about the fun at the dance, and Bill teasing his sister about a new conquest she had made.

Then Bill handed something to his father. "Look what we found sticking up in the driveway, Dad. Ellen stumbled over it or we'd never have seen it. Who on earth do you suppose could have lost such a fancy knife?"



But evil things, in robes of sorrow,
  Assailed the monarch's high estate.
And round about his home the glory
  That blushed and bloomed,
Is but a dim remembered story
  Of the old time entombed.

And travellers, now, within that valley,
    Through the red-litten windows see
Vast forms, that move fantastically
  To a discordant melody,
While, like a ghastly rapid river,
  Through the pale door
A hideous throng rush out for ever
  And laugh—but smile no more.

EDGAR ALLAN POE (1809–1849).

THE RED DEATH

R. H. WHITTAM

Illustrated by Thomas Swimmer

This is that story of a girl's life, horribly afflicted by a possessive love from beyond the grave. The loving family and friends about her are helpless to save her from the horror that comes to her by night and by day. It seems to be only poltergeist phenomena, but what happens is far more deadly than mischievous. Here is a ruthlessly compelling tale of mystery and imagination.

EVER SINCE HER father's death, his bedroom had remained intact, everything clean and tidy as though awaiting an occupant. But the girl's own attitude was ambivalent. Sometimes she would open the door and go in. Deliberately contemplating the long-familiar objects, she would evoke a poignant realization of the dead man's presence and raise the stinging tears to her eyes. But there were times, too, when she hurried along the corridor with averted face, sensing some mysterious and malign force hidden behind the door.

She never forgot that evening of the first occurrence. It was half-past seven and the oil lamps had been lit downstairs. She had left her own room, and was approaching her father's bedroom when she saw that the door was ajar. A nameless terror lanced through her, winging her steps and fixing her eyes ahead. Another stride would have carried her past the door, but she caught the flicker in that black slit, and something fell softly on the skirt of her dress. Screaming, her dark, young face contorted, she flung herself down the staircase, to lie sobbing on the husk-matting below.

"Marlee! What's happened?" they cried, hastening to her: her mother, majestically bosomed; her aunt, a pinched and silent spinster; her round-eyed young brother, the head of a spinning-top protruding from his pocket.

The old cook thrust a grizzled chin around the dining-room door. The women raised the girl to her feet and the aunt's eyes fell upon the skirt. She gasped. From waist to hem a pattern of crimson spots clamoured against the peach-coloured material of the dress! The big woman engulfed the girl in her arms and sought to lead her to the stairs, but she screamed again.

"No, Mamma! Please! Not upstairs. The door's open!"

"What door, Marlee?" The mother's voice was as solid as a man's.

"Papa's room door." The girl shuddered and clung convulsively. "Someone's in there—they threw something on me!"

"What's the matter?" asked a cheerful voice, and Marlee's cousin Gern came in, white teeth flashing in his brown face.

"Nothing's wrong, Gern," the woman replied firmly. "Marlee's had a fright and must lie down for a while, but she'll come to the pictures with you later on. You can do something now, though; run up to Uncle's room and see if everything's all right there."

The older women supported the girl up the stairs. Young Parl whispered to Gern, "Marlee said someone's in that room, and threw something at her. She's got a lot of red stuff on her dress."

Gern bristled. Glancing round for a weapon, he saw a heavy ebony ruler on the writing-table. He seized it and started off.

At dinner Marlee was herself again. Nothing was missing from the empty room, but all agreed that she must have disturbed a burglar, who had thrown some sort of coloured stuff at her.

"I'd have broken his head if I'd found him," Gern boasted.

But Mrs. Krutts said calmly, "We must report to the police in the morning."

As usual, Aunt Ezzie held her peace.

It was midnight when Marlee and Gern returned from the cinema. In the living-room the silent aunt sat crocheting. The young couple whispered in the doorway, and kissed,

chastely, like children. Suddenly, a sharp pattering broke out high overhead. Then another, and another volley rattled upon the shingled roof.

"Stones!" exclaimed Gern. He sprang to the table for the ruler and rushed out. They could hear him shouting for the servants.

For twenty minutes the bombardment of stones continued. Sometimes a volley was punctuated by the heavy thuds of larger missiles; sometimes there was a mere patter of pebbles.

While the women clustered together downstairs, Gern and the servants scoured the compound and neighbouring grounds. From time to time he ran in to report, but never the news that the culprits had been caught.

When it had all ceased, Marlee, terribly over-wrought, lay on the settee, her forehead covered with a handkerchief saturated in eau-de-Cologne. Her mother went commandingly to the door.

"Two men at a time must keep watch the whole night," she announced to the servants who stood there anxiously. "Gern!" she called, "you will sleep down here tonight. The cook will inform your mother about it. Tomorrow you must see the Police Captain and bring him to us."

The rest of the night, however, passed undisturbed.

At ten o'clock the next morning Gern returned with the police. The bedrooms on the upper floor flanked a central corridor. They had french windows fitted with jalousies which gave on to verandahs running along the sides of the house. The window of the untenanted bedroom was closed but not latched, so entrance had been possible.

In the compound, on both sides of the house, hundreds of smooth pebbles lay scattered. They were of uniform size, except for a few larger stones rounded as by the action of water.

The Police Captain finished his inspection.

"I'll have the night patrols keep a special eye on your house, Mrs. Krutts," he promised. "A report-book will be hung up in the porch, and the patrolmen will sign it at frequent intervals."

"You must not object if I give them a tip, sir," smiled the big woman. She handed him a parcel containing Marlee's dress.

Gern went away with the police, and Marlee kept to her bed till the afternoon, exhausted as after a severe illness. A vast, nightmarish cloud swelled above her. It seemed that the frightful thing that had so long threatened was upon her at last. She covered her head with the pillow and cried soundlessly for her father.

Aunt Ezzie lit the lamp in the living-room and replaced it in its hanging frame. Marlee came quickly down the stairs.

"Auntie," she whispered to the woman who seldom spoke, "do you think we should tell the Sisters at the convent about all this?"

The other turned her narrow face slowly. "Ask your mother," she muttered.

Patter—patter—patter—patter—patter! The onslaught of stones had started again. Almost at once there

was a knock at the door and two policemen bustled in.

"We heard it!" the first man cried excitedly. "It's not quite dark yet. We'll catch them this time!," They dashed away.

Marlee huddled in a corner of the settee, her arms wrapped tightly round her head. Aunt Ezzie knelt down beside the girl, but her sister stood at the open door like a sentinel.

Outside, the constables quartered the grounds and surroundings, but in vain. At length one of them raced for the police station. The night had closed in, but the furious fusillade did not falter. Although smaller in size than before, the stones fell in greater quantity.

From the road came the tramp of feet, and the Police Captain with a strong party marched through the drive gates. Expertly he made his dispositions, and soon the darkness was slashed by swathes of torch-light. The policemen challenged and hailed one another in the distance. Then in twos and threes they returned, empty-handed. Some were muttering uneasily, but the Captain rapped out an order and they were silent. Not until every man had reassembled did the stones cease, suddenly, as though switched off. The Captain found Mrs. Krutts waiting patiently inside the house. "I'm afraid we couldn't——" he began; but she interrupted:

"Your police are useless against the forces of evil, sir." Her deep voice was sombre. "Thank you for what you have tried to do for us."

"Er—about the marks on the dress, Mrs. Krutts," the other said hurriedly. "Chemical analysis shows that they are merely chalk and water—coloured chalk for school use."

The woman's face was expressionless. "Then the dress is not spoiled," she muttered, turning away heavily.

"We shall continue the patrolling and do all we can to find those responsible," the policeman informed her, but his voice lacked conviction.

The following day was a Saturday. Shortly after breakfast young Parl, who had been playing in the compound, ran in excitedly.

"Look, Mamma!" he called. "I've found a letter; it was under the green flower-tub where my top got lost."

His mother took the folded sheet of paper and read:

How does a lover tell his maid
All that his heart must hold?
Speak, or for ever be dismayed!
Buy, ere the wonder's sold!

Angry lights glittered in the big woman's eyes. She stalked to her room and changed into her street clothes. At the police station she laid the paper before the Captain.

"I was wrong last night, sir," she said grimly. "Can you trace the man who wrote this from his handwriting?"

The policeman examined the document carefully.

"This is a page from a school exercise-book," he announced. "It is ruled; the discoloration suggests very old stock. I'll have it fingerprinted, and sent down to headquar-

ters for a special report by the handwriting experts."

"I hope you'll see to it that he suffers the full punishment when you arrest him," his visitor replied.

She went back to Marlee, who lay listlessly in bed. "Don't get any fanciful notions into your head, child," she admonished. "Nothing is going to harm you. The police have found something new which will help them to discover the criminals. Forget about it; we'll have a party this evening. Come along and help to get things ready."

The young people who danced to Aunt Ezzie's piano-playing were very well-behaved. They clapped and bowed to each other, and the boys escorted their partners to their seats punctiliously. There was much enthusiasm over the large ice Mrs. Krutts provided in the shape of a peacock in its pride. Suddenly a girl shrieked.

"Look! There!"

In the centre of the circle of chairs and about a foot above the floor, an invisible source decanted a stream of copper coins on to the polished floor. They chinked and tinkled, and one rolled away on its edge. Soon there was a small, flat heap of perhaps fifty coins, and still they fell.

Gern, in a great rage, yelled, "What the devil's the use of that? We want gold!"

"Gern!" gasped Marlee in terror. Then she screamed, and slumped in her chair as two heavy gold bangles dropped into her lap. They were her father's last gift to her, and had lain locked away in her box of precious things.

"The coins are disappearing!" someone shouted.

Before their horrified gaze, the floor resumed its former emptiness. The party broke up in panic. Gern was a little frightened now, but only for Marlee, and wanted to stay the night; but Mrs. Krutts sent him home.

Aunt Ezzie helped Marlee to bed. The girl was on the verge of a collapse and whimpered piteously. It was just as the woman turned down the

night-light that she heard the knocking. It came from the bed on which Marlee lay, rigid—the bed that rocked slowly along its greater axis, and struck its head against the wall! Aunt Ezzie stood stock still for a moment; then she hurled herself at the foot-board, thrusting it down with all her strength.

"Crack!" The blow exploded in the room, and the woman fell across the bed, her hand pressed to her cheek.

"In the name of God!" she croaked, and with a mighty effort raised herself. The bed was still again; the girl upon it was unconscious.

No stones fell that night.

Marlee did not go to Mass as usual on Sunday, but at about noon Mrs. Krutts brought the parish priest up to her room. He was frail with age, and his rheumy eyes flickered sadly.

"Father," the girl implored, "tell me, please, tell me, why must I be tormented like this?"

"There are some things we cannot know, my child," the aged voice said gently. "You must be patient and bear your tribulations bravely. Pray to Our Lady. She is ever ready to succour. Now I shall bless you, and every room in this unhappy house."

Marlee turned away in despair, but after the priest had ended, her hollow eyes were quieter and she slept. At dusk she awoke, and found that her mother had been watching while she rested. The girl was light-headed from lack of food, but the other insisted upon helping her to the bathroom.

The door closed, and Mrs. Krutts was turning away when she saw—the bottles! Beer bottles of quart size, one by one they appeared about a foot above the floor, and were deposited as by an unseen hand just outside the door. Nine—twelve—fifteen—seventeen, she counted. Then, one by one, they were plucked up and disappeared. The stout woman closed her eyes and prayed for a moment.

"Are you all right, Marlee?" she called.

There was no reply.

"Open this door!" she thundered, thrusting her shoulder against the panel; but the door was unlocked and gave at once. From the bath the girl looked up bewilderedly.

"What's wrong, Mamma?" she queried.

The older woman breathed heavily. "I—want to stay with you, child," she prevaricated.

Later, in the bedroom, she stood by while Marlee got out her night-dress. Suddenly, it was twitched away from her grasp and draped across the bed. She cowered back, her great eyes fascinated.

Mrs. Krutts stalked the garment round the bed, but it fled from her as though alive. Determinedly she pursued it. Then the dress planed into the air and formed a canopy above the girl's head. She stood as though made of stone, and the dress floated softly down over her body!

The stones were absent again that night, but Mrs. Krutts moved her rocking-chair into Marlee's room, and settled down to her vigil. Her mind wrestled ponderously with the problem. She had been right—this

was no matter for the police. But the priest had failed as well. He was so old and weak; probably he had forgotten the correct prayers, or said them badly. Perhaps she would ask him to come again, but her faith had waned. She must think out a way to resist the enemy. She had told Aunt Ezzie that the girl was never to be left alone, day or night.

In the small hours, Mrs. Krutts made herself coffee, and drank it. She ruminated again. Marlee was seventeen; Gern, twenty. They were first cousins, had grown up together, and their mutual attachment was known and approved by the families. Marriage, normally, was a matter for maturer years. But now there was some Thing to fight, some Agent to forestall. She watched, while the girl on the bed moaned and tossed, her slight body child-like under the sheet.

Mrs. Krutts went out on to the verandah. The noises of the night were at last still. A vast blackness had swallowed the compound. Near dawn, Marlee wept in her sleep.

"Papa! Papa!" she whimpered.

The big woman frowned. She had never approved the girl's excessive affection for her father, and had often rebuked her. Marlee awoke and cringed against the pillows.

"It is I—Mamma, child." Mrs. Krutts bent over the bed. "Listen! I have made a plan for you. You shall marry Gern, very quickly now, and have someone to love and protect you all the time. I am sure you would love that."

The girl's face was full of wonder. "Get married!" she whispered. It was like going to see the Queen.

"Yes, child. I'll speak to the priest about it at once. Now you can go to sleep again. See, the dawn will break soon!"

Marlee was full of excitement that day, discussing the wedding with her mother, but in the afternoon she went to bed with her thoughts. She had always loved Gern. He was strong and jolly, and danced very well. And sometimes when he was serious he looked a lot like her father. She caught her breath sharply. Why was it that, once or twice for no reason at all, she had felt a sudden, hot anger against him? She hurried the thought away.

After dinner Gern came in. He listened with great seriousness to what his aunt had to say, nodding his head often.

"I will always think of her first, Aunt Brinnie," he promised. "And I'll guard her with my life. See. . . ." From his pocket he drew something wrapped in a handkerchief—it was an automatic pistol.

"Don't tell me how you got that," the woman said calmly. "But do you know how to use it?"

"Yes," explained Gern, "I practised last night near the cemetery. Then I came back here. I saw you on the verandah, Aunt Brinnie, while I was watching in the compound."

The next three weeks were busy ones for the household. Marlee, however, was in great demand amongst her friends and rarely in the house. Almost unbelievably,

nothing unusual occurred, and night after night there was peace. Marlee, too, was quite untroubled, and her mother noted with satisfaction the rounding of the childish bosom and the little, dignified air she bore.

Then it happened again, exactly as before. Parl was grubbing under the flower-pot for his top, and found another missive. He took it to Mrs. Krutts in the kitchen. It ran:

My lady's hands are white,
My lady's cheek is fair,
My lady's eyes are bright,
All darkness in her hair!

And every night she comes to me,
Her step is soft and slow;
My eyes are closed, but still I see
Her face as cold as snow.

As far as Mrs. Krutts could recollect, the paper was the same kind, and the handwriting, also. This was nothing but a love-letter, she told herself, and so was the first which she had shown to no one but the police. She brooded a long time.

At her mother's call, Marlee left her sewing-machine. She read the poem out aloud. "Oh, Mamma!" she exclaimed. "How nice! Who wrote it? I think I'll copy it into my album, although I feel I know it by heart already!"

Some instinct made Mrs. Krutts dislike the girl's response. "Nonsense, child," she replied, but her tone was soothing as she recovered the paper. "You can get far better verses from the poetry books. This is only an old thing I had."

After the midday meal she went out to the police station.

A week later Marlee and Gern were married. The strange incidents kept no one away from the house, and the wedding reception was crowded and gay.

Darkness had fallen outside when Mrs. Krutts, who was surveying the scene from her corner, heard the stones. Venomously, and in greater volume than ever before, they battered upon the roof. The volleys were like waves, rising to a crescendo of violence, dying away, only to renew the onslaught.

Gern jumped into the centre of the floor. "Let's all dance the Lancers!" he cried, and offered his arm to the nearest girl. Somehow, the guests struggled up, and soon the charming old movements were in progress.

Marlee had crept towards her mother; but the dancing couples cut her off, and she stayed beside her aunt at the piano. Suddenly the older woman glanced upwards, and her hands froze upon the keys. From somewhere near the ceiling a smooth stone, the size of a human skull, was slowly descending directly above Marlee's head.

In dead silence, every eye except the girl's watched the object. Without deviation, and as though a mere featherweight, it came to rest upon her head—and vanished! Then something flashed across the floor, and great crimson stains sprang out on Marlee's dress from shoulder to knee. Her eyes rolled in their sockets and she fell into Aunt Ezzie's arms.

They carried Marlee up to the double bedroom which had been prepared for the young couple, but she recovered quickly. "I'll be all right, Mamma," she smiled wanly. "I've Gern here, to guard me during the night."

The boy went to a drawer and brought out the pistol. "We're not afraid of stones and coloured water," he scoffed. "This gun shoots bullets!"

Marlee fell asleep at once, but it was midnight before Gern came in from the verandah and bolted the window. He slept fitfully, and was instantly alert when he awoke.

The night-light was not too low for him to make out the girl's figure by the corridor door. Something held him silent as he watched her pass through the door, her body very straight. "She's sleep-walking," he told himself.

As he slipped out of bed, his hand touched the pistol on the table and he grasped it. When he reached the corridor the girl was at the door of her father's room. She opened it, and Gern stiffened as he saw the broad band of paler darkness flood across the threshold, indicating that the verandah window was wide open.

Stealthily he crept down the passage as Marlee disappeared into the room. Then he rushed for the doorway.

Across the room Marlee stood by the open window, but her face was towards him. Some THING, shapeless in the gloom, loomed behind her—perhaps gripped her, for he thought he saw dark bands across her arms. Gern dared not shoot, but suddenly the girl slid down and the way was clear.

Gern sprang forward, the pistol exploding deafeningly. Leaping over Marlee's body he reached the window, the gun blazing till it was empty—as the verandah—the grounds below—the air.

As he came back to Marlee, something swished past and thudded upon the floor. Mrs. Krutts lumbered in with a light, and together they found a smooth stone with a page of exercise-book paper wrapped around it. The writing on it read: "Curse you, Gern, for shooting at me."

The following morning the Police Captain called, and Mamma took him into the drawing-room. He was an extremely worried man.

"Mrs. Krutts," he began diffidently, "I've only just returned from headquarters. I know you are a—er—lady of the utmost discretion——"

He broke off, and the woman said levelly, "You have found out who wrote the poems."

"Yes—that is—it is clear that both were written by the same—er—hand." He paused.

"And this also?" The woman gave him the previous night's communication. He examined it and nodded.

"There could be no doubt about it."

"Who is the man, sir?" she asked grimly.

"Mrs. Krutts," the policeman began again, "the matter is still secret—only the police know. We think—we are sure—that the handwriting of the

poems is identical with that of a—er—known person."

"Who is he?" the woman demanded again.

The other stood up and walked a few paces away. "You have a right to know," he answered at last. "The handwriting is the handwriting of the Judge!"

Mrs. Krutts's eyes seemed to grow smaller, and she shrank a little in her chair. For the first time she felt shaken—daunted by the enemy she confronted.

"I don't know what to think." The Captain was apologetic. "I've never had anything similar in my experience."

Mrs. Krutts rallied. She was sure of one thing at least.

"My husband worked for the Judge. It is impossible for it to be true—it is the work of the devil!" she declared. "You must destroy the letters; I will tell no one!"

The policeman's face showed his relief. "Thank you, Mrs. Krutts. You are a remarkable woman, if I may say so!"

All day Mrs. Krutts ruminated over her next step. At first she saw no way open. Every move of hers had been defeated, every aid she had sought had failed. Then a thought came—and she repudiated it at once. But when it persisted, she faced it squarely.

The decision she reached produced a long conversation with old Bulrhan, the cook. Boy and man, he had served her family for fifty years. He was too old to change now, even in the face of the fearful plan she pro-

posed. He retied his head-cloth and set off in the twilight upon his errand.

Mrs. Krutts mounted the stairs to the young people's bedroom. She found them on the verandah, where Marlee rested quietly upon a couch. Hesitation was something new in the big woman's behaviour, and the others showed their curiosity. Finally she said slowly, "Marlee, darling," and at the unusual endearment the girl's eyes widened, "I have decided that we should see—someone else about this trouble." She was silent again.

The young people felt her tension, but waited. Mrs. Krutts twisted her hands.

"It is—the woman—who lives in the swamp-land," she whispered.

"The witch! The Spurm Swamp witch!" cried the girl faintly.

"Aunt Brinnie!" Gern was astounded. "We couldn't do that!"

The other's face crumpled. "We must, Gern, we must. There's nothing left but that. There are powers greater than us—we must sometimes use evil to fight evil!"

"You want to go now, Mamma?" Marlee sat up, strangely eager.

"Not at once—Bulrhan has gone to make arrangements with her. We will wait till he returns."

At eleven that night the three went to the lane behind the house where Bulrhan had led the pony and cart. It was very dark and they had eight miles to travel.

"The woman said she would start talking with her devil at this time," the old servant explained, "but that you must arrive there soon after midnight."

Gern took the reins, and the women huddled lower in their shawls to avoid recognition by chance passers-by. Outside the town-limits the pony trotted along briskly, but slackened pace when they turned into a little-used track. The yellow beams of the kerosene side-lamps outlined the pony's head. Stillness caged the dark, treeless fields.

At length the cart-wheels began to sink deep in the muddy track. Gern pulled up and they dismounted. He took one of the lamps from its socket and, holding it aloft, led the way.

Some distance farther on the path became a narrow embankment. On either hand the fields had degenerated into malodorous bogs. Suddenly the square bulk of a hut showed in the lamp-light. The party halted, and Mrs. Krutts called hoarsely:

"Wise woman! We have come!"

The door of the hut creaked and swung inwards, but no one appeared. Then a thin, old voice from within chanted:

"I wrought with great suffering for
thee!
I do not often fail;
Mighty the spirit who encompasseth
thee,
My power could not prevail!"

Mrs. Krutts crushed Marlee to her; they waited. At length the voice spoke again:

"Come before the door, singly, and make no delay, that I may sleep soon."

The three gazed at one another wordlessly. Then with set face Mrs. Krutts went slowly forward.

"Thyself hast no need for my aid, but thou didst well to seek it. Go now in peace, but rest will not be for thee."

Gern whispered to Marlee, "I will go next," and took Mrs. Krutts's place. The pistol in his pocket gave comfort.

"Beware!" the old voice screamed. "Thy danger cometh by light of day! The blade thirsteth for thee!"

The boy stepped back uncertainly, and it was Marlee's turn to stand before the door.

"Hast thou brought the gifts? Show me!"

The girl laid the bundle she had carried as instructed by old Bulrhan upon the doorstep and untied the knot. A white chicken, less than three weeks old; seventeen small eggs; seventeen red chillies.

"It is right. Stay till I come to thee."

A slithering sound came from the hut, and in the doorway a small, squatting figure appeared. She was a very old woman, and disease had made an elephantine monstrosity of

one leg. She dragged herself to Marlee's feet, and knelt with her white head in the dust.

"Place thy foot upon my head, child of the mighty spirit," she whined.

Mrs. Krutts and Gern were spellbound, but the girl seemed quite unconcerned and did as she was asked. The witch raised her head and kissed Marlee's feet. Then she crawled back over the doorstep, clutching the bundle of gifts.

"Woman!" she cried to Mamma, "there is naught that I can do. But one hope can I give thee! Let the child cross the great water: it may quench some of the fire that burns!"

She disappeared inside the hut, and the door closed in their faces.

It was decided that Marlee and Gern should travel down to the seaport and cross the gulf to the south coast where the family had relatives. All the arrangements were left to Gern. Mrs. Krutts was like a defeated army dispiritedly collecting its broken equipment.

It was Marlee, however, who displayed the greatest change. Somewhere inside her a power was being generated; it flared up her feverish excitement and luminous eyes. But Aunt Ezzie did not miss the narrowing shoulders and the features which grew more ethereal each day.

She came to her sister's room the night before the couple were due to leave. Only she knew the effort she had made to break her habitual silence, and upon such a subject.

"They haven't—slept together—as man and wife yet," she said earnestly. "You should speak to them—tell them——" Her voice trailed off.

The other woman bridled. "Sleeping with a man!" she sneered. "That's in all your dreams—it's the only paradise you want!"

"It is for Marlee's sake," Aunt Ezzie said doggedly. "I thought you meant that to happen—when you arranged the marriage."

"Nonsense!" retorted her sister. "Marlee has a child's mind about such things, and Gern only wants to protect her from harm. Go to bed now, and never mention it to them."

Aunt Ezzie left without another word.

A little later the stones attacked again. This time they penetrated into the double bedroom, but Gern shut and bolted the window. For an hour they rapped upon the jalousies like hundreds of knuckles demanding admission.

Marlee was calm, and smiled when she saw Gern handling the pistol. "The stones don't worry me any longer, Gern," she said. "I feel they'll never harm me—they must belong to the Spirit the old witch mentioned."

Gern put the weapon away, crestfallen and uneasy.

At the young couple's departure Mrs. Krutts broke down completely. Marlee fluttered like a bird, hugged everyone, and even had a gift for the the old cook. Later, in the railway carriage, she said thoughtfully:

"Mamma didn't weep like that when Papa died. But I don't believe

it's because she loves me all that much."

"Of course she does," protested Gern, "and I, too. Both of us would defend you against anything."

The girl was not stirred. "I don't think there's really any reason to feel afraid," she demurred. "I'd be quite all right if only I didn't feel so tired."

Once again Gern had that sense of uneasiness.

The journey across the gulf took three days. At first Marlee was interested in the new sights around her, but soon Gern could not understand the way she withdrew herself, even from him. She would lie for hours in her chair, eating very little, and insisting that she was tired and should be left alone.

It was no different when they arrived at their destination. After the first enthusiasms, the relatives allowed them plenty of privacy, but Marlee did not appear to need Gern's company at any time.

The boy felt something he had never before experienced—a barrier which cut Marlee off. Within it she appeared safe enough and to have no need of his chivalry. The weeks passed uneventfully, and Gern began to fear he was losing Marlee—but was she not his wife?

Perhaps the girl on her part sensed the change in him. One morning she said, "I don't much like this bedroom, Gern. It's very hot in the afternoon, and I'm so tired I must rest in bed. I'm going to ask Aunt Miena to let me have the small room on the other side of the house. You can remain here and be more comfortable."

Gern's face hardened. "That would be wrong," he retorted. "You are my wife, and we must live together."

Anger flushed the girl's wasted cheeks, but Gern's stern air was curiously compelling, and she said no more.

During the afternoon, Gern went up to the bedroom and found her asleep. Tenderness softened his newly liberated manhood, and he sat down beside her. As he bent to kiss the pale mouth she awoke, but the eyes that stared at him were those of a stranger.

"Go away!" she screamed, flinging herself to the farther side of the bed. "Don't ever come near me like that!"

"But, Marlee!" Gern cried in fear. "It is Gern—I love you! And you love me, too!"

The girl slipped to the floor and rummaged in her grip under the bed. When she rose Gern saw the long, fine blade of the dagger she grasped.

"Keep away from me!" she hissed, her lips snarling. "I will kill you if you try to—make me your wife! Now I know why I brought this knife with me!"

Gern was aghast. "Give me the knife, Marlee, please," he begged. "It's a *kroofer* knife, the kind which has been poisoned. It's too dangerous for you to handle." He went slowly round the bed, his hand outstretched in supplication.

Like a wild animal at bay the girl crouched, her eyes great circles of hate. Then she sprang at Gern, stabbing fiercely at his open palm.

The blade ripped through Gern's shirt-sleeve, and then he was strug-

gling furiously for his life. For a while it seemed that the electrified creature he fought would free the evil weapon to do its work. Suddenly the girl darted her face at his neck, her jaws snapping, her free hand clawing at his eyes. Never releasing the wrist that poised the dagger, Gern struck her a swinging smack on the side of the head. Marlee's knees relaxed, and a gush of blood bubbled out of her sagging mouth and down the front of her dress.

Shuddering breaths shook Gern as he laid her body upon the bed and picked up the knife. What had the old witch-woman said about danger by daylight? He could not remember.

Marlee opened her eyes—and saw the stains upon her dress.

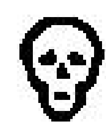
"Look, Gern," she whispered, "the Spirit must have come again—I wish I hadn't been asleep! But how did you get that horrible scratch on your face?"

She slipped into unconsciousness.

The hospital report gave no hope of Marlee's recovery. She had malignant tuberculosis in both lungs, and complications. The hæmorrhage, brought on by the exertion of the mad struggle with Gern, had dangerously weakened her, and her life flickered like a candle in a draught.

The day Mrs. Krutts arrived, Marlee had a second and final attack. They eased her as far as possible, and stood watching helplessly. The mother was a mere wreck of her former stature; she sat by the bed weeping uncontrollably.

"Mamma!" gasped the girl as her life ebbed away. "It was a mistake for me—to have married Gern. I see it now—the stones, the coloured water—all the strange things that happened—it all came from inside me—some kind of conflict—I don't know exactly." She licked her cracked lips and her sunken eyes grew terribly bright. "Please, Mamma dearest, please be kind to Aunt Ezzie—she, too, has suffered!"



O, the dark feeling of mysterious dread which comes over the mind, and which the lamp of reason, though burning bright the while, is unable to dispel! Art thou, as leeches say, the concomitant of disease? . . . Nay, rather the principle of woe itself, the fountain head of all sorrow co-existent with man, whose influence he feels when yet unborn; . . . for . . . woe doth he bring with him into the world, even thyself, dark one, terrible one, causeless, unbegotten, without a father . . .

GEORGE BORROW (1803–1881).

PRELUDE TO MURDER

BARBARA ROCK

MY DAUGHTER INTENDS to kill me. I know that as certainly as I know that my name is Elizabeth Ann Stokes of Marcourt in Gloucestershire.

We are quite devoted to each other, Elsie and I. We have lived together in closest possible companionship ever since she left school at the age of sixteen. I remember it was three weeks before her School Certificate examination. She had been studying very hard for it, she had some extraordinary idea that she wanted to Matriculate and later become a teacher. So unwomanly. When I observed how the hours of study were undermining her health, I decided that the examination itself would put more strain on an already weakened constitution, and in her own interests I took her away from the school.

She made a great deal of fuss at the time, but that only showed me how right I was to protect her from her own rash enthusiasms, how badly she needed guidance from one whose judgement was more mature than her own. She was at heart an obedient girl. It is only in recent years that she has shown a regrettable streak of obstinacy.

I had been widowed only a few years when Elsie left school, and it was to be another year before acute rheumatism in my left leg made a virtual invalid of me. I had to use a stick to make my painful way from one room to another. It became no longer possible for me to continue with the cooking and the housework, and since our modest means forbade the extravagance of a domestic servant, these duties devolved on my dear Elsie. As I lay on my sofa in the parlour, I would hear her struggling with the old-fashioned cooking-stove in the kitchen.

For some months the meals were but poorly cooked, the meat tough, the pastry hard and the cakes showed a tendency to sag in the centre. I like to think that my comments at the time were given in a spirit of helpfulness rather than malice, for indeed if faults are not pointed out, what chance is there for improvement? I well remember the time I took a gingerbread she had made, and ground it into the carpet with the tip of my stick. It merited no better treatment, as I pointed out. The carpet in that corner needed going over with a stiff brush, anyway. I never did, and never will, tolerate one of those horrible humming vacuum contraptions in my house. As for the ginger cake, I carefully instructed Elsie how this should be made, and she spent the evening making one. She had to give up the game of tennis she had planned for that evening, but the lesson was the more valuable and better remembered.

Actually Elsie gave up tennis soon

after that. Always watchful over my dear girl's health, I noticed that she seemed tired after tennis, and I decided it was doing her no good. So when the Rector called, I gave him the racquet for his schoolgirl daughter. He later told me that the child was delighted with it. I am very sorry to say that my dear Elsie was rather sulky over the matter. It is not given to everybody to be generous with their things and find happiness in giving pleasure to others.

After cookery and household management, I set about teaching my daughter dressmaking. It was my wish that she should become proficient in all the womanly arts. I strived to get her to aim for perfection in everything she did. I cannot tolerate second-rate work or slovenly methods. Short cuts are the evil invention of idle minds, and to be satisfied with anything less than the highest standard shows a pitiful lack of character.

Few mothers, I think, would have taken the trouble over teaching and guiding their daughters that I took over Elsie. It is a comfort to me to know that I never failed in my duty. That she often appeared sadly lacking in gratitude cannot be denied. It is so often a woman's cross not to be appreciated by the very one she serves. My task was the more difficult because Elsie was by no means quick to learn. Her frequent forgetfulness and clumsiness were a sore trial to me. I hesitate to question her intelligence, for her school reports had been of the highest order, hinting at an aptitude for scholastic work not untinged with brilliance. However, I believe that school teachers are frequently culpable of falsifying school reports to make a good impression on parents, and I fear this must have been the practice at Elsie's school.

So, I taught my daughter to make clothes. To ensure her perseverance in this most useful of crafts, I stopped her small dress allowance the same year. From Hardacre and Samson, with whom I have dealt since childhood almost, I ordered a roll of suitable grey woollen dress material, another of check gingham and a third of a firm sateen, which I consider so much more suitable for underwear than the flimsy materials favoured today. From these materials my daughter, after due instruction from me, made herself such replacements for her wardrobe as were necessary.

Elsie gradually became a fairly competent needlewoman. I sometimes thought that she was not altogether successful at choosing the happiest styles for her rather lumpish figure and sallow complexion. I remember telling her once that I thought it strange that she had not inherited my own neat, small-boned figure, nor had she the narrow-fingered white hands of which I was rather proud. She replied bluntly that it was hard work that had coarsened her hands. I replied that it had evidently coarsened her sensibilities too, for it was hardly kind to so remind an invalid of her pathetic inability to play her full part in the running of the house.

By then I was spending a greater part of my time confined to the sofa in the front room, so tiresome was my

rheumatism. Naturally I felt my disability very keenly. I had few friends. Feeling unable to extend any hospitality, I never accepted any, nor allowed my daughter to do so. Listening to the wireless only brought on severe headaches, so I sold my wireless set to a dealer, and bought a wheeled chair with the money. My daughter resented this. She had enjoyed the concerts, it seemed, and after I had gone to bed at night, she would sometimes come down and listen to chamber music or a play, and these had been a great pleasure to her.

I spoke to her firmly. I told her I was deeply sorry to see this renewed evidence of what I had long feared. She was a young woman who continually put her own pleasures before those of her mother. I asked her to consider my life, confined to one room, lonely, in pain, my one absorbing interest being her welfare. I told her how I had tired myself out, body, mind and nerves, to teach her my own housewifely arts. I asked her could she really grudge me this bath-chair, in which I could at last get some share of that fresh air and movement to which all of God's creatures are entitled. I saw the tears in her eyes, so I said no more, not wishing to upset the poor child. She never mentioned the wireless again.

Elsie took me out most afternoons, pushing my chair the circuit of the Pavilion Gardens and sometimes up Poplar Hill to see the charming vista from the top. The neighbours remarked on our devotion to each other. Being always charitably inclined and with a great sense of loyalty, I never told anyone of her occasional mulish moods and sulky silences.

The second winter after I had the chair, I developed a very troublesome bronchial cough and had to stay indoors for several weeks. If I had hoped that Elsie would have stayed in to read to me in the afternoons, I was sadly disappointed. She took herself out for an hour, sometimes longer, every afternoon. I fear the neighbours must have passed remarks about the way she left me, a sick woman, to spend the afternoons in solitude. It was a time of great sadness to me. I used to lie on my sofa and ponder on the amazing insensibility and ingratitude of the young. My own disability seemed ever more distressing and hard to bear, and there would often be tears on my cheeks when Elsie returned from her outing.

I learnt the terrible truth from the Rector, who called on me one afternoon.

"Ha, Mrs. Stokes!" he said, wagging a forefinger at me, "there'll soon be a wedding in the family, I can see! That charming daughter of yours will make a splendid wife, of course, um—yes——"

I asked him to explain.

He told me then that Elsie had been out walking with this young fellow Tom Hopkins from Ingates Estate Office. Every afternoon they'd meet, and he'd have his arm round her shoulder as they walked along talking and laughing together. Only yesterday they had stopped awhile under the oak-tree and he had kissed her, right out there in the Rectory meadows.

"I saw them from the Rectory win-

dow!" laughed the Rector. "Young folk will fall in love, you know, Mrs. Stokes. We can't stop them!"

I thought, "Oh, can't we? We'll see about that!"

I was overcome by disgust that any daughter of mine would allow a young man to embrace her in the Meadows like any common little slut!

I did some hard thinking after the Rector had taken his departure. I knew it would be useless to forbid Elsie to see this young man again. She has a mulish streak in her, and such tactics would probably drive her straight into his arms. Something more subtle was needed.

When Elsie came in I was all smiles.

"Now, young lady, what's this I hear about a young man, eh?"

She went white as a sheet and pressed her hands to her heart.

"You—you've *heard*?" she stuttered.

"Yes, I've heard what a naughty girl my Elsie's been, keeping this big lovely secret away from her own Mother! Thought Mother wouldn't like it, I suppose? Why, my dear, I'm delighted you've found someone! I shall want to see him, you know!"

She fell down on her knees by my sofa and her eyes were all starry with excitement.

"You don't mind, then? Oh, Mother, that's just wonderful of you! He's wonderful, and he really loves me, I think. He said today he wanted to marry me and take me away from everything—oh, I shouldn't have said that!—I mean, I think he wants to marry me quite soon, he's got some money saved, and oh, Mother! He's the most darling kind wonderful person!"

I let her babble on, poor naïve child. In her happiness she even put her arms round my neck and kissed me, something she had not done for a long time.

I asked her to bring him to see me the following day. She agreed. The pride with which she presented him was quite comical! From her manner one would have supposed him a Sir Galahad, a Romeo, a Prince of lovers. Instead, he was such an ordinary young fellow! Fair unruly hair, pink face, blunt features and freckles. Not at all an attractive type. I could see at once that he was not nearly good enough for my dear girl. I felt no compunction in doing what I had to do. She could not have been happy wed to so mediocre a creature. I was acting in her own interests as well as my own.

I said, "Now, run away, Elsie, I want to talk to this young man alone."

I saw them look uncertainly at each other.

"Surely," I said, "you'll lend me this delightful beau of yours just for half an hour? I want to have a talk to him, and how can I, if he's looking longingly at you, all the time?"

They both laughed a little at that, and I saw that I had won my point.

"Run along to Greyson's Cake Shop, dear," I said to Elsie. (Greyson's is at the far end of the town.) "Get us some crumpets and an iced cake for tea. I think this afternoon calls for some celebration!"

So off she went, and Tom and I were left alone.

He looked acutely uncomfortable at first, but I soon put him at his ease, chatting of this and that. Inevitably the conversation soon came round to Elsie.

"It gives me great pleasure, Tom, that you should love my dear Elsie, and want to marry her. I really think it is very sweet—and very plucky—of you, in the circumstances."

He frowned.

"How d'you mean 'plucky'?" he asked. "What circumstances?"

"My dear boy," I said, leaning forward a little and covering his hand with my own, "surely you have realized by now, that Elsie is not quite, er—normal?"

He pulled his hand out from under mine as if something had stung him.

"Seems a normal enough girl to me," he said. "I think the world of Elsie, a wonderful girl she is, and I don't like to hear anyone say nothing different!"

Oh, his grammar was atrocious!

He stuck out his chin and glared at me like a bulldog spoiling for a fight.

I managed to laugh lightly.

"Well, now, that's just as it should be, Tom. I'm glad my girlie has made such a good impression on you. She is a very sweet girl indeed, most of the time. After all, she can't really help the other times, can she? Poor Elsie."

"Look here, just what do you mean?" he asked.

"Why, Tom, perhaps I shouldn't have mentioned it at all really, it's just that I shouldn't like you to have too great a shock after marriage, you know. And of course, I did think it my duty to warn you not to have any children. Elsie's father, you see . . ." I covered my face with my hands. There was silence in the room. After a minute I faltered out; "I really cannot speak about the way he was when he died, that horrible, terrible place!"

Tom's voice had suddenly become hoarse.

"You mean, he died in an asylum?"

Very gently I nodded my head.

He uttered a stifled exclamation, rose and went across to the window, where he stood with his back to me.

"My little Elsie!" I heard him mutter.

Suddenly he swung round and faced me. I saw he had gone very pale, and a muscle was twitching in his left cheek.

"If you'll excuse me, Mrs. Stokes, I won't stay to tea this afternoon. After what you told me, I can't face Elsie—not yet. I've got to get away and think about things. Will you, please, tell Elsie that I—I'll see her tomorrow?"

"Very well, Tom," I said, but he had gone.

I lay back on my sofa and closed my eyes. It had been a very trying afternoon, I felt quite worn out.

When Elsie came in, I said that Tom had become unwell. It seemed the simplest explanation. I have always been so careful not to hurt Elsie's feelings. She was very restless that evening, and kept looking at me from time to time almost as if she suspected me of having turned the young man out of the house! She was a girl

who got strange fancies at times.

The next afternoon she went out, presumably to meet him. When she came back she went straight to her room and shut the door. Presently I heard her sobbing. Elsie was always a noisy weeper. I regretted then that I did not have the radio. Some bright music would have drowned that dismal sound.

It was after my poor girl had been jilted by Tom Hopkins that I began to see Murder in my girl's eyes when she looked at me. Yes, ever since that afternoon, a year ago now, when she came back from seeing Tom, and shut herself in her room, she has wanted to kill me. I who have looked after her and loved her so devotedly all these years.

She has twice tried to take my life.

The first time was during one of our afternoon walks. She had pushed me to the top of Poplar Hill, we had turned to come back, when she suddenly gave the chair a sharp jabbing push, and let go the handle! The chair began to rush down hill. I cried out. Fortunately, a man who was painting a gate saw my plight and rushed to stop the chair before it could overturn. Elsie ran up, pale and trembling.

"I only let go for an instant!" she exclaimed. "Only an instant, really it was. I never dreamt it would career off like that, I never thought . . ."

I was feeling quite sick and faint from shock, but I remember thinking how very childish were her senseless repetitions.

The second occasion was only two weeks ago. It was during the night. Unable to sleep, I called Elsie and asked her to bring my library book from the parlour and a sofa cushion to prop me up a little while I read.

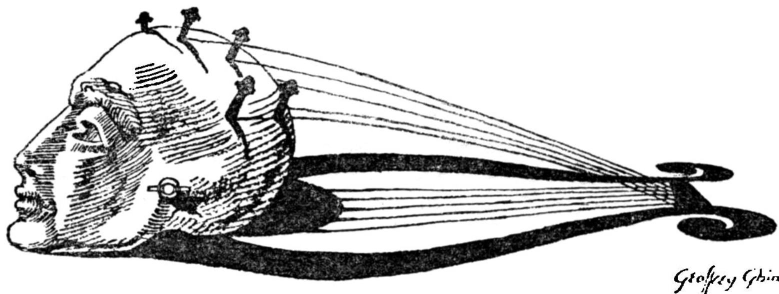
I must have dozed off while she went on her errand, for I remember waking to find her staring down at me with the most extraordinary, malevolent expression on her face, and the sofa cushion poised in both her hands ready to crush down, down upon my sleeping face. Luckily my right hand and arm were free of the bedclothes, and with a sharp movement I knocked the cushion from her hands, and it bounced from the bed to the floor. She gave an odd noise that might have been a sob and rushed from the room.

I can tell you it is not pleasant to know that one's beloved daughter is a homicidal maniac. Was it not Cleopatra who nursed a viper in her bosom? Then that fabulous lady and I have something in common. A poisonous viper indeed. I do not know at what hour the viper may strike again. Helpless, I must wait whatever fate is in store for me. I do not think I shall have to wait long.

It would be useless to call in the Police, they would dismiss my tale as the morbid wanderings of an old woman's mind. Friends, relatives, I have none to help.

Meanwhile we are together, my dear daughter and I. She tucks the rugs round me so lovingly when she takes me for my afternoon outing in the wheeled chair. She smiles at me and calls me her dearest Mummy.

It is all very touching—and rather horrible, too. Don't you agree?



THE SHADOW OF THE MIND

JAMES KENNEDY

The shadow of the body meets the eye, but the shadow of the mind strikes deeper. Here is the eternal triangle story in its most sinister light.

I HAD NEVER SEEN the shadow of a man's mind till I met Julian Willim. Four times I saw the shadow of his mind, and once I saw the shadow of my own. And now it seems unlikely that I shall see the shadow of a man's mind again.

I can feel my warders' sympathy, but when I try to see the shadow of their minds, I can't. During the three days of drab wrangling and fustian oratory that constituted my trial, I experimented on the people in court from the Judge to the Usher. I could see their normal physical shadows plainly enough; but there was no darting shadow of their thoughts.

From the expression on a face I could guess what its owner was thinking. My counsel's mouth twisted sardonically as he pointed out that at worst it would have been manslaughter if I had killed my victims in what the law delicately calls *flagrante delicto*. And I knew he was thinking I ought to have arranged it that way.

When the Judge was summing-up to the jury, his words had authority and weight. He recited the law about insanity as earlier Judges and textbooks have laid it down. But in his voice was the weariness of a tired traveller who drags his feet unwillingly.

I could guess at thought from face or voice. But nowhere was the content of a mind and the shape of its thought projected into a shadow. There was no little dancing devil such as cantered behind the horse in Rotten Row that day I first saw Willim.

I was sitting in the Park with Mara. I wanted a clear mental picture of the riders for a scene in a book I was writing. Imagination is all very well, but it ought to gambol on a firm

basis of fact. Perhaps that is why the critics say my stories are "very true to life." The tribute hasn't a high cash value.

It was a bright, warm day, and the sun at noon threw sharply profiled shadows of the horses and the riders. The strong horizontal silhouettes on the ground moved in harmony with their vertical originals in the rhythm and grace of an equestrian symphony.

On a black horse a man of masculine height was magnificent in life and had a sinister splendour in shadow. The sombrero and the small black beard, stiff and stubbly as a porcupine, became distinguished appendages in the shadow. But this man needed no properties for distinction: an eagle nose and proud dark eyes gave strength to a face, regular enough for male beauty, but mocking and essentially pernicious.

"Look, Tim!" exclaimed Mara, "that's Julian Willim. Isn't he wonderful?"

I knew Willim by name and from his photographs; but he and I had never met. Though we had the same publishers, our social worlds didn't mix any more than our books. The characters he wrote about were big and bad, and wicked and witty; they had as much relation to life as a nightmare. The best any reviewer ever said of his books was that they were infernally clever. But they sold.

I found it fascinating to have a name and a context for what I was seeing—seeing so intently that I didn't answer Mara. I was watching a shadow which had no vertical original.

Horizontal on the ground behind the black shadow of horse and rider a little red devil loped along. It was a miniature of Mephistopheles as he appears in the First Act of Gounod's *Faust* in his vivid costume of cavalier red.

Colour gave me the clue. Thoughts have colour. The coloured shape caught the form and hue of Willim's thoughts. This was the shadow of Willim's mind.

"You seem as fascinated as I am," laughed Mara. "He's certainly marvellous."

"Can you see what I see?" I asked.

"I can see quite enough," smiled Mara. "But what can you see?"

"A little red devil," I answered.

"I can see a big black one sitting on a horse."

"But can't you see a red shadow running behind?"

"Don't let the sight of a handsome man affect you like that, Tim—not even after our evening out. Pink elephants, but not red shadows."

"Then you can't see any shadow beyond the ordinary?"

"An ordinary shadow and an extraordinary man. But what's all this about?"

"Mara," I declared solemnly, "it is as though I have developed a new power—a sixth sense. I am looking at the shadow of a man's mind."

The little red devil developed a strut in its trot as though it sensed Mara's interest. But perhaps it knew that its physical original would interest most women.

"You mustn't make up stories like that," warned Mara. "Your reputation

is based on stories people can believe. Don't lose it."

"But I'm serious," I retorted.

"Can you see the shadow of my mind?" asked Mara airily; "or only the shadow of my body?"

"That man," I said, "is the first person whose mind has ever thrown a shadow for me."

"Darling," concluded Mara as Willim disappeared along the Row, "it's scarcely prudent to focus my attention on so striking a man. But I don't suppose we'll ever meet him. Take me for a drink to console me."

But we did meet. Six months later the publishers gave a cocktail party to launch my latest book, and Willim came.

"I've always admired your books," he said as he shook my hand. "Less showy than mine, but so much better. If style is a preservative, you'll live."

I murmured my acknowledgments and looked at the floor. I don't pay much attention to compliments, but I was searching for the attendant coloured shadow.

Willim turned to Mara and intoned "You, of course, are his inspiration—as you are the joy of every theatre-goer who appreciates the fine playing of supporting parts."

Then I saw it. Mara and I were at the end of a room, close to bookshelves; and as Willim faced us the electric candelabra flung his physical shadow obliquely across the books. Restless behind the black immobility of the physical shadow lay a tiny outline of Don Juan in the gay dress he wears in Mozart's opera.

I watched the gay shadow intently. Mara was watching me just as closely.

"They're giving a champagne lunch to float my book next month," Willim was saying. "You must both come."

"What's the book to be called?" asked Mara.

"Dames Die Speechless," laughed Willim. "A horrible title for a terrible book."

"It sounds fair enough," Mara answered in her showiest style, "for we talk a lot while we're alive." Then she added with eloquent eyes, "We'll be there."

I saw the tiny figure preen itself in its gorgeous costume. Perhaps Willim's mental shadow came to me in operatic shape and shade because I took him lightly at first. But even when our relationship had become serious and grim, the shadow retained a phantasy of form suitable enough for phantoms.

The grimness came quickly. A week after that lunch I gave a lecture in a city about a hundred miles from London. I had arranged to spend the night there; but a brother of my chairman's was driving back to London after the lecture, so I travelled with him.

I got back to our flat about half-past two. I saw the black hat hanging shamelessly in the hall. I had no doubt about the owner. Nor would anyone who knew Willim have any doubt about where I should find him.

From what I've heard in the court, I gather that if I'd killed him there

and then it certainly would not have been murder. It seems odd it became murder because I waited.

All I did was to take Willim's hat and throw it from the bedroom window. "Are you going the same way or peaceably down the stairs?" I asked.

Whether I could have carried out my threat will always be doubtful. Probably not. Anyhow, Willim dressed for the street, and then departed without a word either to Mara or to me.

From the moment I switched on the light I saw the shadow of his mind. It was an ash-grey bird, with a barred breast and a long tail. A cuckoo.

Mara and I went on together. That was easy; for she was young and beautiful, and meant a lot to me.

Besides, all my anger was against Willim. He seemed to have faded out of our lives as quietly as he left the room. Ironically enough, I had a happy feeling of relief when I read he was going to Hollywood for the filming of *Dames Die Speechless*. But perhaps the person most concerned sees least.

Soon after I'd read the good news I was writing in my study one afternoon when the phone rang. It was Mara.

"Tim," she said, "I hadn't the courage to tell you face to face, and merely to write would be too cowardly. I'm going to Hollywood with Julian Willim. He's getting me a part in the film. I wanted to wish you——"

I glanced at my watch. I had just fifteen minutes before the boat train left. I dropped the receiver without replacing it, caught a taxi, and was walking up the platform three minutes before time.

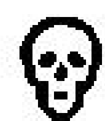
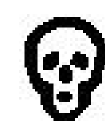
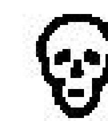
The photographers were busy with Mara and Willim. I gave them something to photograph.

But none of the cameras caught the coloured shadow of Willim's mind. I saw it as I walked up: still gay, still trivial; a rainbow parakeet with a red tail. They're showy little fellows.

I shot the gay colours out of him. The afternoon sun shone strongly in on the three of us. Looking down at his huddled body, I wondered whether I should see the shadow of his mind as he lay dead. There was none.

But beside the black outline of my own shadow was a miniature shadow of something that wasn't in the station. For the only time I saw the shadow of my own mind. And the shadow I saw was the shadow of the gallows. It was then I shot Mara, too.

These shadows I have seen may seem to others hallucinations or false lights—or false shades. But as prophecies no one can doubt their accuracy. Like my books, they have kept close to the facts.

Our acts our angels are, or good or ill,
Our fatal shadows that walk by us still.
JOHN FLETCHER (1579–1625): *Upon an Honest Man's Fortune.*

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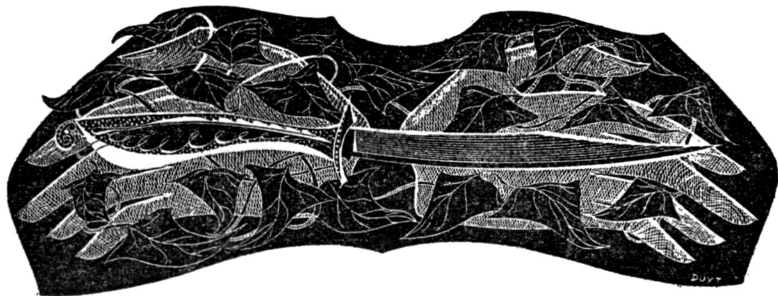

CROOKS IN BOOKS

A review of some recent crime, mystery and detective books.

ANTHONY SHAFFER

"JASON GOES WEST," by John Newton Chance (*Macdonald, 9s. 6d.*).

And with him go a couple more ripe clichés—the mysterious foreign power and the pretty girl with the lost memory. Once again it's bully for Wing-Commander David Brendon (*alias* Jason), I suppose. But if only he'd garner the golden fleece and move back home a bit smartish, and stay there, we'd all be better off.

"DARLING CLEMENTINE," by Dorothy Eden (*Macdonald, 9s. 6d.*).

It is strange that such a splendid exponent of the atmosphere of brooding suspense as Miss Eden should have burdened herself with quite such a Dickensian plot.

It is all the more to be regretted because this time Miss Eden has surpassed herself in the laying on of horrific ambience and sheer macabre malice. Would to God she'd laid a modern plot.

"ALIBI BABY," by Stewart Stirling (*Boardman, 9s. 6d.*).

This one is all about oil millionaires, and rape and murder, and double-crosses, which in this class of literature are very useful, if hackneyed, subjects.

For good measure we also get a peep behind the scenes of a big hotel. This is not a hackneyed subject and does not deserve to be.

"MURDER POINTS A FINGER," by David Alexander (*Boardman, 9s. 6d.*).

But not in any direction the reader is likely to go. The murderee and ex-cop, with a ·45 slug in his intestines, identifies his murderer before he dies, by carefully arranging some finger-print cards, which quite by chance he has lying about the house. So ambiguous is his ingenuity that the police suspect everyone in turn before coming up with the right hombre.

"THE JUDAS KISS," by Herbert Adams (*Macdonald*, 9*s*. 6*d*.).

A very ingenious method of comitting murder in a household, all of whom have names like Garnet, Pearl and Emerald. The only trouble is that the author's ingenuity has been negatived by a too-obvious title and a dust-jacket of glaring obtuseness.

"DRINK ALONE AND DIE," by Belton Cobb (*W. H. Allen*, 9*s*. 6*d*.).

But not from alcoholism, as one might expect but from cyanide: cyanide in a bottle of gin from which three people habitually take their evening cocktails. But only one person dies, and that person, the intended victim.

Mr. Cobb has produced another in his long line of ingenious whodunits, and proves once again that the closed-circle situation does not get any more concentric with the passing of the years.

"ALL THROUGH THE NIGHT," by Whit Masterson (*W. H. Allen*, 9*s*. 6*d*.).

A police chase between midnight and dawn. Their quarry: a mentally unstable criminal and the girl he has kidnapped.

The style shows that the author's eyes were fixed more on the cinema box-office than on his typewriter, and lip service is dutifully paid to Mr. Johnstone's censorship office by the fact that All-American girlhood goes unsullied under the most prurient conditions, and the hero's All-American clean-cut limbs are merely punc-

THE LONG HAUL

by Mervyn Mills

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of London's underworld

13s. 6d.

MACMILLAN

tured with a bullet hole, which fortunately misses the bone, in circumstances in which it would have been inevitable for him to have been pierced like a sieve.

"MAKE-UP FOR THE TOFF," by John Creasey (*Hodder & Stoughton, 10s. 6d.*).

As if the top-hat, monocle and cigarette-holder were not enough already, Mr. Creasey has to give us a title like this. It's another lipstick poisoning—the second this quarter, and there comes a point beyond which even the most charitable reviewer can say "this is a highly original way of committing murder."

Mr. Creasey's way is not even a very good way of writing a book, but it serves to make him very popular, and this should do no harm to his reputation for the facile.

"SLEEP WITH STRANGERS," by Dolores Hitchens (*Macdonald, 9s. 6d.*).

This tri-murder story is not nearly as promiscuous as the title would lead one to suppose. But one can't, alas, give the style such a clean bill of purity. Throughout the book it flirts dangerously with Raymond Chandler, Sax Rohmer and Mrs. Henry Wood, to no one's advantage.

"TWO TICKETS FOR TANGIER," by Van Wyck Mason (*Robert Hale, 10s. 6d.*).

Good, convincing spy story with plenty of action, cross and double-cross, with the O.K. social philosophy turning up trumps at the last minute.

2 good thrillers

Drug on the Market

HENRY BRINTON

Another exciting *John Strang* story by "One of the best, most intelligent and original adventure cum detective writers to have appeared since the war." —*C. P. Snow.* 10s. 6d.

You Know the Way It Is

ARTHUR E. JONES

A tough New Zealand thriller crackling with action and the unexpected romance which besets every Private Eye.
10s. 6d.

Hutchinson

Mr. Mason is an "eminent" professional soldier and writer, and it's these two facts that make his book so "readable."

"A SHIFT OF GUILT," by John Bude (*Macdonald*, 9*s*. 6*d*.).

Another one from the ever-fertile Mr. Bude—a fertility discernible in the assembly-belt packaging. The puzzle: why was a young girl strangled, and left on a common with her hair cropped, her shoes and stockings removed and with a dog-leash and a hand-rolled cigarette butt left conveniently near by?
Answer: In the title.

"AN ARTIST DIES," by John Rhode (*Geoffrey Bles*, 10*s*. 6*d*.).

And in horrible circumstances. The excellent Mr. Rhode has once again given us as pretty a teaser as ever a closed-circle village of suspects yielded. But, oh Mr. Rhodes, shame on you for curare! It's as *passé* as long-lost Australian uncles.

"NARROW GAUGE TO MURDER," by Carolyn Thomas (*Boardman*, 9*s*. 6*d*.).

The blurb on the book jacket tells us that "uncovering some peculiar secrets among these strangely assorted inhabitants of Glory Cloud, Gail (Rawson) finds herself in a greater danger from the murderer than from the law; but won't give up.
This may or may not be a fair comment on the course of justice in America, but it certainly tends to put a foolish gloss on another well-constructed tale of mayhem from the

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Arthur Upfield

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" An ingenious story told with his accustomed humour. Verdict: Bony at his best." *Daily Mail.*
" Well up in an already high class." *Spectator.* 13s. 6d.

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A. A. Fair

BEDROOMS HAVE WINDOWS
An exciting story of blondes, deaths, and mystification which crackles with action and keeps its secrets to the end. 12s. 6d.

Heinemann

pen of the author of *The Hearse Horse Snickered.*

"THE MEGSTONE PLOT," by Andrew Garve (*The Crime Club,* 10*s.* 6*d.*).

Mr. Garve's latest lacks much of the delightful ambience of *The Riddle of Samson,* but it is clever enough for all that.

The plot is concerned with the attempt by a man and his mistress to get damages for libel out of the Press by means of a trumped-up set of misleading circumstances. I am giving nothing away when I say that the flaw in the otherwise impeccable scheme is a highly ingenious, if unnecessarily slight, ornithological one.

"THE LONG HAUL," by Mervyn Mills (*Macmillan,* 13*s.* 6*d.*).

To get through this book is the longest haul this reviewer has had for months. Basically a good story of passion and corruption in the long-distance haulage world, it is thoroughly spoilt by an acute and prolonged attack of over-writing, coupled with a comprehensive ignorance of spiv and working-class argot.

Excessive romanticism seldom mixes kindly with excessive realism at the best of times, but when turgidity is allied with inaccuracy, only tedium results.

This is a great pity, because Mr. Mills's canvas is refreshingly large and his attempt a brave one.

"ALWAYS SAY DIE," by Elizabeth Ferrars (*The Crime Club,* 10*s.* 6*d.*).

Another in Miss Ferrars' swiftly

THRILLERS OF THE MONTH

Current successes

The Pinned Man

by George Griswold

"A very special astringent quality about the Groode books."—CHRISTOPHER PYM. "Will win new followers for Mr. Groode of British Counter-Intelligence."—M. HOUSEKEEPING. "He is as good as anyone at the spy-thriller."—FRANCIS ILES.

Invasion of Privacy

by Harry Kurnitz

"Action brisk, fizzes with wisecracks."—YORKSHIRE POST. "Brilliantly ingenious . . . apt and funny side-glances at Hollywood."—CHRISTOPHER PYM. "Expert and thrilling."—IRISH TIMES.

This month's choice

The Beckoning Dream

by Evelyn Berckman

(Ready May 31)

To follow

Goodbye is not worthwhile

by William Mole

(author of *The Hammersmith Maggot*)

Widow's Web

by Ursula Curtiss

Thrillers of the Month from

EYRE & SPOTTISWOODE

growing pile of creepy, baffling whodunits. The ingenuity springs from a situation in which a woman has disappeared in circumstances where some members of the *dramatis personæ* have reasons for contriving her disappearance, whilst others conversely have pressing reasons for producing her alive.

As usual with this authoress, yer pays yer money and yer taikes yer choice—almost certainly a wrong one in this case.

"BERMUDA MURDER," by Van Siller (*Hammond & Hammond*, 10*s*. 6*d*.).

A goodish murder jamboree blazed through a trail of marital infidelities. The style is light, slickly professional and satisfyingly unimportant, and the dénouement as neatly contrived as it is psychologically unlikely.

"THE PAPER CHASE," by Julian Symons (*The Crime Club*, 10*s*. 6*d*.).

The Paper Chase finds Mr. Symons in his happiest vein—salty ironic, bearing round just the teeniest bit to the facetious.

The initial murder takes place in a remote, progressive, co-educational school (the "Brooker-Timla Health Guide" is used), and the chase for hidden treasure (so it turns out to be) leads the hero and his nymphomaniac girl-friend through many wild adventures, including a splendid Hitchcockian session with a song and dance troupe called "Barnacle Bill and his Limpets," to a final massacre when everyone of note in the book, except naturally the aforementioned amorously-inclined parties, is killed in a wonderful massacre in a water-tower. O.K. stuff for the *aficionados* of the Junior Common-room genre.

"THE MASK OF ALEXANDER," by Martha Albrand (*Hodder & Stoughton*, 10*s*. 6*d*.).

A secret-service novel in the Bernard Newman style—fast pace, intricate and thoroughly unlikely (though it appears that the central character is based on a real-life agent), this book is certain to appeal to all those who firmly believe that right will triumph over might no matter how darkly the storm clouds may lour during the course of events, how sinister the tightly belted leather overcoats of the inevitable pursuers may be, or how single a purpose may shine from their soulless grey eyes.

"THE BECKONING SHADOW," by Denis Scott (*Hammond & Hammond*, 10*s*. 6*d*.).

Involved, padded-out quest for a wily, ruthless murderer who manages to stay one jump ahead of the detective and two ahead of the police, for all but the weary, time-saluted ending where the private op describes the murderer's actions in detail (here they seem like something lifted from one of the drearier works of Freeman Wills Croft), and he/she, gun in hand, admits them cheerfully while slowly backing towards the door. Little does he/she suspect that behind the door lurks approximately fifty years of last-minute salvations. It did, however, just cross the mind of your canny old reviewer.

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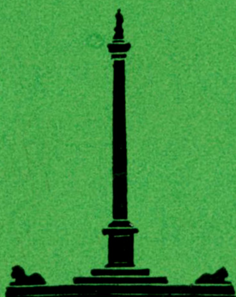

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by
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