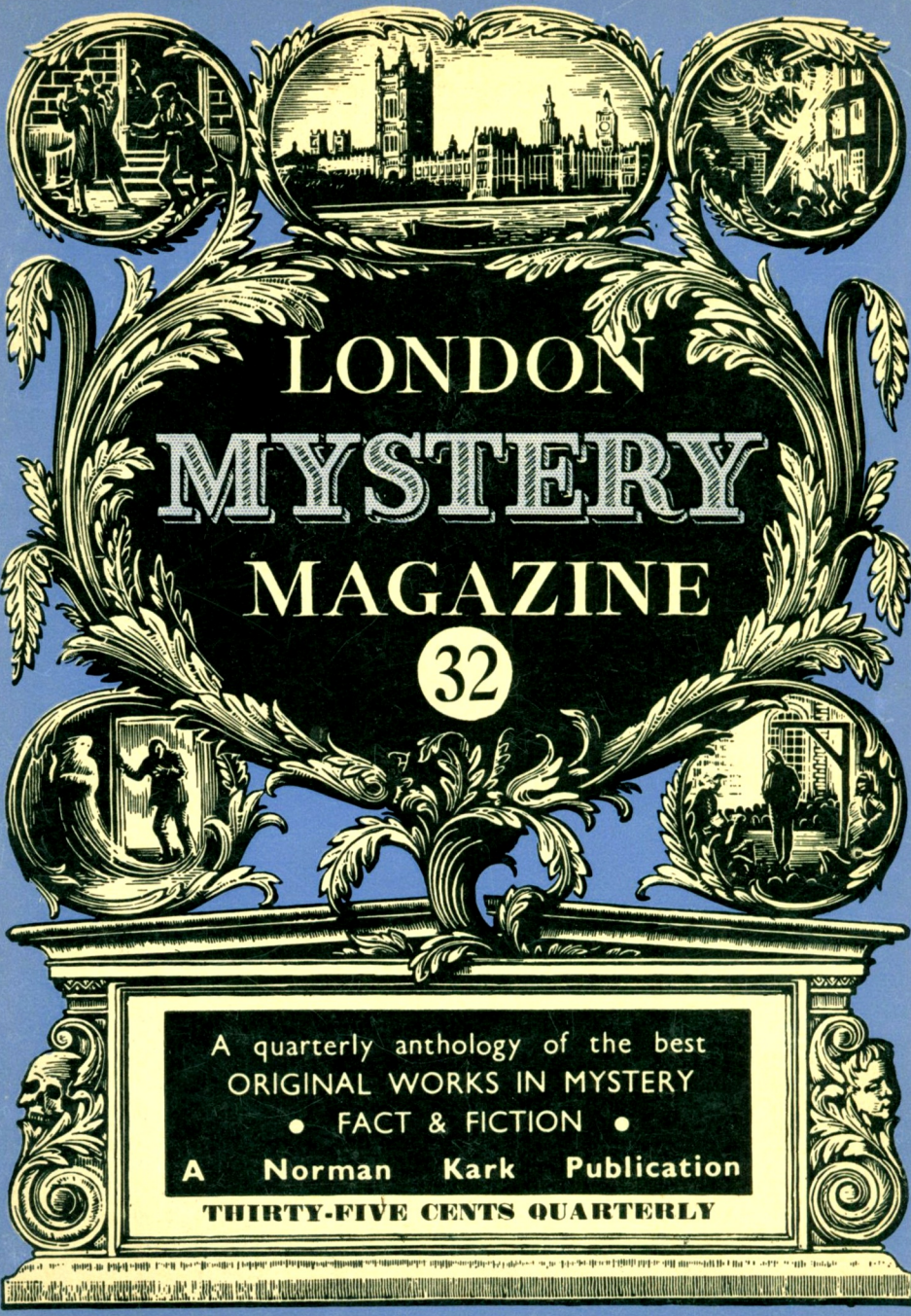


LONDON MYSTERY MAGAZINE

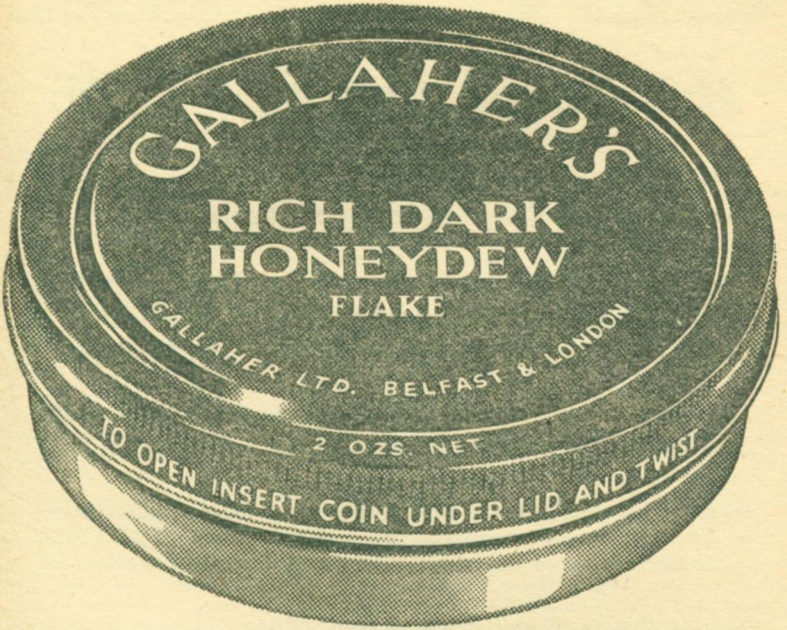
32

A quarterly anthology of the best
ORIGINAL WORKS IN MYSTERY
• FACT & FICTION •

A Norman Kark Publication

THIRTY-FIVE CENTS QUARTERLY

A tobacco



# of quality

ALWAYS FRESH—FLAKE OR RUBBED OUT · IN 1 OZ. AIRTIGHT TIN 4/10 2 OZ. 9/7

Buy

COURIER

it's worth looking into

Britain's Finest Magazine is directed to appeal exclusively to those of taste and discrimination.

Courier publishes only the outstanding in fiction, fact, photographs, art and satire, using all that is finest in paper, printing and process engraving.

Courier is seen only in the best homes, hotels, clubs and ocean liners. It should be in your home.

As a special offer to every new reader who places a subscription to Courier, we are presenting a 437-page volume of MYSTERY —an Anthology of the best mystery and detection stories.

To add this handsome book to your library, all you have to do is to post us your cheque or money order for £2 ($6.00 U.S.A.) with your name and address, when we will send Courier to you in any part of the world for the next twelve months and the complimentary MYSTERY volume immediately.

NORMAN KARK PUBLICATIONS LTD
Courier House Blackfriars Bridge London SE1, England

THE LONDON MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Here in London the hint of foul play and the monstrous is always with us. The dark surface of the river flowing by our door at Blackfriars Bridge conceals many a secret. A chill wind blows from the City, skirting St. Paul's and making the spine shiver as we pass down Ludgate Hill. We have put together this anthology in the depth of winter. Out of the fogs and frost phantoms come gliding. The gory annals of crime detection fall open at our feet. We are all set to entertain and terrify you.

But before we begin the music it is fitting that we should boast a little. The world looks in to THE LONDON MYSTERY MAGAZINE. We have been the means of inaugurating at least one great biographical controversy in the world of scholarship.

In the current issue of our worthy transatlantic contemporary, THE BAKER STREET JOURNAL, for which we have to thank the eminent Sherlockian Edgar W. Smith, we note with pleasure the enormous interest that has been aroused by the Will of Sherlock Holmes. As is now well known to many of our readers this was discovered in 1951 by Nathan L. Bengis and was first reproduced in these pages. Its authenticity was subsequently questioned by Professor Jacques Barzun. Now in a splendid and scholarly defence of his remarkable discovery, hailed by Sherlockians everywhere, Mr. Bengis asks the learned professor to imagine Sherlock Holmes's chagrin if he had found that his Stradivarius was a cheap imitation, and goes on to tell of his successful submitting of the Will to the scrutiny of an impartial committee of experts.

Thus having been instrumental in the shedding of light on the great Baker Street sleuth, THE LONDON MYSTERY MAGAZINE continues the great tradition of mystery writing. Our present mixture is a potent one of crime fiction and the macabre alike.

The field of the detective is amply covered by famed Irish writer Jim Phelan in a baffling mystery; A. R. Williams with an ingenious yarn of burglars who fall out. Denys Val Baker presents a remarkable, long, fantastic mystery of the river, and Zachary Cox has to tell of a professor's strange experiment.

The group of distinguished American writers in this issue has fine and characteristic offerings. Marjorie Lyle McGowan lends a subtle whimsy and humour to her tale of a girl who just could not please. Miriam Allen de Ford is a practised ghost story writer of great power, and Edmund H. Burke gives us an imaginative *tour de force* of unspeakable horror.

In mystery and imagination of the utmost excellence we are indeed well served. Rosemary Timperley returns to our pages with a subtle tale of a child that is full of the demonic and the unexpected. A few haunted children wander through our pages but the greatest horror and spine-chilling is reserved for the adult. The adjustment of Philip Spring's "Dark Glasses" produces a formidable pageant of the damned. "The Big Stick" is indeed a lethal weapon in the hands of a diabolical Punch. "The Hand Mirror" reflects all the ageless powers of evil, and "The Parrot Shop," too, can work its frightful transformations. Finally, we would warmly recommend G. E. Fox's "The Hanging Stones" as a most genuine piece of Yorkshire intensified to a pitch of imagination reminiscent of the Brontës. Once again we welcome our readers to the feast and promise them all they can desire of nightmares. EDITOR.

NORMAN KARK PUBLICATIONS, COURIER HOUSE, BLACKFRIARS BRIDGE, LONDON, S.E.1

STATE EXPRESS 555

The Best Cigarettes in the World

The House of STATE EXPRESS. 210 PICCADILLY. LONDON. W.1.

Policeman's Lot

HARRY SÖDERMAN

This Swedish master of criminology—organiser, inter alia, of the post-war International Police Commission—died suddenly in Tangier some months ago. The memoirs he left provide an absorbing study of crimes, criminals and detection which have come within the orbit of Dr. Söderman's vast experience.

Illustrated. May. 18s. net

College Harry

DAVID ELIAS

The subject of this book has been, technically speaking, a criminal for fifty of his fifty-nine years, and has spent a total of two decades in prison. David Elias has chronicled the story of College Harry's lawless career in the spirit in which it was lived and carried on. Harry who has now retired, has been responsible for some of the most imaginative coups in the police records, and the revelations on the world he moved in are both gripping and startling. *May. 18s. net*

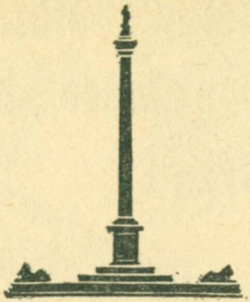
The Road to Tyburn

The Story of Jack Sheppard and the Eighteenth-century Underworld

CHRISTOPHER HIBBERT

Jack Sheppard was executed at the age of twenty-two after a fantastic progress through the bizarre nightmare underworld of the eighteenth century. Mr. Hibbert captures in his narrative all the horror, hunger and squalor of the period and setting. *Illustrated. May. 18s. net*

LONGMANS



THE LONDON MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NUMBER THIRTY-TWO

THE LONDON MYSTERY MAGAZINE IS PUBLISHED QUARTERLY BY THE NORMAN KARK PUBLICATIONS LTD.

MARCH 1957

Copyright in all contents reserved. This periodical is sold subject to the conditions that it shall not be disposed of by way of trade except at the full retail price; nor in a mutilated condition; nor affixed to nor as part of any advertising, literary or pictorial matter whatsoever.

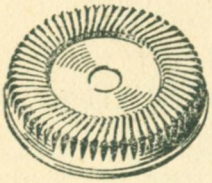
ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION RATES

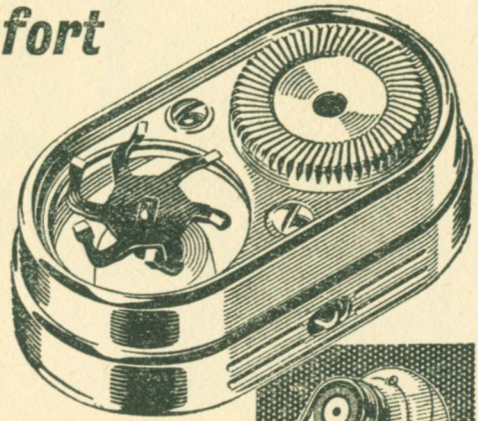
U.K. and Sterling Area 11s.

U.S.A. and Canada $1.75

Printed in England by HAZELL WATSON & VINEY LTD., Aylesbury and London

Why 'Philishave' Rotary Action gives you a closer shave — *in comfort*

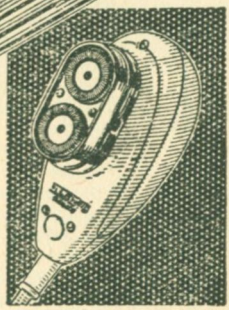




Beneath protecting skin-guards, the 'Philishave' blades rotate with a genuine shaving action.

1. BECAUSE the 'Philishave' blades *rotate* they smoothly remove every single bristle, growing at any angle. No clipping or pulling, no after-shave soreness!

2 BECAUSE the raised rim of the shaving head gently stretches out the skin, the rotary blades can get down to *really* close shaving.



Unbeatable value at

£7 • 14 • 2

tax paid, complete with case. Operates on AC/DC 110-130, 200-250v.

Ask your dealer for a demonstration of

PHILIPS PHILISHAVE

— THE DRY SHAVER WITH THE BIGGEST WORLD SALE

A PRODUCT OF PHILIPS ***PHILIPS ELECTRICAL LTD.***

(PS653H)

THE CHILD WHO WAS STRANGE IN SUNSHINE

ROSEMARY TIMPERLEY

Illustrated by Beresford Egan

THERE WAS SOMETHING strange about the child. At a glance she looked an ordinary enough little girl of six years, with her straight dark hair, pale pointed face and slender limbs; but her hands were always cold, she moved with unnatural quietness, and her grey eyes, narrow and long-lashed, lacked innocence. She was so pale and chilly that I thought she needed to soak herself in sunshine more than anything else; yet her mother would never let her out into the sun, and the child, oddly enough, made no protest. She liked to be indoors.

On sunny days, mother and daughter would stay in the house, as if they expected the sun to hurt them. On grey days the mother went shopping, taking her daughter with her. Sometimes, when the sky was heavy with cloud, the little girl would be seen playing in the garden; but she never stayed there for long. I'd see her run indoors and hear her announce to her mother, "Want to stay in now with you and Father." She said that even when her father was out at work.

Mother and daughter were not at all alike to look at. Lucy Cotton, the mother, was a plump, fair, pretty young woman, or she would have been pretty if her face hadn't always had that frightened look. She had a face that didn't go well with fear. Thin, neurotic women with big dark eyes and emotional mouths seem to

be made for fear; but pretty blonde Lucy looked too practical and prosaic to be afraid of anything. Yet she *was* afraid. Her very ordinariness made that fear all the more disturbing.

I couldn't think what she was afraid of. Certainly not of her husband. Tom Cotton was the kindest and stodgiest of men. Plump, pink and placid, he adored Lucy and Peta, their daughter. He had a good, steady job, so Lucy had no need to fear poverty. Peta was a well-behaved child, so there was little fear of her getting into scrapes or hurting herself. In fact, she never hurt herself. Not for her the grazed knees, burnt fingers, cuts and damages of an average childhood. So what was Lucy afraid of?

Sometimes I wondered if it was the atmosphere of the flat that filled her with nebulous fear; yet I'd told Lucy and Tom nothing about the former inhabitants of the flat, and if they'd heard rumours and the place upset them, they wouldn't have stayed for seven years, for Peta had been born in this house.

I remembered how delighted Lucy had been when she first learnt she was going to have a baby. She went to see the doctor when her husband was at work, and on her return rushed up to my flat.

"Mrs. Mason," she said, "I've been to the doctor, and I'm going to have a baby." She hadn't been afraid then. How different from young Mrs. Madding, who had lived in the ground-floor flat before the Cottons and had come to me with the same news and a very different expression on her face.

Lucy had been jubilant.

"Tom will be so pleased," she said. "We've tried for three years, ever since we were married. We've been so disappointed. And now at last it's happened—since we moved into the flat in this house. This must be a lucky flat for us, even though it's so damned cold." And she laughed.

She'd complained of the flat's being cold before. I'd noticed the perpetual chilliness myself, but there seemed no reason for it, as she kept good fires burning.

"I hope it *will* be a lucky flat for you, my dear," I said, remembering how *un*happy it had been for the former tenants.

"Tom and I were beginning to think that one of us 'couldn't,' " she said. "I thought it was Tom, actually, although I'd never have been so cruel as to tell him so. But now everything's all right, and we're going to have a family, after all. Isn't it wonderful? If it's a boy, I shall call him 'Peter.' "

"Why 'Peter'?" I asked sharply.

She hesitated, her expression uncertain.

"I don't really know," she said. "The name just came into my head as being the right one. I don't know anyone called 'Peter,' nor does Tom. But we'll call our son 'Peter,' for all that."

But the child wasn't a son, but a daughter. They called her 'Peta,' because Lucy insisted, without knowing why she did so. In her heart she must have known, of course; but she wasn't the sort of young woman to probe the depths of herself, which was a good thing.

When Peta was a baby Lucy said,

"She has Tom's curly dark hair. Isn't she lucky?" But soon the child's hair grew straight as rain and wasn't a bit like Tom's. "She has Tom's shape of face," said Lucy. But the child's face soon became delicate and pointed, unlike Tom's heavy jaw. "I suppose she's not really like Tom at all," Lucy admitted at last. "She's not like me either. Isn't that odd? I hope Tom won't think I ever had an *affaire* with a dark, pale man with a pointed face and strange grey eyes." And she laughed. But her laughter was uncertain and a shadow passed across her face, as if she were almost remembering something she couldn't quite remember.

"What's the matter, Lucy?" I said.

"I don't know. A sudden shiver. When I said that I suddenly felt as if I *had* known a man like that; yet I haven't. I must have dreamed him."

In those early days she let her daughter have a lot of sunshine. The pram was often out in the garden. It was only when Peta reached the toddling stage that Lucy got her anti-sun mania. I remember when it started. Peta was about three, playing on the lawn, pulling up daisies with young ruthlessness. Suddenly I heard Lucy call to her:

"Peta, come indoors."

"Why?"

"Peta, come indoors at once!"—panic in Lucy's voice.

Peta went in, not unwillingly. There was something strange about her little thin figure in the sunshine. Something queer. I couldn't quite put my finger on it. Something was—missing. What?

It was years before I answered that question.

After that day Peta wasn't allowed out when the sun shone. She acquired that white, sickly look of living creatures who dwell or work underground.

When she was six she should have gone to school. Lucy managed to get her schooling deferred for a year, pleading the child's "delicacy." I spoke to Lucy about this when she came up to my flat one day.

"You should let Peta go to school and lead a normal life," I said. "She's not a delicate child. She's never been ill for as long as I've known her."

Peta had had none of the childish ailments, never even caught cold.

"You can be delicate without actually being ill," Lucy argued.

"But that's not your reason, my dear. I know what a wrench it is for a young mother to part with her child for the first time. I went through it myself. You feel as if you're casting the infant out into a cold, hard world. So you are, in a way. But it's got to come some time, so why not now, at the right age? School would do Peta good. She'd play games for one thing and get some sunshine. . . ."

"Exactly," said Lucy.

"Lucy, what *is* this fetish of yours about the sun?"

"So you haven't noticed?"

"Noticed what?"

"Peta in the sunshine."

"I don't know what you mean, Lucy."

"It doesn't matter. I suppose I shall have to send Peta to school in the

long run, but I'm putting it off as long as I can. I have reasons."

"I can't imagine what they are. What does Tom think?"

"He agrees with you."

"I'm sure he does."

"He doesn't understand," said Lucy.

"Lucy," I said softly, "could you perhaps tell me what the trouble is? Why are you scared? What's the mystery?"

"The mystery," she repeated in a sick, shivering little voice. "The mystery. You say it so carelessly. You're lucky. You don't know what mystery is."

"Peta worries you, doesn't she, Lucy? Why?"

"She's such a stranger. She's mine, yet she doesn't seem to belong to me. It's as if she belonged to a different world. She sees thoughts and feelings in a way that you and I don't. When a thought crosses my mind, Peta often says something that shows she knows what I've been thinking."

"Children have a queer sort of intuition sometimes."

"It's more than that. Have you noticed her eyes?"

"She has unusual eyes."

"She has *old* eyes, Mrs. Mason. Full of secrets and knowledge."

"Sometimes babies have those old, old eyes, as if they were remembering things from some former existence."

"But Peta's not a baby any longer. And she never cries, she's never ill. . . ."

"Heavens, Lucy, if you're worrying because the child's *never* ill. . . ."

"Yes, I am! It's not normal!"

"Nonsense. She's a well-cared-for little girl, and she's been lucky."

"She put her hand against the fire the other day, and she didn't burn herself. She fell in the street and her skin wasn't even bruised."

"She must have a tough skin, lucky little thing."

"Then there's the flat," went on Lucy. "She can't bear to be away from the flat for long. You know how cold the rooms always are? Peta's cold, too. Her face and limbs are always

cold, like the place we live in; but she never complains. It's as if she found such coldness natural. It's all so queer."

"You're making mountains out of molehills, my dear. Children are often impervious to heat or cold. They don't bother about weather the way we adults do."

"You make me sound foolish and hysterical."

"I think you're a little overwrought. Peta is an unusual little girl, but that doesn't make her abnormal."

"She *is* abnormal," Lucy said very softly. "You haven't noticed the one thing that makes me know it for certain. I'm not going to tell you either. The secret's going to be kept for as long as it's in my power to keep it. I shall keep her away from people so they won't notice. For as soon as they notice, there will be no peace nor privacy left for our family. Peta would become—news."

"News? Lucy, stop showing off. You're not impressing me in the least."

"I wish I were 'showing off.' I wish I were crazily imaginative and that the thing I've noticed were only in my own mind, but it isn't. I'm a placid, practical person by nature. I don't go in for fantasies and imagining. I was often told in my youth that I *lacked* imagination, and it was true. What I see, or don't see, is real, not imagination."

"And you won't tell me what it is? How can I help you, then, as I'd like to?"

"No one can help," said Lucy. "One day you'll notice for yourself."

I was annoyed with her. I thought she was being deliberately tantalizing.

It was some weeks before Lucy and I talked of Peta again; then she told me, in a burst of confidence:

"I'm so worried about Peta. Do you know what her latest line is? She says Tom isn't her father."

"How absurd! What quaint ideas children get."

"I found her looking into a mirror," said Lucy. "She said: 'I look just like Father.' I laughed and said: 'Peta, you're not a bit like Daddy.' She answered: 'I didn't mean Daddy. Daddy's not Father.' I argued with her, but it was hopeless."

"You can hardly argue with a six-year-old, Lucy!"

"But where can she have got such an idea? She talks to me about 'Father' now, telling me what he thinks of this and that, how he loves her and so on. I know she's making it all up, but it scares me. Look at her now."

She pointed out of the window to where Peta was wandering round the garden in the grey, cloud-laden afternoon. The child was talking quietly to herself. She looked remote, lonely, unyoung.

"She looks like a little ghost," I murmured.

Lucy gave a nervous start.

"Why, Lucy, what's the matter?"

"Peta doesn't look in the least like a ghost," she said coldly.

"Of course not. It's only a turn of phrase."

At that moment Peta looked up at us. I saw her full-face, clear and serious, and I saw a physical resem-

blance to someone I'd known—saw it so vividly and irrefutably that I gave a gasp of surprise, and said unguardedly:

"Good heavens! Your daughter looks just like Peter Madding."

"Who's Peter Madding?" Lucy asked.

Damn! I'd let the cat out of the bag. I'd no desire whatever to tell Lucy about Peter Madding.

"The man who lived in your flat before you and Tom moved in," I admitted.

"What happened to him?"

"He—well, as a matter of fact, he died."

"In our flat."

"Yes, Lucy. I never told you before because sometimes it upsets people to know they're living in a place where someone died recently."

She said, "Is that why the flat is always so cold?"

"Of course not. What rubbish. You may say you're not imaginative, but I think——"

"Did this Peter Madding kill himself?"

"How did you guess that?"

"I don't know. A feeling. As if I *knew* him. He wanted something very much, didn't he? Something he couldn't have. You remember I told you once that I dreamed of someone who looked like Peta? Well, I remember the dream now. This man was in it. He—he made love to me without loving me. Not like Tom's love-making. It was a horrible dream. I suppose that's why I've only just remembered it. I made myself forget it, and almost succeeded. He wanted something obsessively. What was it? What did he want? I can't remember that part."

Should I tell her? The story of Peter Madding and his wife was a grim and terrible one. But now her curiosity was aroused she'd get the story from someone else if she didn't get it from me. So I told her.

"More than anything else in the world, Peter Madding wanted a child to keep the family line going. He came from some obscure aristocratic family, penniless but absurdly proud. He was the last of the line. He hated the thought of that, so wanted a child of his own. Unfortunately his wife was afraid of having a child."

"I don't really blame her," said Lucy. "It is a pretty frightening business."

"The idea terrified her. She was a slender, ethereal, red-haired girl, a bundle of nerves really, and seemed always to shrink away from her husband, although in her own way she loved him. And dreadfully she feared bearing a child. She confided her fears to me."

"Everyone who lives here seems to confide in you," smiled Lucy.

"She had no one else to talk to, poor little thing. No friends. I told her quite honestly that if her husband wanted a child so badly, it might be wiser for her to agree, otherwise their marriage wouldn't last. She said she loved her husband too much ever to want to lose him, and she'd think about the matter again."

"And did she?"

"Yes. The next thing I heard was

that she was expecting a baby. She cried when she told me. She said she was afraid."

"But the husband was pleased."

"Yes. Peter was the happiest man in the world. He couldn't do enough for Lisa. For a while they seemed contented. Then Lisa could control her fears no longer. She came and told me she couldn't go through with it, after all. I tried to calm her down, but I'm afraid I wasn't much help. I suppose I didn't really understand. You see, I *wanted* my children—they're all grown-up now, of course. Perhaps I was unsympathetic without meaning to be.

"Anyway, Lisa went downstairs again. Later I heard her go out. She hadn't come back when her husband returned from work, and this was so unusual that he came up to me to ask where his wife was. I told him she'd gone out but I didn't know where. But he knew."

"How could he have known?"

"I don't know. He said: 'I want that child more than anything else in this world. I shall want it all my life, all my after-life, if there is such a thing, and if she's killed my child, I shall kill her!'

"At that moment we heard Lisa come in. He rushed downstairs. I followed him.

"Lisa was leaning against the front door, white as death. She looked frighteningly weak and ill. Peter said:

" 'What have you done?'

"She answered, 'I couldn't go through with it. I'm sorry. Please try to understand. I was too afraid. I couldn't.'

"He swore at her. I'd never heard him use strong language before. His voice sounded like a stranger's voice. His face became evil, devilish. He snatched up an umbrella from the hat-stand. It had a heavy silver handle. He struck her with it. Struck her again and again. When I tried to drag him away, he thrust me off. He was a slender, fragile-looking man, but he seemed to have inhuman strength that day."

I paused, suddenly sickened, remembering the scene too vividly.

"What happened?" whispered Lucy.

"He beat her to death."

"Oh, my God! And then?"

"Then he ran up to the roof of this house and threw himself from there to the pavement below. He was carried back into the flat, and died within an hour. Just before he died he looked at me with his queer, fanatical, grey eyes and said:

" 'Somewhere, somehow, in God's heaven or in the Devil's hell, a child of mine will be born. I swear it. I shall have a child of my own.' "

"He was mad!"

"Obsessed. I suppose that is a sort of madness."

"And the rooms where he lived are always cold," murmured Lucy, "and Peta says that she looks like her father, and you say that she looks like this man. She's a child of death—my daughter—a child of death! That's why she's so safe from illness and injury. She belongs so much to death already that illness, which is a shadow of death and harms only the living, doesn't harm her. She's immune from life. Not quite real." Her voice had become louder and more shrill. Her eyes were terrified.

"Lucy, you're hysterical. Be quiet," I said.

"Look!" she cried. She pointed to the window.

"What's the matter?"

"The sun's come out—and Peta's out there." She ran to the window and called, "Peta, come in at once."

Peta's voice wafted faintly up to us:

"Father's here. I'm going with him."

"Tom isn't there, is he?" said Lucy. "Oh, God, what's happening? Peta, come back!"

Peta's small figure was running across the lawn towards the copse at the bottom of the garden. She was smiling and saying, "I'm coming, Father."

Lucy rushed out of the room, down the stairs and out into the garden. Her face was deathly pale in the white, bright sunshine.

"Peta," she called. "Peta, Peta." She disappeared after the child among the trees. "Peta, Peta, where are you?" I heard her voice, like the wail of a night-bird.

There was no reply.

For weeks afterwards police searched the neighbourhood and made inquiries. The Press reported the case fully. But Peta was never found.

Heart-broken, Tom and Lucy Cotton left the neighbourhood. Other tenants moved into the flat, which they found most warm and comfortable.

I went over that last scene again and again in my mind: Peta's small figure running towards the trees, Peta calling, "I'm coming, Father."

And then I remembered what was so queer about Peta in the sunshine—the thing that Lucy had noticed a long time ago and never told—the thing that would have made Peta news—Peta in the sunshine was strange and different from other children. . . .

For she cast no shadow.

CONVERSATION PIECE

DOROTHY A. G. WATTS

I LIVE IN A FLAT and my next-door neighbours are a jolly family, mother, father and two school-boy sons, and although I have not lived here very long I soon became friendly with them, and was only too glad to take their spare latch-key and keep an eye on things for them when they went on holiday. Gaily they departed one Saturday morning for a month by the sea, and I hung their key up on a hook in my hall, promising to order milk and bread for them on their return.

I think it was the day after they left that my telephone rang about seven o'clock in the evening. I was cooking, and by the time I had turned the gas low, run my hands under the tap and reached the phone a few minutes had elapsed, and I was therefore not surprised that, although the bell was ringing when I lifted off the receiver, I heard the burring disengaged tone.

The following evening the same thing happened at exactly the same time, and when on the third evening the bell rang at seven o'clock, I pounced on the receiver within a few seconds.

"Hello—Wansbeck 1234," I said sharply, but no reply came. I heard no burring tone this time, but in the silence I heard a faint rustle or movement at the other end of the line, so that I was convinced there was someone there.

"Hello, hello," I repeated rather crossly, but my only answer was a long soft sigh, a sound of weariness, and then a click and the disengaged signal. As there had been several burglaries in the neighbourhood, I thought someone was obviously trying to check up on whether I was away, too, and I made up my mind to contact the police if I was again disturbed.

I was out the next evening, but the following day at seven o'clock the bell rang. I wondered if it had rung the previous day and whether I ought to take no notice now, give the impression that I was away and inform the police about the impending burglary which I was now sure would take place. There was, however, always the chance that it might be an important call, one of my family might be ill, so I lifted the receiver.

"Wansbeck 1234."

A pause and a woman's voice replied so softly that I could hardly hear:

"Oh, so you are there this evening." It was not a voice I knew.

"Who is that?" I asked.

"Well, actually we have never met," was the reply. "I used to live in the flat opposite."

"Is there anything I can do for you?" I asked. "Have you been trying to get me before?"

"Yes, I did try, but I could not get through." The voice sounded stronger and nearer, as though the line had cleared. "You see, I am very much

on my own here, and it is rather lonely. It is so nice to talk to someone even on the telephone while I am waiting."

Slightly puzzled, I wondered who or what she was waiting for.

"I really miss your neighbours very much, they are such a nice happy family."

I agreed, and we talked about them for a moment or two.

"I must go now. I have enjoyed talking to you, as it does pass the time. May I ring you again?" She sounded pathetically eager.

"Do, if you would like to, but I am often out in the evening." I tried not to sound bored.

"Never mind, I can always try. It is very kind of you." The voice trailed off:

"Good-bye." It was almost a whisper.

I realized as I replaced the receiver that I had no idea who she was, where she lived and really why she had rung me up in the first place, except that she was lonely and wanted a chat. I firmly decided that if I was not out the next time she telephoned, I would not answer the bell. Presumably she would ring at seven o'clock, and when the bell shrilled the next evening at that time I did not answer it, although the persistence with which the wretched thing went on and on for nearly ten minutes was more irritating than the short conversation on the previous evening.

Feelings of remorse made me answer it the next evening.

"You didn't answer last night." The voice sounded peevish. "I was most disappointed."

"I am sorry, I was——" I nearly said "Out," but I was interrupted.

"I saw you come in at six-thirty, so I know you were there."

"I was going to say that I was busy," I replied with dignity. I was annoyed that my movements were being watched, so I supposed she must still live near-by if she could spy on me.

However, we carried on a short conversation about the weather and one thing and another before she rang off.

In the course of the next two weeks our conversations became lengthier, and although she did not ring up every evening, it was always seven o'clock. Why I continued these conversations I simply cannot explain. Perhaps I was sorry for her, perhaps I was curious to find out who she was, for although she told me her name was Mary I never heard her surname. I got the impression she lived near-by, and gradually discovered that she had a husband who was always late for dinner, which was always ready and on the point of getting overcooked.

Two days before my neighbours returned I began to think I had let the conversation go on long enough, and was wondering what excuse I could give when I met one of my other neighbours on the staircase. She had lived in the flats some time, and I felt sure would know my previous next-door neighbour. After exchanging greetings and grumbling that the baker called later and later, I said:

"Do you happen to know the people who had the flat opposite me before the Johnsons, by any chance? I suppose they still live near-by?"

"Oh no," she replied emphatically. "They don't live here at all. He went to New Zealand, I believe."

"*He* went to New Zealand?" I queried.

She looked embarrassed. "Well, yes. Perhaps it won't matter if I tell you as you don't live in the flat, but don't repeat it to the Johnsons, especially as they have children. The fact of the matter is that the whole thing was a great tragedy. The people who lived there before were a young, good-looking couple, newly married, and although they seemed very happy at first, we thought things were going wrong. Apparently she was under the impression that he was having an affair with his secretary or a client or someone, and as so often happens she became suspicious and jealous whenever he was away from home or late home in the evening. It was quite without foundation; but the poor girl was convinced there was another woman, and one evening when she had dinner all ready her husband never turned up. The police found the meal burnt to a cinder in the oven."

The good lady was well away with her story and continued:

"If only the poor girl had come down to me or one of the other neighbours, she might never have been driven to such a desperate way out. I can imagine the hours of loneliness and despair she must have gone through waiting for her husband."

"What happened to her?" I hardly dare ask the question.

"Poor girl. She cut the telephone wire and hanged herself with the cord. The terrible part was of course that her husband had had a motor accident and was taken to hospital unconscious. All his papers were in a brief-case in the car which caught alight and was burnt out, so there was no means of identifying him until he came round.

"Please don't repeat this to your friends," she added. "I wouldn't want to make them nervous or feel the flat has had unpleasant associations. Queer things happen even in flats, don't they?"

I agreed with her so enthusiastically that she looked rather surprised, as though I had discovered some scandal concerning the other elderly and respectable neighbours.

I almost decided to turn round and go straight out to the cinema, but I thought the only thing to do for my future peace of mind was not to let the thing fizzle out in guess-work, but really find out who was ringing me each evening.

As I put my key in the door I realized I had been talking for longer than I thought. It was just seven o'clock and the telephone was ringing. My hand shook a little as I lifted the receiver. My rather short "Hello" was greeted by the low familiar voice I had got to know so well.

"I want to thank you so much for helping me." She was speaking very softly and seemed a long way away. "It really has helped me, you know. I am most grateful to you.

"I shan't be ringing you again," she continued. "I won't be alone after tomorrow, and I think I may be going away." Her voice was very faint, and I could hardly hear what she was saying. I knew that this was the moment to ask her the question I had wanted to ask for so long:

"Before you go, tell me who you are. I don't know your surname, you know. Who are you?" I might even have added, "What are you?"

There was no reply. I heard only a long-drawn-out sigh. At that moment I saw the keys of the next-door flat hanging just above the telephone. This was my chance to check that there was no one next door; so, gently putting the receiver down on the table, I took the keys down, quietly opened my front door, crossed the few feet of passage to the front door opposite and put the latch-key in the lock. Just before I turned it I heard an unmistakable sound from the other side of the door. It was the click and half tinkle of a bell when the telephone receiver is being replaced on the instrument.

For a moment I paused before pushing the door open. What might I see on the other side? I quickly withdrew the key and returned to my own flat. Therefore I never knew the identity of my unknown friend Mary, but I like to think that one way or another I helped her in her loneliness.

Standing on earth, not rapt above the Pole,
More safe I sing with mortal voice, unchang'd
To hoarse or mute, though fall'n on evil days,
On evil days though fall'n, and evil tongues.
In darkness, and with dangers compass'd round,
And solitude; yet not alone, while thou
Visit'st my slumbers nightly, or when morn
Purples the east: still govern thou my song,
Urania, and fit audience find, though few:
But drive far off the barb'rous dissonance
Of Bacchus and his revellers.

JOHN MILTON (1608–1674).

THE HAND MIRROR

P. CLAYTON

Illustrated by Arthur Wragg

JUDY CLIVE COULD NOT believe it. She had been so young only twenty-four hours ago, and now she was old and on the verge of death. There was no way out of this nightmare because she knew she had only a few hours left.

And Hugh—she could not bear to think of Hugh. She could do nothing to save him. He might find out—but too late—that the girl he loved had changed into an evil, loathsome thing.

It had all started with their stupid quarrel, and then she had rushed away from home and taken this job without finding out more about it. Mother and Dad were against it, but she felt she couldn't bear home any more.

This job seemed all right on the surface when Judy had gone for an interview. A writer who lived in the country had advertised for a secretary, and Judy found the house, an old one in the heart of the Wiltshire downs, standing back in its own grounds just outside the village. She was shown into the study, where Jeremy Halkett was waiting for her. He was a tall, dark man with a shy smile.

"You are very young," he remarked as they shook hands, "and we are quiet here. Don't you think you might find it rather lonely?"

"No," she answered, "it will be a nice change from a London suburb, and perhaps I could go home at week-ends?"

"Certainly," he agreed. "Your references are good," he added, fingering her letter, "but you may find it too quiet here. I thought I'd better warn you." He smiled and Judy liked his smile.

"Look," she said, "can I give it a try?"

"Of course, I'll take you on a month's trial," he agreed, "and if we don't suit at the end of that time, no harm done—eh?"

So Judy was engaged. As she walked away from the house she had a curious feeling that she was being watched. Perhaps Jeremy was standing at his study window, and then she remembered it looked out at the back.

"Oh well," she thought, and dismissed the matter from her mind.

The following Sunday Judy caught the train for Market Chairings. At the station she expected Jeremy Halkett to meet her, but there was no one on the platform, so she walked along to the station entrance, leaving her luggage in charge of the solitary porter. As she neared the

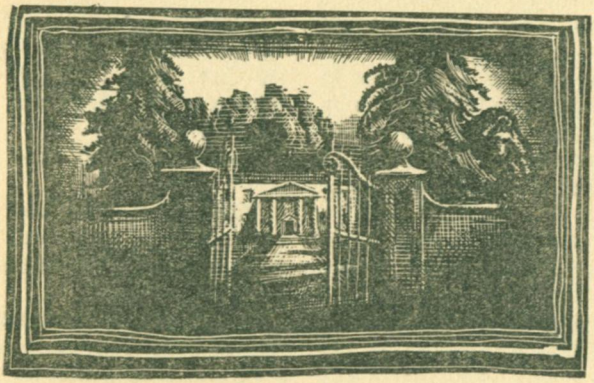
gates a little, elderly woman who was sitting on a seat near the entrance rose and came towards her.

"Are you Miss Clive?" she asked in a deep, firm voice that belied her rather fragile appearance.

"Yes," Judy replied, stopping short.

"I am Mrs. Halkett—studying the girl intently with her penetrating black eyes.

"Oh," Judy hesitated, "I didn't know there was a Mrs. Halkett."



"I am Jeremy's mother," the woman corrected her. "I came to meet you. The car is outside."

Mrs. Halkett turned without further comment and walked towards the station entrance. Judy still hesitated. A sudden irrational impulse urged her not to follow but to take the next train home. Something about the woman's eyes—then she shook herself with a stifled laugh.

Outside the station she found a large Humber Snipe standing in the road. Jeremy was at the wheel, but he got out when he saw her.

"Your luggage?" he asked.

"It's on the platform," Judy replied.

"It's always Mother's whim to come and meet people," he told her; "she likes to look them over." He grinned shyly. "I think it satisfies her curiosity. She hasn't much to interest her now."

Judy found Jeremy Halkett an easy person to work for: the hours were not long, Market Chairings was a beautiful spot and it was a lovely summer. She joined the local tennis club and the Women's Institute, where she met the vicar's wife, who asked her to tea.

The girl did not see much of Mrs. Halkett, who had breakfast and lunch in her own room, and did not get up till three o'clock.

"Mother's heart is very weak," Jeremy told his secretary, "and she has to be careful."

Judy felt uneasy in her presence,

though Mrs. Halkett was pleasant enough, but something about her repelled Judy.

The vicar's wife referred to Jeremy's mother when they were having tea in the sunny, shabby vicarage sitting-room.

"How do you like Mrs. Halkett?" she asked.

"She seems quite nice," Judy replied guardedly. "I don't really have much to do with her, as she is an invalid."

"Yes, her heart is weak, so I believe," answered Mrs. Scott dryly; "it's been like that for years—but she takes good care of herself. Don't you find Chairings lonely, my dear?" she added.

"No," Judy replied, "I go home at week-ends and I've joined the local tennis club. It's not too bad."

"But for a young and pretty girl like you," murmured the vicar's wife thoughtfully. "They had a number of other secretaries, and they all left because they said it was too quiet, or they did not like Mrs. Halkett."

Judy shrugged. "Oh well, she's not my employer," she remarked lightly, "and I like Jeremy."

"Yes, he's a nice chap," agreed her hostess, and they chatted of other things.

When Judy was saying good-bye, however, Mrs. Scott reverted to the subject again. "My dear, if you are ever in need of help or advice, don't forget to come here. You are very young to be on your own."

"Thank you," Judy replied, "that's very kind of you."

She walked home, wondering why Mrs. Scott had been so solicitous. When she entered the house she found Jeremy in the lounge.

"Did you enjoy your tea-party?" he asked, rising at her entrance.

Judy had a feeling that he had been waiting for her. "Yes, thank you," she replied, "do you want me to do some work tonight, Mr. Halkett?"

"No, my dear, but I have a message from my mother. She wishes you to have supper with her tonight."

"Why?" blurted out the girl.

"She says she sees so very little of you," he continued, "and she would like to know you better."

"I see," Judy replied, recovering from her surprise and trying to keep the hesitation out of her voice. "When does Mrs. Halkett have supper?"

"In about half an hour. I'll show you where her room is."

So half an hour later Judy knocked on Mrs. Halkett's door and, on entering, found her hostess lying on a couch near the open window of a large sunny room.

"My dear, how nice of you to come," Mrs. Halkett smiled up at her. "Sit here by me"—patting a chair that had been placed by the sofa. "You have been to tea at the vicarage, I hear. Mrs. Scott is a nice woman, but rather gossipy. I'm glad you are making friends."

Just then the maid brought in supper. While they ate, the old woman talked hard, drawing the girl out in a quiet, skilful way. She asked about her home, her parents, was she an only child. Judy told her that she had

a young brother of fifteen.

"And why hasn't a pretty girl like you a young man?" Mrs. Halkett asked in a teasing voice.

Judy hesitated. She was longing to tell someone about Hugh, and yet.... "I was engaged," she blurted out, "but it was broken off. . . ."

"My dear, I'm sorry. And you are still unhappy about it?"

"Yes," Judy replied, "it was like this. . . ." And she briefly told the whole story.

"What a pity," Mrs. Halkett mused. "Couldn't you write to your young man?"

"Do you really think I could?" Judy asked.

"Why not, you both seemed so very much in love. And I suppose you are a healthy girl?" Mrs. Halkett added suddenly.

For a moment Judy was so startled she didn't answer but stared at Jeremy's mother in astonishment.

"Why of course," she replied at last.

"You've never had any serious illnesses in your life?"

"Never," Judy stated emphatically, "I'm as strong as a horse."

"And your family," Mrs. Halkett persisted, "they are healthy on both sides?"

"Mrs. Halkett," Judy drew back, "I don't see what the health of my family has to do with my efficiency as your son's secretary."

"My dear, forgive me," the old woman's hooded eyes suddenly flashed wide open, and Judy was aware of the full blaze of their glance. Her heart thudded painfully. How terribly old and wise they were. "Forgive me," Mrs. Halkett repeated, still holding the girl with her eyes, "I have been such an invalid all my life that I have an obsession with health."

Her eyes were dark and brilliant like black diamonds, with a pinpoint of light in them that seemed to bore into Judy's brain. The girl felt her senses reeling and her strength slipping away. Suddenly she was dreadfully afraid, her throat was dry and her heart was beating sickeningly fast. She must get away from here quickly, she would go to the vicarage . . . she would . . . but even as she fought she felt herself weakening.

"Look at me, Miss Clive, keep your eyes on mine. Ah, that's better!"

Judy struggled against her, but it was no use. The old woman laughed a cold, cruel laugh.

"You're just what I have been looking for," she said, "healthy, beautiful and just the right age. It's no good finding someone too young—because I would not know how they were going to develop. No, it must be someone in the very early twenties, who has reached their full growth and physical development. The other secretaries were all too old, except one and she was too delicate. But you are perfect . . . perfect. . . ." She leaned forward and smiled at Judy gloatingly. "You are about to take part in an experiment which I have tried many times and which has always succeeded. I was nearly in despair till I saw you leave the train. I have not long to live because of my heart, and I had to find the right one

quickly. I made a mistake in the last girl I took. She had congenital heart disease, and I did not find out till too late."

"What do you mean?" Judy whispered. She found herself shaking with uncontrollable fear and she tried to move, but a new and curious sensation pervaded her. In some way she seemed to be standing outside her body and watching herself and Mrs. Halkett talking. It was as though two halves of her had come apart—and try as she would she could not join them again.

"How old do you think I am?" Mrs. Halkett demanded.

"How old?" Judy echoed stupidly, "I don't know . . . sixty. . . ."

The old woman laughed her cruel, derisive laugh. "Sixty! That's all you think I am?"

"Yes," Judy whispered.

"Sixty! More like sixty centuries, my girl. I saw the first pyramids built. I saw Egypt die. I have found the way to cheat death, and I mean to go on living." Her hand shot out and gripped Judy's wrist. "No one knows my secret. I was born an Egyptian, and I learnt it from the priests of the mystery temple of Osiris. It was a secret that was carefully guarded and told only to the select few."

"Mad! Mad! Mad!" repeated the sane half of Judy's brain, but the room seemed to be growing darker.

"The time has come to take a new body—your body," Mrs. Halkett's voice went on. "I shall be young again and free."

"Oh no!" Judy cried out in agony, struggling to make one last effort, but everything was black, except for the faint blur of Mrs. Halkett's face with the two brilliant eyes shining into hers.

Those were the last words Judy spoke—as herself. She seemed to stand naked and shivering in the room while she watched a form with an incredibly evil face rise from Mrs. Halkett's body and float across to hers in the chair. The wraith-like figure melted into the body of the motionless girl, and blackness and horror swept over Judy. She struggled against a great force that pushed her towards the figure on the sofa—and then she knew no more. . . .

When she awoke it was many hours later, because daylight was filtering through the curtains. She lay with a feeling of unease. At the back of her mind she knew something was wrong. Then she realized she was not lying flat as she usually did, but was propped upright with pillows, and she was not in her ordinary room at Chairings, but in a strange, handsomely furnished bedroom.

What had happened? Had she been taken ill the night before? Judy didn't remember anything except going to have supper with Mrs. Halkett. Then she tried to rise, but breathlessness forced her back on her pillows. She must be very ill indeed, she decided. Just then the door opened and Mrs. Halkett's maid entered.

"Oh, good morning, Emily," Judy greeted her, "where am I? Have I been ill?"

Emily approached the bed, and Judy saw she was carrying a tray with a tea-pot and cup and saucer. "Yes, Madame," the maid replied. "Good morning, Madame, you had one of your heart attacks last night, and Mr. Jeremy phoned the doctor and carried you to bed. I hope you are feeling better now."

"But, Emily," Judy stammered, "I'm Miss Clive—and I'm in the wrong bedroom. I've never had a heart attack in my life. I remember having supper with Mrs. Halkett last night——"

Emily gave a queer gasp, almost dropped the tray on the bedside table and fled from the room like a terrified hen. Judy heard her calling: "Nurse Wayne, Mr. Jeremy!" at the top of her voice. Then she heard footsteps coming down the corridor and Emily's agitated voice saying: "She's gone off her head, Nurse. It must of been that attack last night. She thinks she's Mr. Jeremy's secret'ry."

"But I am Miss Clive," Judy called out as Emily, accompanied by a strange woman in nurse's uniform, appeared in the doorway. "What is the matter with everybody—I *am* Miss Clive."

After that the nightmare began. She began screaming in terror, and tried to tell them what had happened. And all the time she knew they wouldn't believe her. Now Jeremy was there and a strange man they called "Doctor." Judy was crying and asking over and over again to see Miss Clive.

Then She was there—standing by

the bed. The others had gone and the curtains were drawn back, flooding the room with sunlight. She stood there smiling at Judy, who was startled to see how beautiful She was. It was her own self at which Judy was looking. The blue eyes, the auburn hair, the red lips, the supple figure, were all her own. But not the expression in the eyes. They were old with an ancient and evil wisdom.

"Well," She said, "you asked to see me, Mrs. Halkett."

"Why did you do it?" Judy gasped.

She laughed lightly. "I've already told you—but I advise you to resign yourself. The doctor says you are suffering from delusions. I don't think you've very long to live."

Judy shivered. Then she began to plead. "But do you realize what you're giving up? Your son, your beautiful house, your wealth? You will have to earn your living now——"

"And what have I gained?" She taunted. "Health, youth, life, love. I had a letter from your Hugh this morning. He is coming down here today—he wants to make it up and marry me. I shall see to it that he does."

"Not Hugh!" Judy cried in agony. "You shan't have him. He loves me, I love him!"

She laughed her light, mocking laugh. "It will be me that he loves when he sees me—not you. He won't know you."

She went to the dressing-table and picked up a heavy silver hand mirror. "Look at yourself!" She taunted. "See whether he would love you now."

Judy looked. She stared fascinated and horrified at a crumpled old face, streaked with tears, surrounded by tousled elf locks of grey hair. And the eyes—they were dark—but they were not old like the eyes of the girl by the bed. They were young, frightened eyes that looked back at Judy out of that tormented old face.

She came close to the bed, bending over Judy. "Look at yourself. Do you see! Will your Hugh know you now?"

A sudden, overwhelming anger swept over Judy. Whatever happened this fiend should never marry her Hugh. Anger and fear gave her strength, and she raised the heavy, silver hand mirror and brought it down fiercely on the leering face bending over her. Her gesture had been so sudden there was no time to dodge, and the mirror caught the face edge-on across the temple.

A blinding pain swept through Judy, then she fell back on the pillows. The girl's body collapsed across the bed.

Pain cut through Judy's head. She struggled to rise, but the pain was so bad she moaned. She heard a rustle of skirts and a woman's voice said firmly:

"Now, don't try to move."

"What happened?" murmured Judy, as the pain receded a little. She opened her eyes to find that she was lying in the bed in her own room at Chairings, and Nurse Wayne was standing by her.

"You've had a bad blow on the head and you've been unconscious," the nurse told her crisply.

"What?" began Judy, then she remembered and gave a sharp cry of horror. "Who am I? Who am I?"

"Miss Clive, don't agitate yourself. You mustn't talk too much. You want to get better soon, don't you? Your young man is here and wishes to see you."

"Hugh?" Judy whispered. "It's all right then? Mrs. Halkett? . . ."

The nurse laid a cool, firm hand on her wrist. "Mrs. Halkett is dead," she replied quietly. "She died two hours ago of a heart attack. Drink this and go to sleep."

Judy relaxed back against the pillows with a sigh.

"Hugh . . ." she thought as she drifted off into sleep. "I am safe . . . it can never be proved that I tried to murder myself."

I have seen her die twenty times upon far poorer moment. I do not think there is mettle in death which commits some loving act upon her, she hath such a celerity in dying.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (1564–1616).

STOLEN ALIBI

JIM PHELAN

"LEEPING TABLETS, THE Medical Officer reckons," said Inspector Warren, looking up from a note-book on the table before him. "Two whisky glasses. No finger-prints."

"H'm. That cuts out any talk of suicide," remarked Chief Inspector Eaves as he glanced around him.

The big studio looked cheerful. Gilded picture frames and brightly coloured paintings caught and held the light. Brilliant sunshine, pouring through an amber-tinted window, lent a golden tinge to everything in the room. Only the chalked outline of a man's body on the carpet contrasted sharply with the rest of the picture.

"Mervyn Hartley, 45, unmarried," read Warren, and nodded towards the chalked outline. "Artist and art dealer. Found dead by Doris Hewson, his secretary, at two-five this afternoon. The charwoman saw him alive at about one-fifty."

He rose and joined his chief near the window, to look down into the quiet street. Nothing moved, except a boy who cycled lazily down a long, narrow alley-way opposite. The boy did not seem to notice a sign which read, "Footpath to Lilybrook Station. Cycling prohibited."

"Quiet, eh?" remarked Eaves. "Were there any callers, or expected callers, after the charwoman left?"

"Two," Warren told him. "Cyril Morley and Mark Lampert. Both artists. Note on deceased's diary says they both had appointments."

"And they kept them?" pursued the Chief Inspector.

"I don't know yet," explained Warren. "Headquarters sent a sergeant to Morley's address. Lampert's downstairs."

"Anything missing from *there*?" inquired Eaves, pointing to a built-in safe in a corner of the studio.

Warren shook his head. "The cash seems to be all right," he stated. "Jewellery, too. But Doris Hewson says a small box, which held private papers, has been forced. She doesn't know if anything's gone."

"H'm," commented the Chief Inspector. "Something personal, eh?"

"Could be, Chief," agreed the other, "considering this." He passed over a typewritten sheet. It was an angry letter from an American art collector.

The writer complained that three pictures, sold as Renoirs by Hartley, were fakes. He demanded a refund of eighteen thousand pounds. Eaves read the letter and thought for a moment.

"So," he said musingly. "Someone palms off three dud paintings on deceased, and leaves him to carry the baby. But Harley has receipts or something—in that box, say?"

"Aye," said Warren, as if he had been asked a question. "That'd mean

a long stretch of penal for someone." He waited.

"For someone—or other," agreed Eaves. "Let's hear what Lampert has to say."

Mark Lampert was in his early thirties, tall and bare-headed, with a light brown moustache. Wearing a tweed jacket and grey corduroy trousers, he paused just inside the studio door until Eaves nodded to a chair.

"You may be able to help us," Eaves began. "Of course you don't *have* to answer questions——" Lampert nodded and smiled. "Mr. Hartley was alive at one-fifty and dead at two-five," the detective continued. "Did you see him between those times?"

"One-fifty?" Lampert repeated. "Why—yes. I left here about that time or a little later. Say five to two. I went to Lilybrook Station."

"Up that alley-way opposite?" inquired Eaves, waving towards the window.

"That's right," Lampert agreed. "I caught the two-five."

"I see, sir," commented the detective. He nodded to Warren, who rose and left quietly. "Could you tell me what business you discussed with Mr. Hartley?"

"None," Lampert told him with a short laugh. "I wanted him to lend me two hundred pounds. But he wouldn't even discuss it. Said he had an appointment, and told me to phone tomorrow."

"Did you meet anyone, at the station or on your way there?" asked the Chief Inspector.

Lampert shook his head. "No one," he said. "Except one girl, in the alley-way. Lilybrook's a quiet place."

"Could you describe this girl, sir?" inquired Eaves, and the young fellow thought for a moment.

"Only that she wore a very long coat," he said. "A ridiculously long green coat that made her look like a telegraph-pole."

"Anything else, sir?" pressed the detective.

Lampert frowned. "She had a funny little hat," he stated. "A kind of orange scarf, too; that's all I can remember. We knocked against one another—that passage is narrow—and she dropped a parcel or something."

Eaves made a note, and rose.

"Well, thanks very much, sir," he said. "Would you mind waiting downstairs for a while? The sergeant will show you where you can stay." He saw Lampert to the door, and turned back to the table as Warren reappeared.

"No luck at the railway-station," reported Warren. "They're a bit easy-going." The detectives exchanged rueful grins. "Morley's downstairs," Warren announced. "Just arrived."

"Send him up," said Eaves. "But first phone the Lilybrook police about this girl." He gave Warren a pencilled description. "She sounds like a local," he added. "You might have luck." He sat down as a sergeant showed in Cyril Morley.

Morley looked almost exactly like Mark Lampert, except that he wore a Norfolk jacket and flannel trousers.

Hatless and nearly six feet tall, he had a light brown moustache, which he fingered nervously as he faced the detective.

"One-fifty?" he was saying. "I was speaking to Mr. Hartley at about that time, and I left just afterwards."

"What did you discuss with the deceased?" inquired Eaves, and Morley laughed.

"Nothing," he said shortly. "I wanted to sell him four paintings—my own work—but he gave me the brush-off. Said he had someone coming, and told me to make another appointment."

"So you left at one-fifty or a little later," summed up Eaves. "Where did you go then, sir?"

"To Lilybrook Station," Morley told him. "I just caught the two-five."

There was a long silence.

"Did you meet anyone on your way to the station?" resumed the detective, and Morley shook his head.

"Only a girl," he explained. "No one I knew."

"What was she like?" pursued Eaves, and the young artist hesitated.

"I didn't notice," he said. "Only that she wore a hell of a long, skimpy coat. Right down to her ankles. It made her look funny."

"Can you remember anything else?" inquired the detective, his face expressionless.

"She had a parcel or something," Morley stated. "We bumped a bit in the passage, and she dropped it."

"And you picked it up?" helped Eaves in a matter-of-fact tone.

"No," Morley answered slowly. "I kind of didn't realize. Not until I'd gone on a bit. Sorry I can't help more."

"Never mind, sir," the Chief Inspector reassured him, and rose. "Would you mind waiting downstairs a few minutes?" He saw Morley to the door, and looked up inquiringly as Warren reappeared.

"Could be," said Warren to the unspoken question. "I have the girl here. Can you see her downstairs?"

In a sitting-room below the studio, Warren introduced Hilda Wayne, medium-sized and pretty. She wore a diminutive hat, with a wide reddish scarf, and a long narrow coat, reaching almost to her ankles, gave her a comical appearance. It was blue rather than green, but it was unmistakably the coat to which both young men had referred.

The reason for the garment's length was apparent when the girl sat down. She opened the lower buttons of her coat, and the detectives could see that both her legs were heavily bandaged.

"A car accident," she explained. "The long coat keeps people from staring."

Eaves nodded and smiled sympathetically.

"Can you remember, Miss Wayne," he began, "what time you came down that passage from the station this afternoon?"

The girl nodded. "I *started* down it at two," she said with a smile. "It took me about ten minutes to reach the main street—I do about a mile an hour with these bandages on."

"Did you meet many people in the alley-way?" the detective inquired.

Hilda Wayne shook her head. "No one," she said without hesitation. "Except one young man going up towards the station."

"I wonder could you describe him, Miss Wayne," went on the detective, but the girl shook her head again.

"Not really," she answered. "Except that he was tall, and had no hat. I think he had a moustache, but I'm not sure. Sorry," she concluded. "I just didn't notice."

Eaves scribbled a note and passed it to Warren, who rose and went out quietly.

"Can't you recall *anything*, Miss Wayne," the Chief Inspector resumed, and the girl thought for a moment.

"We knocked against one another," she said at last. "And I dropped a small parcel. Naturally I expected him to pick it up, but he just walked past. Hurrying for a train, I thought. Sorry, there's nothing else."

"Never mind, Miss Wayne," Eaves was saying when Warren came in with Cyril Morley.

They crossed the room without speaking, and went out by another door. A moment later the sergeant passed through with Mark Lampert.

"Those two young men——" Hilda Wayne commenced as soon as the door had closed. "One of them knocked the parcel out of my hand."

"Which one?" urged Eaves, but the girl shook her head.

"I can't be certain," she said hesitatingly. "I *know* it was one of those two, but I couldn't say which."

The detective thanked her, and a moment later Warren was showing the girl out.

Upstairs in the studio, the two detectives faced one another again, across the same table. Warren finished sorting his notes, then snapped the rubber band on his notebook.

"Well," he said slowly. "One of them's lying, and that one's the murderer. He didn't meet the girl in the alley-way—*he saw her from here.* Saw the other fellow pass her, and pinched his alibi. But which is which?"

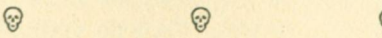
"Lampert told the truth," said the Chief Inspector, "when he said that he saw a girl in a green coat with an orange scarf."

"Then Morley's our man," summed up Warren. "But Miss Wayne——"

"I know," interrupted the other. "Miss Wayne has a blue coat and a red scarf—but Lampert was telling the truth just the same."

Warren stared. "How come, Chief?" he inquired slowly.

"Your man," said Eaves, "saw the girl from this studio, through that window there. Blue is green and red is orange—if you see them through yellow glass. Go and get Lampert."



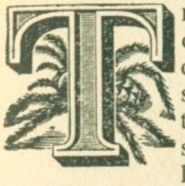
It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data.

SHERLOCK HOLMES.

DARK GLASSES

PHILIP SPRING

That cunning old artificer tries a new technique . . . to render the world ghastly.



HE SHOP WAS A queer little place, down five cracked stone steps, and entering it from the strong sunlight was like going down into a pit. Most shops in the old part of this town have a medieval feel about them still. It was odd to find at the bottom of these centuries-old steps a few discreet glass showcases displaying microscopes and binoculars.

I stood at the counter a few moments in silence, waiting for attention. Then from the gloom there seemed to emerge a slow presence. In a dim corner of the shop, dressed in black apron, and with black elasticated sleeves of cotton, sat an old man staring at me piercingly.

"Oh!" I felt foolishly startled. "I didn't know——"

He smiled maliciously.

"No, sir." He tittered. "Nobody ever does."

I didn't quite like this approach, nor the familiar way he leered at me.

"I've got a pair of binoculars here," I said brusquely. "Dropped them. Prisms have got shaken out of position, I think. Can you repair them?"

He made no attempt to take the proffered glasses. "Of course, sir." He studied my face closely. Again that familiar grimace. I felt nettled.

"How long will you be?"

He spread dark, crooked hands. "For *you*, sir? Three weeks."

"And how long for anyone else?"

"Ah, but, my friend, you are a special case."

Damn the fellow. I've been thinking of him ever since. Why this seemingly gracious service—rendered so malignantly? Why me as victim?

You see, I couldn't test the binoculars in that narrow street. I waited till I was about a mile off the cathedral, then focused them on the tip of the north-west tower.

The magnification was enormous! One gargoyle seemed like the face of a giant covered in a leprosy of peeling stone. Another seemed close and evil enough to spit at me.

I stared amazedly. These were faces I knew—faces of intimate friends. Here was a two-tongued woman; there a beast with barbed teeth. I knew them, too. But I had never seen them like that before. Suddenly I felt I should never again distinguish between mask and face.

Wildly I focused on people in the street. All without exception had the swinish faces that protrude at one from a Dürer engraving, medieval faces that were brutish or suffused with lust or greed.

I noticed, too, that my own perceptions were preternaturally sharpened. Focusing on a bent, frail man whose back was turned to me, I knew the

appearance of his face before he turned. And so it was. Under the scant white hair jutted the peaky nose and the toothless jeer of one I could never till then believe in—the aged mocker in Hieronymus Bosch's painting of the Crucifixion.

In horror I put the binoculars away. Perhaps I was ill—possibly poisoned by carbon monoxide in the narrow streets. Surely, I felt, among the fields and hedgerows these abnormalities would vanish. Within a couple of hours I was able to test this. I stopped the car on a hill-top, took out the binoculars and looked.

A lark was ascending, showering the air with a silvery cascade of song. I could see with ease its beating throat and its eyes closed in ecstasy. Suddenly from above there shot down a bolt of pure savagery, of murderous beak and talons. Through the glasses I watched a single feather drift carelessly to earth. Then with a shock of dismay I noticed my own emotion. I had not been frozen with revulsion and anger. My heart had leapt avidly and I had gloated.

Shakily I turned the binoculars over in my hand. Certainly they were mine. I recognised my own focus-mark, the eyepiece that had a chip in the vulcanite, the makeshift stud in the neck-strap. I felt sick.

Climbing back into the car, I drove about, thinking. All light had gone out of nature, out of people, and I saw only the dark. Something about these glasses was corrupting me. Or did they reveal—or pervert—some truth? That all things and people are, in fact, corrupt? No, I thought, that can't be. Stop and focus on the first child you see.

I did. Several fields away were a small boy and girl hammering something on a gate. Again the immense magnification. Again I saw with appalling clarity. Along the top bar of the gate were nailed the claws of innumerable moles. The boy had a live mole in one hand, a pen-knife in the other. I watched with suspended breath as he laid the squirming mole on a stone and raised his knife. Then . . . with an effort I wrenched the glasses from my eyes. Again I had felt exultation in cruelty and blood.

It wasn't long before I discovered other malevolent properties in these glasses. They told me infallibly where to focus, and it was infallibly on all things horrible; the torn throat of a small beast, a blown carcase, a tortured cat, parasites, destruction, always the insolence of death overriding the pride of life.

They had kinetic properties, too, showing me in enormities of imagination decay and the suffering which came in its train. And if it was with envy that I saw things in their beauty, it was with exultation—and the malignant chuckle which hovered in the air always startled me—that I watched their dissolution. In terror or disgust I would wrest the infernal glasses from my eyes and thrust them aside. . . . And with an itching lust I would pick them up again.

Yes, I saw *her*—the image of desire which to each man creeps in always through the eye. She seemed to stand naked on a hill-top, arms outstretched to the sun, her pale-gold body amor-

ous and beckoning as Aphrodite's. Sickened with physical desire, I yearned towards this pagan goddess though half-knowing her vileness. She turned towards me, as did Helen offering her lips to Faustus—and I fell back in horror at her blackened teeth and the worms crawling in the bony sockets of her eyes.

"Am I going mad?" I would mutter. "Or fey? Or under some spell or curse?" I no longer dared look in a mirror lest I should see there the face of Cain or Nero, swine or ape.

"Am I really alive?" I would wonder. "Am I all mixed up in intersecting planes of space and time, of subconsciousness and paranormal things?"

Through these glasses I had actually watched the rifling of a tomb. Nothing but a long barrow on the grassy uplands it had been till then. But through the glasses I had watched a swarthy man in leather skull-cap and bullskin jerkin claw it with bare hands, hack it with the shoulder-blade of an ox. And from this green mound he had taken a goblet and a diadem. Then I remembered this tomb had been pillaged two thousand years ago. I laughed frenziedly and shouted at the sky, "Thanks be! At least, no glasses can pierce into the future." An evil laugh came back.

Then followed a day when across a bald landscape sped a white sports car. I picked up the binoculars and saw through them a red-lipped girl with flowing hair, driving recklessly. She cut corners, took a hump-backed bridge crazily, and hurled her car along the valley road at speed.

"Faster! faster!" I willed her on viciously. "Thrash it! Give it hell!" I saw her bite her lips. I saw the sudden look of terror stiffen her face. I saw the uplifted hands with the blood-red nails as the near front wheel struck the root of a tree and the car spun over in a gust of smoke and flame. I raced to the spot and found nothing. I was there twenty-four hours too soon.

Still dulled by the shock, I read the newspaper report as though of some incident long ago. Had I, under malign influence, willed and urged that girl to her death? And did these accursed glasses now begin to see into the future? I passed from witlessness to fear, and from that to a cold fury.

Again, but with the glasses in my hand, I went down the five stone steps into that medieval darkness.

"Where is the old man who repaired these for me?"

The lady in black stared at me. "Old man? Aren't you mistaken? There is no old man with us."

"No," I said, "I'm not mistaken. But I expected your reply." I looked round the shop. The blackened timbers were still in position. The walls were thinly-plastered stone. Most of the shops in this street are built over immemorially ancient substructures. I heeled the lino-covered floor.

"You have a cellar under here?"

She bridled at my peremptory manner. "Yes. But it's never used."

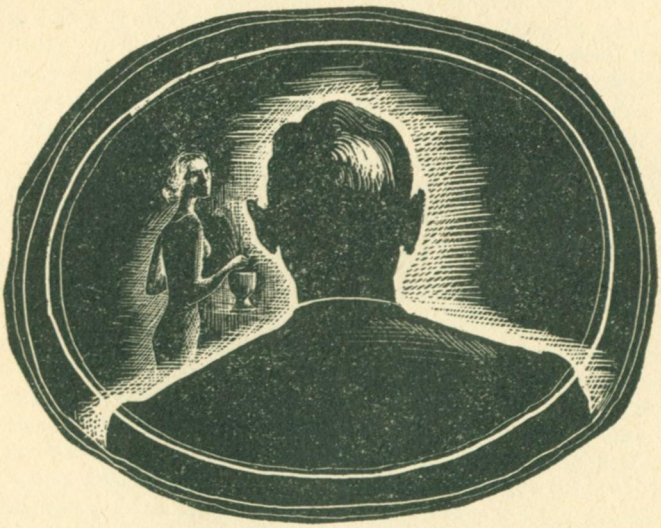
I laughed crazedly. "Not so. You've got a most cunning artificer down there. A new trick, perhaps, but an old hand. Well"—I thrust the glasses at her—"you can pitch these back to him."

TO PHILIP WYLIE—WITH LOVE

MARJORIE LYLE McGOWAN

Illustrated by Arthur Wragg

THE FIRST THING THAT struck you about Joe was his ears and his nose. His ears were large and stuck straight out from his head. His nose was large, too, and it had a bump on it. Some blind date! Of course, after a while you didn't notice his ears or his nose because he was such a thoroughly nice guy.



I saw a lot of him in the following weeks. He told me he had been married, but was divorced when his wife became an alcoholic. He had custody of his two boys, and his mother took care of them. At the mention of his mother, I was surprised to see a shadow cross his face. I wondered about it, and in the weeks that followed I wondered even more because by that time he had proposed, I had accepted and I still hadn't met his mother. When I asked him about it, he said he had to do this his own way and in his own time. He was preparing his mother for me, whatever that meant.

Finally one Saturday his mother

was "prepared" enough, and he drove me to his house to meet her. Before we got there, Joe asked me to remove my ear-rings and the watch I was wearing. I did what I was told without too little grace, but when he told me to take off my lipstick, I rebelled.

"Please, Ann," Joe pleaded. "Mother is very religious. She doesn't believe in ornamentation."

So all right. I tissued off the lipstick. This was supposed to be better? To me, I looked like I'd been in a hot necking session.

Mrs. Johnson was a small woman with a hump back which gave her a strange, evil appearance. She was nice enough to me that first day. She didn't voice her disapproval, but she didn't voice any approval either. Joe said later that I'd been honoured with the family silver. This came out only for special occasions, or (but this thought I kept to myself) if you want someone to know they are only a guest in the house and not a member of the family—and not likely to be if she had her way.

The kids were wonderful—shy at first but warming up nicely. They were cute as little teddy-bears and just as cuddly.

I made two mistakes that day—real whoppers. After lunch I started clearing up the dishes, and was told that one didn't work on the Sabbath. I told her, in as nice a way as possible, that it wasn't the Sabbath for me.

"No one works in this house on the Sabbath," she said.

Later that evening I was allowed to help the boys learn their Bible verses for the following Saturday. It went pretty well, considering that they were only three and five.

When it was their bed-time, they kissed their father and their grandmother on the cheek, and came to me and put their little arms around my neck. I picked them up and kissed them. This was sheer heaven, until I glanced at Joe's mother's face and saw there a look of malevolent hatred. It was a look such as I had never seen on a human face before and hope never to see again. I smacked both kids gently on the bottom and sent them off to bed. Soon after that Joe took me home.

He said his mother liked me. Evidently he hadn't seen the look on her face. If this was how she liked someone, I shivered to think of what it must be like to have her hate you.

The rest of the summer passed quietly, and in the fall Joe and I registered at the University for some evening classes, he in Mathematics and I in Literature. We both decided to take Psychology, and wound up in the same class. I didn't like this too well, because Joe was somewhat of a brain and I barely squeak by. Having him in my class sort of frustrated me. I couldn't answer a question without feeling self-conscious about it.

Before I tell you about what happened, I must tell you something else about Joe. He had one absolute big hate in his life—women who drank and got really revolting about it. Knowing what I did about his wife, I could understand it and agree with him. This, thank heaven, was nothing I had to worry about because even

though I took a drink now and then, I never got drunk.

At Christmas Joe took me to his company party. It was a swell party, and I was having myself a ball. Everyone was so nice to me. I looked awfully pretty, if I must say so myself, and Joe's eyes were just shining with pride. I had a few sips from one tiny cocktail. That was all I had time for because I danced with practically everyone there.

It was when I was dancing with one of the Vice-Presidents that it happened. All of a sudden, after a terrific whirl, I got the giggles and my knees buckled under me.

The room whirled around and around, and I got disgustingly sick—all over the Vice-President, of course. I could see Joe's mother laughing at me. (This was especially mad because she wasn't even there.) Then I must have passed out.

When I came to, one of the girls from Joe's office was feeding me black coffee. Joe was apologizing to the Vice-President for me, but the Vice-President said it could happen to anybody.

"Not to me. I've never been drunk in my life. Besides, I only had part of one drink."

"Sure," said the Vice-President. But I could tell he didn't believe me because he winked at Joe. We went home then, and all the way I kept telling Joe that I hadn't been drunk.

"It's okay, Ann. Let's forget it."

I couldn't forget it, though. The disgust in Joe's eyes haunted me. Then, too, it happened again.

I was darn scared when it came time for our final exam. in Psychology. I had studied hard, but I still had a terrible feeling I was going to fail.

I had dinner that night in a small restaurant near my office. I ate with *Basic Psychology* propped up in front of me, and studied right up to the last minute I could and still make class in time. Traffic held me up, so I was a few minutes late.

When I walked into class everyone else, including Joe, was already writing like they were crazy. I went to the front of the room and asked the Prof. for an exam. sheet. Then I burped—real loud. Everybody looked up, of course. They started giggling, and I did, too. I started back to my seat and

bumped smack into some joker's desk. When I tried to apologize, the words came out all slurred and funny. Someone whispered, "She's drunk as a hoot owl."

"No, no I'm not. I'm perf'ly sober."

Then I saw Joe's mother sitting at one of the desks laughing, and I passed out again.

There was no coffee for me this time. When I came to, I was in Joe's car; he was driving me home like someone possessed. Only he wasn't possessed, I was. I tried to tell Joe that I hadn't even had one beer with my dinner. He wouldn't listen to me. He said he had had one drunken wife, and he sure as hell wasn't going to have another.

"Okay," I said, "but I swear to you I wasn't drunk. I'm going to a doctor tomorrow and find out what *is* wrong with me."

Joe went with me for my check-up. According to the doctor, I was a perfectly healthy young woman with premarital jitters. Joe accepted this, and our romance got back on a normal keel. We set the date for June.

All that time we were still spending most of Saturday and Sunday at Joe's house. As the kids' love for me grew, so grew Mrs. Johnson's hate. Outwardly, she seemed to have accepted our coming marriage, but I had the clear and accurate impression that she wasn't finished with me yet.

One morning in April, as I was putting my face on, I got the horrible feeling that my nose was bigger. Up till then I had had a pretty nice little nose, but now it was honest to God bigger. It didn't disturb me too much at first, because I thought it was just the way the light was hitting it, but then when I started to comb my hair, I got sort of panicky. My ears were sticking straight out from my head. No matter how I combed and rearranged my hair, it just wouldn't cover those ears.

I got through that day as best I could with at least a half-dozen people asking me what the hell I had done to my hair. I could have belted them, because it wasn't my hair at all. It was my ears and nose.

When Joe picked me up that evening to go to a party at some friends' house, right off the bat he said, "What the devil have you done to yourself?"

Boy, that really did it. All the way to the Adams's I let him have it. I hadn't done anything to myself but get mixed up with him. "Don't you remember? Just two weeks ago we commented on the fact that most of our married friends look alike. We aren't even married yet, and already I'm beginning to look like you. It's horrible."

Of course he hit the ceiling at that; but what I meant was—the nose and ears looked all right on him after you got used to them, but my face was just too small to carry that big a load. By the time we got to the Adams's, we were both so mad we weren't even speaking to each other.

Betty Adams didn't notice anything when she let us in, but when she took my coat, she said, "Annie, pull your dress down in the back, it's all bunched up."

I pulled and she pulled. "What did

you do, stuff the back of your dress?"

I looked at myself in the hall mirror. I had a hump on my back just like Joe's mother. There she was, laughing at me in the mirror. I didn't pass out that time because I was drunk; I just plain fainted.

When I came to, Joe took me home. I told him I'd had enough. His mother had won. She could keep her grandsons and her son. I wanted no part of the Johnson family. Our marriage wouldn't have a chance in Hades of working with a mother-in-law like that. Joe was pretty down in the dumps about it all, but he agreed. I bawled my heart out for a few weeks, but I finally got over it.

In time the hump on my back went down, and my ears returned to normal. My nose even got smaller, but I still have the bump on it. I think I must have broken it with all the nose dives I had taken. Someday I'll go to a plastic surgeon and have it fixed. But in the meantime, my husband says it gives my face character.

Oh yes, I'm married now. I married the first thoroughly nice guy I met who didn't have a mother.

She knows her man, and when you rant and swear,
Can draw you to her with a single hair.

JOHN DRYDEN (1631–1701).

. . . . . .

And all the young ladies . . . said . . . that to be sure a love match was the only thing for happiness, where the parties could any way afford it.

MARIA EDGEWORTH (1767–1849).

. . . . . .

With all my will, but much against my heart,
We two now part.
My Very Dear,
Our solace is, the sad road lies so clear.
It needs no art,
With faint, averted feet
And many a tear,
In our opposed paths to persevere.

COVENTRY PATMORE (1823–1896).

FOILED

A. R. WILLIAMS

THE NIGHT WAS DARK, but the cyclist acted with more caution than seemed necessary. He came along a quiet country road outside Melcester. Dismounting at the gates of a large villa, the man stood a moment looking all round and listening. Nothing unusual could he see and he heard no sound. Extinguishing the lights of his machine, the cyclist wheeled it in through the gateway. He went along the drive, turning off to reach the back of the house. There he placed his cycle among the bushes of a shrubbery so that it would be invisible if lights were switched on in the house.

That done, the man stood looking at the house windows. All were in darkness. Trying the lower ones, he found them fastened, as was the back door. Not a sound did the seeker make, moving in rubber-soled shoes and wearing black rubber gloves.

A garage stood against the back of the house. The man shinned up the waste-water pipe, and stood upon the roof listening again. No sound or movement occurred.

Satisfied with the certainty of that, the climber moved to the nearest window and tried the lower sash. It slid upwards. This sent the man rigid, crouched with his head below the level of the window-sill. After a minute thus, as nothing happened or sounded, he slipped a black mask over his face. Then he raised himself erect and gazed into the darkness of the room. Stretching out his hands, he felt nothing inside, so climbed carefully in and stood while he took an electric torch out of his pocket.

As the intruder switched it on, it gave only a faint diffusion from its glass being dimmed with tissue-paper. But it was enough to guide the man among the furniture and past the empty bed to the door, which he opened noiselessly and stood to listen for any sound before emerging on the landing. Feeling safe, he walked along to the stairs. These were carpeted, so he descended without a creak.

At the bottom he froze into immobility. He heard something on his left, behind a door which stood ajar. Was someone lying in wait for him? Then he stepped forward and pushed open the door, to see a light vanish as he switched off his dim torch.

Perhaps for a minute the two men remained motionless and watchful. Each could descry the form of the other, conscious more than seeing, wary, prepared to jump, run or fight whichever might be necessary. The inside man switched on his light and directed it on the new-comer, who did the same. He already in possession was sturdier of build, clad in dark brown as obscure as the other one's deep grey, and similarly black masked.

From him came a chuckle and a murmur of "So you're on the job too."

"Yes. But I'll go now——"

"No," interrupted the first man. "Too risky."

"You don't think I——"

"How do I know? I'm not leaving anything to chance. Stay here."

"If I do we shall've to share fifty-fifty."

"H'm. Perhaps. But I believe I know you. Would do in a good light and no mask."

"As I should you."

"Let's unmask. But no tricks."

"Right. Together."

Each man raised his right hand and slid off cap and mask. They stepped nearer, scanning each the other's features. The stouter man was square-jawed and ruddy of complexion, all about him indicating strength with pugnacity. The slimmer one had a long sallow face in which the deep-sunk eyes were black pools of watchfulness.

Said he, "I thought you were a labourer."

"Scaffolder," corrected the first man.

"More useful on this job," assented the slender man.

"As no doubt your window-cleaning is."

Both men laughed. As if moved by a mutual impulse, they resumed their masks and caps. Moving together with an expertness which needed few words, they ransacked the house. Leaving the house after removing their masks, they cycled back to town, arranging to meet again in the very near future and to work out a plan of campaign.

Thus began a partnership in crime and domesticity. For the latter Duncan MacKell moved from his lodgings to the cottage where Percy Linch lived with his mother. The window-cleaning business was not pursued too intently. The pair spent days doing nothing; sometimes merely lounging about, at others dressing up to seek what amusements the town offered or to walk about the streets. They drank moderately, remaining sober and conversed little with outsiders. Between themselves their talk was fragmentary, each understanding the other's allusory speech while it conveyed no information to overhearers.

Their nocturnal profession was proving profitable. Although they had to sell jewellery, plate and other burgled articles at but a fraction of their real value, yet it seemed considerable to men of their status. There was money got as well. So in secret recesses of their bedrooms both men were accumulating a store of notes, having vague plans for leaving Melcester when they were wealthy enough to make bigger ventures.

Dunk MacKell was the leader. Bluff and direct, prepared to use his strength to gain his own ends, he was also skilled in the use of tools. Locks, bolts and all manner of fastenings and safeguards yielded to his dexterity backed by muscular force. Yet Perce Linch was the thinker of the partnership, crafty and cunning, cautious, patient, ready to take time and trouble to achieve his aims. He was more keenly observant than Dunk MacKell, and was the planner of the successful scoops they brought off.

This began to annoy him. He felt he

was the brains of the pair. The idea grew in him that he ought to be getting more than half the profits. He was coming to resent the attitude of Dunk MacKell, which was tending to be domineering. The stouter man was a heartier eater and a heavier drinker and smoker than Perce Linch. He liked the good things of life, the easy chair by the fireside, to be waited on and lie long in bed.

A few months of it convinced Perce Linch he must dissolve the partnership. It was becoming burdensome to himself and to his mother, who wanted her little house to herself, tolerating only her son in it.

But how was the break to be made? He could not tell the other man to go. To quarrel with him was too dangerous. Betraying him to the police would involve himself in a subsequent stretch of imprisonment.

To kill him was too risky. Perce Linch shrank from direct murder, though he thought of it, assuring himself he did not fear committing such a crime if it could be accomplished with swift certainty and no likelihood of detection afterwards. Such a problem was congenial to Perce Linch's mind. Slowly a foolproof scheme evolved, to be staged when circumstances favourable to it arrived.

Both men bought themselves new bicycles of high-grade make. From that Perce Linch's desires and aversions built up the plan of action for disposing of his partner. Also he was avaricious of money, and saw a way to secure by the same stroke the whole of Dunk MacKell's share for himself.

A chance conversation confirmed Perce Linch in the course he was to pursue. He asked, "Whatsh'll we do, Dunk, if we're ever caught at it?"

"Run."

"Always?"

"Aye. Run like hell before they can be sure what we're like enough to know us again."

"You'd never put up a fight?" This interrogatively.

"Don't be a fool!" exclaimed the older man. "I'm not going to spend years in clink. Wriggle out and run somehow; get away for sure, but no rough-stuff."

"Yes," said Perce Linch, rejoicing that this policy fitted his purpose and looking to their operation with a calm satisfaction.

Discreet survey revealed that Hill House was unoccupied; family and servants away, no caretakers in and access to be had without danger of being seen. The night chosen for the raid was dark and calm. Leaving the front gate, the two men walked up the drive and took a side path to the back of the house. Here they placed their bicycles among shrubs with the front wheels towards the road, their usual precaution.

Entry was gained by forcing a back window. This house proved one of the richest they had rifled. Securing much jewellery, trinkets and loose cash in the bedrooms, the two burglars descended to the ground-floor for the plate. As they entered the dining-room there was a sound, unidentifiable, from the front of the house. Both men froze into still silence. Dunk MacKell turned his head and looked at his mate.

For Perce Linch was the watchdog of the pair. Always alert, his sight and hearing acute, he investigated any possibility of discovery. Queer sounds there were in plenty; cats and dogs, rats and mice, bats and birds and occasionally other creatures, with creaks and groans and snaps and all the many noises which seem louder and more mysterious at night in big houses empty of people or the residents asleep. Dunk MacKell relied on his companion for safety.

Saying nothing, Perce Linch went. Outside the back door he found it so dark he had to find Dunk MacKell's bicycle by feeling. Taking a small pair of pliers out of his pocket, he loosened the adjustment nuts of both brakes. Then he tightened them again with finger and thumb so that they held at gentle application of the levers but the connections would slip under pressure of real braking downhill.

Hastening back into the house he hissed, "Cops."

"Where?"

"Front of house."

"How many?"

"Two. Trying doors and windows."

After a few seconds pause, Perce Linch added, "We must make a dash for it."

He wished he had not been so prompt of suggestion. Before he finished speaking, Dunk MacKell had gone. Running after him, Perce Linch pulled the remaining cycle from among the shrubs, jumped on it and set out in pursuit of his pal. In the road both men switched on their headlights. For a few hundred yards the highway was level, then started the declivity which gave Hill House its name.

A notorious road it was locally. Nearly straight for nigh on half a mile, it steepened midway before easing to the bridge. The little river was not at right angles to the road, so the approach to the old bridge had a sharp incline to the left, necessitating careful descent by vehicles and cyclists if to negotiate the corner safely. Early on Perce Linch passed his colleague, making the latter wonder if the window-cleaner knew what waited for him at the bottom of the slope. Yet he had been up and down it before. Looking over his shoulder and seeing no pursuing lights, Dunk MacKell braked firmly, determined to run no risks.

Gathering momentum far ahead, Perce Linch realized in horror what had happened. Either he had tampered with the wrong machine or in the hurry Dunk took his. What could he do?

Nothing. With the air whistling coldly past his ears and tears in his eyes, Perce Linch careered downwards at a speed he had never ridden before, faster than he would have thought possible. Still far behind up the hill Dunk MacKell heard a scream and a crash. Arriving at the bridge, he dismounted, turning his lamp to see a bicycle buckled into a tangled wreck lying against the low end of the parapet.

"And Perce gone over into the water," commented the man grimly. "I must clear out before morning."

"ALIVE OR DEAD"

L. B. GORDON

IONEL STORTON WATCHED the mist thicken as though it were the ghostly ectoplasm of the very mountain. It piled itself in hanging banks before him, unfathomable yet—yes, resentful.

"Cheer up, old boy. I'll get you down all right—alive or dead."

Storton marked the grim humour in his companion's tone. He looked at Rex Vanders sitting beside him on the boulder.

"We are a couple of fat-heads. Fine mountaineers! First we allow ourselves to be caught in a mist, and then we drift away from the main party."

"We are not much more than two thousand feet up," replied Vanders, "and Ben Mallich is not too bad. When we have rested a bit, I'll lead the way down."

Storton said nothing. He felt the creeping mist cast clammy arms around him. Its cold touch stirred up all the primeval fears that he had not experienced since that night in childhood when, from his bed in the dark, he had heard the stealthy creak on the stair. . . .

He shivered.

"We'll make straight down, and I reckon we can reach the shelter at the foot in a couple of hours," Vanders was saying.

"I'm not trying to be clever," said Storton. "But *I* haven't the foggiest idea in what direction the shelter lies. With all the landmarks blotted out. . . . Rex! This cursed mist has a threatening feel about it, a—a murderous feel!"

"Cut it out, Lionel. You're getting nervy."

"It isn't nerves, Rex. All my life I've been subject to these—these impressions. I had one when I was sitting in the back seat of Ponsonby's car that day——"

"I remember," said Vanders. In the muffling atmosphere his voice sounded sepulchral. "But Ponsonby *was* canned. I doubt if he saw the road before him, let alone that lorry. Well, what's the use of becoming gloomy? If you are ready we'll be going."

Storton did not move from where he sat. "It is not safe, Rex. We should wait till the mist lifts. We are near too many precipices for my liking."

"We'll be all right. We can't sit here till the fog blows over. On some of these Scottish hills the mists hang around the top for days. Come on!"

Seeing him rise, Storton reluctantly got to his feet.

"This way!" Vanders led off, plunging through heather up to their thighs. "Keep in my tracks, and if I come a cropper at least you will have been warned."

But I have been warned, thought Storton, stepping cautiously after his leader, this damned mist bids every bit of me beware. On his forehead he felt the chill wetness of the fog mingle with the colder dew of dread.

Down, down, down—one careful pace after another, slithering on patches of soaked moss, stumbling over hidden rocks, and all the time the whispering mist breathing its sinister menace in his ear.

Vanders halted. "Wait here a minute till I investigate. I shan't go beyond shouting distance. I've an idea there is some tricky, boggy ground around here."

"Be careful," urged Storton. "There are supposed to be lots of sheer drops on this side."

"All right," grinned Vanders, "I'll look after myself. I won't let any tuppenny bit of hillside beat me. I promised to get you down—and I will. Be back in a jiffy!"

Don't mock, man, don't mock the elements, groaned Storton in his brain, as he watched the mist open white arms to receive Vanders. Then he was utterly alone, lost in grey shrouded terror. He stood, stock-still, waiting as the seconds ticked away.

"Vanders!" he said at last, fear cracking his voice into harsh unreality. "Vanders!" His tone rose with his alarm.

The mist seemed to draw back a little to survey him, to listen to this specimen of manhood that stood before it. Then it swirled back and around him.

"Rex!" he screamed, frantic now and staring wildly round.

No sound, no faintest answer, only the pounding of his own blood and the persistent, sibilant whisper of the mist.

"Oh, my God!" he groaned. An impulse came to pitch away all he carried and run anywhere into the veil that now seemed to beckon him into its embrace. He would run, screaming and yelling, and with him would run the ghosts of the mist. There would be a wild, mad race. . . .

Vanders! A wave of relief swept over him. Vanders was there, a ghostly figure in the fog, beckoning to him to come forward. Storton moved towards his friend. He could discern a strange smile on the other man's face, a kind of smile he had never seen before. Somehow it appeared to shed a radiance that, like some kind of fog-lamp, made the way more visible.

He saw, too, a scar on Vanders's forehead. He must have fallen and torn his brow in the heather. No matter, he had returned.

"Thank goodness you're back, Vanders. Lead on and let us get out of here as quick as we can. It gives me the creeps."

Vanders smiled again and started off at a different angle. Storton followed, gaining confidence now with every downward step. He even threw a defiant glance at the mist. You had me scared, he admitted, but I'll get the better of you yet.

The mist just hung, cold, inscrutable, filling him still with the sensation that he was an intruder on sacred ground that had belonged to it for millions of years. His defiance vanished and he hurried after Vanders. The mist crept down behind him, it seemed to have a myriad eyes, horrid and pale, grudgingly watching his descent to safety.

For no apparent reason, he was reminded of the expression on the face

of a cat once at home when it had let a mouse scurry past unmolested. It had stared at the tiny rodent with contemptuous green orbs, then lowered its head to the fat bird it was consuming.

"I can have you some other time!" had spat the venom in the cat's eyes. . . .

There was Vanders waving him on again. He was clearer now—surely the mist was thinning? They must be well down by this time. Yes. There was the shelter, and from it there was a rough road. His jeep was there.

Tired, exhausted, he staggered into the shed. Vanders was standing there, that strange smile still on his face.

"You seem to be pretty cool about it," grumbled Storton, throwing himself into a seat and pulling out his flask.

He saw Vanders laugh and make for the door.

"Looking for the rest of them?" asked Storton after he had taken a liberal swig of whisky. "They'll be along all right. Oh, thanks for bringing me down. I don't mind confessing I had the wind-up. That cursed mist. . . ."

He felt lethargy, sleep, overpower him. It was warm here in the wooden hut after the cold caress of the pale, vaporous clouds. He let his head sink forward. . . .

"Storton!"

The voice came to him, faintly at first, then urgently, driving the shadows of sleep from him. He sat up.

"It's you, Macdonald—you are all here." Storton saw the shelter filled with men. "Well—what's up?" he demanded, seeing their grave faces.

"You managed to reach here, alone?" said Macdonald.

"I did not! I was helpless in that fog. Vanders led me right here, though I did lose him once for a few minutes—near the Highlandman's Fall it must have been."

There was a sudden, deathly hush. Storton felt all eyes straining at him. Macdonald's face had gone whiter than the mist.

"You say Vanders led you here?"

"Yes—to the very door. What's the matter?" burst out Storton.

"Come outside a moment."

He followed Macdonald out.

"Listen." The tenseness in Macdonald's voice made Storton's very heart halt to hear. "*We* picked Vanders up an hour ago at the foot of the Highlandman's Fall. He had only one little mark, a scar on his brow—but his neck was broken!"

Storton held to him for support. "No; oh no!"

"Yes," said Macdonald grimly. "He's over there now beneath that ground-sheet."

Storton stared at the sheet with its fatal outline. Then he turned his eyes up the mountain. The mist shivered and eddied. It waved shapeless arms of—triumph?

He was reminded of the expression on the face of a cat once at home which he had never forgotten.

THE BIG STICK

DENNIS GEORGE MILES

Illustrated by John Wood

I PICKED UP WITH Charlie Kola about three years ago. I had my doubts at the time, because Charlie wasn't everybody's cup of tea. He was a real queer one, with those big green eyes and a voice like a rusty file. He was doing the south coast with his Punch and Judy show, and he wanted an assistant. I was off the hook, and so we struck it up over a glass of seaside beer.

I soon found out it wasn't all honey being a dogsbody to a Punch and Judy outfit. I was used to shouting the odds and passing the hat round, but what got me was the packing, unpacking and lugging about.

But, looking back, that really was the least of my worries. It was Charlie Kola himself who nearly made me give it up. He was a real horror. I think the reason he wanted an assistant was that he didn't dare show his mug to the crowds. He had a long thin face with a beaky nose and thin lips. I reckon booze had played hell with his complexion, for it was so full of veins it looked like a road-map, with nasty red blotches round his cheeks. He had spent so much time crouched in the booth that he had a bit of a stoop.

It was at Bournemouth that I really got scared. We had had a hard day on the sands, and were glad to knock it off at about seven. He grunted a good night and went off on a solo bat round the pubs. I pushed off back to the digs to write a letter.

I got to bed fairly early, and was just dropping off when I heard Charlie stagger up the stairs. By the sound of him he'd got a real skinful. He slammed the door of his room, which happened to be next to mine, and I heard the springs creak as he flopped down on the bed.

And then, God help me, he began to talk in his "Punch" voice. It wasn't loud but it carried, a cracked nasty voice that rose to a little screech every now and then. Charlie Kola's Punch was about the best on the south coast, and now I had the full benefit of it. He was nattering about as how he was going to do everyone down and as how he was cleverer than all the rest; the usual Punch spiel. But at eleven o'clock at night it was a bit out of place. I don't hold with overtime on principle, so I knocked on the wall and told him to wrap up. He screeched back at me something naughty about clubbing me to death. The situation was getting out of hand, as they say; so I nipped out of bed and went to have a look.

Charlie was all hunched up on his bed, his big nose pushed forward and his face like wax in the moonlight. He

was still screeching, although his thin lips were hardly moving. His horrible little dolls were all bunched round him. Charlie looked like a doll himself, his body all limp and his large face like painted cardboard. And then it struck me that he looked just like Mr. Punch himself.

The next day I said nothing about what had happened. We rigged up as usual by the pier, and I got the crowds together for the first show. Charlie did the real old Punch and Judy act, the one where Punch knocks hell out of his old woman, then goes on to batter the policeman, the doctor, the priest and finishes up stringing up the public hangman. The way he did it, it deserved an "H" certificate. Some of the kids were scared stiff. It wasn't very funny.

After four or five shows, he packed up and came out of the booth. He looked exhausted, and he was leaning heavily on a thick, twisted stick.

The stick was a new one on me, and I just stopped myself making a funny remark. Charlie Kola was one of those where you just don't take the mike; too nasty.

"Pack up," he growled as he took the money. "See you in the morning." And off he sloped, with his great stick making holes in the wet sand.

It was only later that I realized that he had scooped up all the money, as easy as kiss your hand, leaving me nearly broke. Well, a fellow's got to live, so when I got the stuff back to the digs, I made a round of the pubs to run Charlie to earth.

I didn't have far to look. I was stopped outside The Galleon by a fellow who looked as if war had been declared. He clutched hold of me.

"You're the fellow that collects the money at the Punch and Judy show, aren't you?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Well," he said, "your pal's in there and he's gone raving mad. You'd better get him out before there's a flaming riot."

Well, I nip in pretty smartly. The Galleon is a classy place with little portholes instead of windows and tables made out of barrels. I spotted Charlie straight away, perched up on a high stool by the bar, rocking to and fro and waving his hands about. And he was screeching at the top of his voice.

"I'm too clever for you. You'll never catch me. Mr. Punch knows a trick or two, I can tell you."

Well, you know what it is when somebody starts a commotion in a crowded place. Everybody hangs back, hoping someone else will put a stop to it. So Charlie was by himself with everyone looking at him from a safe distance, although I did notice the barman scuttling back for the manager or perhaps for the bouncer. And a long streak in a college blazer tried to put a word in.

"I say, old man," he began.

Charlie turned on him with his green eyes fairly blazing, his beaky nose almost twitching. The young man stepped back and I tried to push my way through, but we were both too late.

Kola raised his heavy stick and deliberately smashed it down on the young man's head. It was sickening. The young fellow was twitching on the floor with blood pouring out of his scalp, the women screamed and Charlie's horrible chattering went on still.

"You're not going to take Mr. Punch away," he screamed, "I'll beat the lot of you."

But they took him away all right, though the two rozzers who came in had to watch themselves. Even the doctor who was called nearly caught a packet as he knelt down beside the college kid.

A fractured skull it was, and Charlie went up for two years.

Of course he should have been put away for good, but the full facts were not known, as they say. Not many witnesses came forward. You can't blame them, being on holiday. The magistrate must have reckoned Charlie as being a drunk, pretty far gone. But I knew better. Charlie was round the bend.

Two years went by. I got myself a few jobs as a barker at fairs and circuses and suchlike, but I kept clear of Punch and Judy shows. And then Charlie Kola came out. I should have

kept away, but I didn't. For one thing, I had all of Charlie's gear, and for another, well, I was sort of fascinated.

We arranged to meet in a coffee-shop opposite the gates.

"Hello, boy," he said as he came in. "Nice of you to come." His voice was tired and husky, and he kept blinking, like as if he was in a daze.

I bought him a coffee, and we chatted away about the weather and about Arsenal's chances. Anything to pass the time.

"Have you still got the props and dolls?" he suddenly asked.

Well, that shook me a bit. I'd been dead careful in steering off that subject.

It seemed that apart from his seaside rounds, Charlie had built up a nice line of business with kids' parties, cinema stage shows, garden parties and suchlike. He had loads of contacts and intros., and, why not? He was one of the best in the business.

Although he looked a bit sorry for himself now. Much older and frailer, and I myself couldn't see how he was going to carry on. And then came the question I'd been dreading.

"Are you stringing along with me, boy?" Charlie asked.

I looked straight at him, trying to harden myself to say "No." But he looked so eager, and pathetic like a kicked dog. After all, he couldn't do much damage now. And he just wouldn't be able to manage by himself. I knew, among other things, that his ticker wasn't all that good. Damned fool that I was, I just had to nod and even gave him my hand.

So we were off again, and we did pretty well. I began to think Charlie was all right again, but I soon found out different. He was gone right enough, but quiet-like and sort of resigned.

After one of the shows, when we were packing up, he began to talk.

"You never knew me in the old days?" he asked.

I shook my head, my hands full of dolls.

"It was just me and Mr. Punch then," he went on. "And the other dolls, of course, but they were just dummies; a flick of the hand and a squeaky voice, that's all. But Mr. Punch was real."

I went on packing, very careful not to turn my back on Kola.

"Yes," he continued, "Mr. Punch knows his own mind. He's the boss. He needn't have been, but when I took to drink he sort of took over."

"Why don't you pack it in?" I asked. "Take a long rest."

"It's no good, boy. Punch wants to go on. I can't keep him at bay any longer. Punch is a lot too clever for me; he's too clever for you or anybody. Good old Mr. Punch."

Charlie's voice was going higher and higher, like a gramophone record being speeded up. I left him quick. I was taking no chances.

I knew one thing. Charlie couldn't go on like that. I always wondered how it would end for the poor old chap. I didn't have long to wait.

We had a big show at one of the towns on Charlie's tour. The town was celebrating some event, something to do with being granted a charter or something. The bigwigs made a real do of it, with displays, fireworks and finishing up with an open-air concert. That's where we came in.

For some reason Charlie was a bundle of nerves that day and liable to fly off the handle. We had some trouble getting the booth up.

"All right," I said. "Take it easy, Charlie."

I was a bit worried, you see, what with Kola's dodgy heart.

"Take it easy?" he hissed. "Look what a mess this booth's in. The dolls are all over the shop. Don't I pay you to put things right?"

His face was twitching and his big bony hands were clenched. He was in a rare state, the red blotches on his face showing like patches of red paint.

"Charlie," I said to myself, "you ain't going to be with us long, at this rate."

Well, I got things moving. I had to run a lead back to get some juice for the lamp that Charlie used in the booth. It was getting a bit dark, and I knew he'd have to use it; just an electric-light bulb on a metal stand, but useful when you're closed in like he was for an hour.

I got everything organized with a bit of help from the main concert party. Charlie scrambled into the booth, his face tight and angry.

And then it began to rain. It pelted down. I wasn't all that worried. There was no hat-work needed for this show. We'd been paid a fee.

Funnily enough, though, most of the people stayed. There was a little bit of shelter, and all the people were set on having a good time. There were the lights and decorations, and there was laughter and a bit of singing; but Charlie got them.

He got them all right. Punch took over right from the start in a screeching, wicked voice that was somehow evil and vicious and exultant.

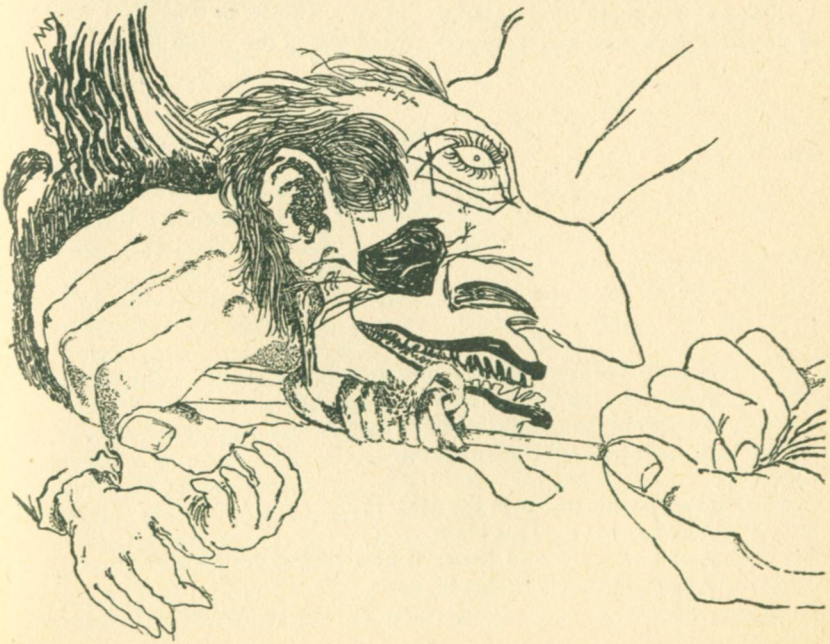
"I've got the best of you. I'm the clever one. Punch will fool everyone."

There was a bit of a stir in the crowd. Some of the kids began to cry, and even the adults began to look uneasy. I'm not much good at words; but there was something so nasty and bad in that small voice that all the spirit of gaiety left the party.

Charlie went right off the usual spiel. It was a monologue by Punch, propped on the ledge, talking all the time. He looked horribly alive.

The rain still fell heavily and some worry began to gnaw at me. I couldn't put my finger on it, but I felt sick and anxious.

I made a move to the booth to try



to tell Charlie to soften it down a bit. I was just moving across the rough stage when there was a crack and a sort of flicker of light. The booth rocked violently, and there was a heavy, dull sound.

And then I knew what had been worrying me. Charlie's wet hands adjusting the metal stand of the light, and the lead that was put in hurriedly.

"Oh Gawd," I said as I ran to the booth. "Not that, not with Charlie's ticker."

It was the lamp all right. A wire hung loose and there was a smell of burning. Kola had fallen backwards. he was lying at my feet, and he was quite still.

AND THEN I REALIZED THAT PUNCH WAS STILL TALKING.

I rushed to the front of the booth and found Punch was still propped on the ledge. And I heard his voice.

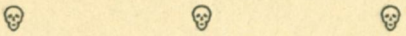
"I've beaten you, I've beaten you."

There was a chance then that Charlie was still operating. I staggered to the back, but Charlie was still as the grave, although there was a sort of flickering in his throat, like a bird's wing.

I had to stop the voice. I lurched desperately into the booth and shouted to the people to go home.

And then I saw my chance. The little gibbet and noose had been erected. Punch's voice cackled on. I seized the hideous doll, pushed the head into the noose and jerked hard. God help me, I felt a tiny thread-like snapping. The voice stopped.

Behind the booth Kola lay as still as ever. I knew he was dead. And his head was at the wrong angle.



From his brimstone bed at break of day
A-walking the Devil is gone,
To visit his snug little farm the earth,
And see how his stock goes on.

Over the hill and over the dale,
And he went over the plain,
And backward and forward he switched his long tail
As a gentleman switches his cane.

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE (1772–1834).

USURPER

ZACHARY COX

To: Dr. Peter Alliott,
The Oaks,
Ambleford, Beds.

University of Westwich
23*rd March* 1959

Dear Peter,

I confess to grave laxity in not having written you before. My excuse is the usual one—work. I have been engaged, during the past few weeks, on certain private experiments which may well revolutionize not only biophysics but the whole pattern of human life.

Peter, my friend, I feel that this information can be entrusted to you. I dare not publish it—not yet. I must have time to consider the implications. Indeed, I may even decide not to publish at all.

I have been studying the biophysical effects of certain salts of Bader's Isotope—the new isotope of neptunium —for the university. I used mice, treating them with proximity, injection and assimilation. Various reactions were observed, and the mice were stored in individual cages pending breeding tests. It was on the third day after their exposure that I made the fantastic discovery which led to my present investigations.

I noticed that the door of one of the individual cages was not properly fastened. I thought nothing of it at the time, merely made a mental note to warn young Berkeley against carelessness. I secured the catch, and left the laboratory for perhaps twenty minutes. When I came back I glanced at the cages—and the catch was unfastened again. It was the same cage; they were numbered cages, and I remembered that this was number nineteen. I kept still and watched.

The mouse in cage nineteen had been fed with a 1 : 10,000 attenuation of the isotope's citrate. As I watched, it pushed against the door—then it looked out through the bars. When it saw me it scuttled off to its food-trough. There was a shocking suggestion of purpose in the move. I felt my back hairs bristling, and more to reassure myself than for any other reason, I left the laboratory, reentered on tiptoe, and crept round to the side of the cages without passing in front of them. After a minute or two the door of number nineteen opened and the mouse emerged. I almost lost him; as it was, I only got him back into the cage at the cost of a bitten thumb.

Peter, I have observed that mouse for three weeks, and I am afraid. Absurd? Consider this: all the while it can see me, it behaves like a normal mouse. Yet when I observe it through a sheet of polarized glass, it is capable of *intelligent action*! There can be no doubt. I have fitted cages with complex fastenings, and it has overcome them all. I have put food in inaccessible places, and it has constructively thought its way over the obstacles. I keep it at home now, in a cage fitted with a padlock. I have not dared to

experiment with further specimens. The other mice, treated with different dosages of salts, have not exhibited a like reaction. I am drawing tentative conclusions, but do not yet care to voice them. Two things appear certain, however:

1. This mouse has logical ability, including the constructive imagination to conceal that ability when it knows it is being observed.

2. The metabolic rate has increased enormously. The mouse consumes and excretes 250–300 per cent. above normal.

I entreat you to keep this matter to yourself.

Work presses; but I feel better for having told you. Please let me hear from you.

Sincerely,
Erskine.

To: Erskine Hislop, Ph.D.,
Professor of Biophysics,
University of Westwich.
"The Oaks," Ambleford, Beds.
26th March 1959

Dear Erskine,

Yours of the 23rd received, marked and digested. Three possibilities occur to me:

1. That the classical and precise Erskine Hislop conceals under his formal hide the soul of a dry joker—which is pretty well impossible!

2. That the said c. & p. Erskine Hislop hath a devil, and needs to get out in the fresh air more (I can recommend the Bedfordshire spring-time).

3. That what you say happened actually *did* happen—but this last is quite implausible.

Looking over these three alternatives, I'd give precedence to the second, but I'd prefer to believe the first, difficult as it may be.

If you are pulling my leg, you're pulling too hard. Whatever the unknown properties of Bader's Isotope may be, the actual brain capacity of a mouse is negligible. Do not write back and tell me the thing has grown a four-inch skull overnight, or I shall be tempted to forward your letter to a "trick cyclist"!

I strongly suggest that you spend a week in the country with me. I've just come in after an evening walk with Buster. You remember Buster, the Setter? He's grown into a magnificent beast; a *real* sample of animal intelligence. I'll set him up against your problematical mouse any time you like.

Do try to get at least a week-end off. It's a crime that you should spend these fresh, crisp days in that mausoleum of a lab.

Hope to hear from you soon.

Yours,
Peter.

University of Westwich
27th March 1959

Dear Peter,

I am very sorry that you have misinterpreted my previous letter; evidently I did not make it sufficiently clear.

All the events which I described occurred, exactly as I related them. True, I have no witnesses. As I told you before, I do not feel that such a discovery should be lightly released—the implications are too far-reaching.

For example, you speak of brain capacity. That is one of the fundamental scientific concepts that is now challenged by my *empirical* evidence. The only alternative at present visible to me is the Bergsonian theory of mind. This suggests that the physical brain is merely a filter or focus; that the "stuff of thought," or "consciousness," is by nature both immaterial and universal, and that the brain does no more than limit a quanta of such consciousness to one sphere of perception and action. This is, of course, a totally unscientific piece of metaphysical hocus-pocus, or it was. Now it seems to agree with observed facts. Certainly the actual brain capacity of this mouse is not abnormal.

As to your second possibility—I am objective enough to agree that I may be the victim of a consistent hallucination. I can only suggest that to put that hypothesis to the test, *you* could pay *me* a visit and see the thing for yourself. Any week-end would do, the sooner the better. I shall soon have to make a decision about publishing this work.

Sincerely,
Erskine.

"The Oaks," Ambleford, Beds.
29*th March* 1959

Dear Erskine,

You have half convinced me. At least you're not joking, so I owe you an apology.

I can only hope you're *not* suffering from an hallucination. I don't know what all these dreadful "implications" are—even if it is all gospel truth—but whatever they are, I'd rather face a thinking mouse than see a good friend getting insulin-shock treatment!

If all goes well, I'll accept your kind invitation next week-end, the 2nd April. I should arrive about 3.30.

Must stop now—Buster has brought me his collar and is producing pleading noises. He wants a walk. He's been a bit off-colour these last two days.

If you've got any of that brain-juice left, you might let me have some, and I'll try it out on Buster—provided it's not dangerous. Trouble is, if he gets any more intelligent I might have to take my collar to him!

Yours,
Peter.

University of Westwich
30*th March* 1959

Dear Peter,

I shall expect you on Saturday afternoon. I am not sure if you were serious in your suggestion that the citrate be tested on Buster. I have not made any further tests. I considered it rather dangerous to move too precipitately in view of the many unknown factors. Of course, a dog is well-disposed towards human beings, and the salt's effect on a specie other than mice might be different—incidentally it could hardly be physically dangerous in so small an attenuation.

None the less, I feel we should be very circumspect.

I look forward to seeing you at the week-end.

Sincerely,
Erskine.

"The Oaks," Ambleford, Beds.
6th April 1959

Dear Erskine,

This is really too bad. You assured me that that stuff was harmless; well, Buster's dead! I dosed him with it on Sunday night when I got back, and he simply faded out—got more and more listless and finally died in a fit of convulsions this morning. I didn't get a vet., because you were so damned keen on secrecy and so sure the stuff was safe.

I suppose, in fairness, this must be as much of a shock to you as it was to me. Still, it's my loss.

For the record, he showed no signs of increased intelligence up to his death.

I'll write again later on with my considered opinion of your astonishing demonstrations on Saturday. I'm not in a thinking mood just now.

Yours,
Peter.

University of Westwich
7th April 1959

Dear Peter,

I deeply regret the loss of Buster, and can only assure you, with the utmost sincerity, that I was absolutely certain of the safety of the test, at least as far as Buster's physical well-being was concerned. You will remember, however, that I did oppose it on the general principle of insufficient data.

Would it be asking too much if I requested you to let me have Buster's remains? I realize that you are upset over his loss, but as an objective man and a scientist, you will appreciate the value of a post-mortem.

If you would rather not, I shall understand.

Sincerely,
Erskine.

"The Oaks," Ambleford, Beds.
9th April 1959

Dear Erskine,

Buster's body follows by rail. Sorry I was short with you. Of course the whole thing was as much my fault as yours—more, if anything. Let me know what you find.

Yours,
Peter.

University of Westwich
11th April 1959

Dear Peter,

I have completed the post-mortem. You did not tell me that Buster had lost his appetite. His stomach and small intestine were practically empty. I could find no trace of any other cause of death, and were it not for the convulsions you mentioned, I could only conclude that he actually starved himself to death. As it is, I suppose the salt must have produced some obscure nervous effect.

I have decided to publish my findings next week. Do you wish me to return Buster's body for burial?

Sincerely,
Erskine.

"The Oaks," Ambleford. Beds.
12th April 1959

Dear Erskine,

Just a hurried note to tell you, before you publish, that Buster ate

like a cart-horse during those four days. He's never eaten so much in his life. I'll leave you to sort that out. Congratulations, anyway, on your forthcoming fame.

Yours,
Peter.

POST OFFICE TELEGRAM
UNIVERSITY OF WESTWICH
6 p.m. 13 APR '59

ALLIOTT OAKS AMBLEFORD
CHECK IMMEDIATELY ALL
DOGS CATS OTHER ANIMALS
AND PEOPLE IN CONTACT
BUSTER SINCE DOSING
PARTICULARLY SINCE
DEATH STOP PREPARE LIST
STOP LETTER FOLLOWS STOP
I WILL ARRIVE TEN
TOMORROW MORNING
UTMOST URGENCY
ERSKINE

University of Westwich
13*th April* 1959

Dear Peter,

I have solved the riddle of Buster's death and shall catch the first train to Ambleford tomorrow—I could not get one today.

I hope you followed my telegraphed instructions. Every hour will count. That is why I am writing now, although I shall arrive within a few hours of this letter; we shall have no time for explanations.

Above all, do not dismiss what I have to say as some preposterous joke. Preposterous it is—damnable, nightmarish it is—but joke it is not, more's the pity!

You told me that Buster ate well during his last few days—but I found almost nothing in his stomach or small intestine. He died in convulsions. Consider that before you read further, for it may suggest something to you, and if you think it out for yourself, the appalling truth may be more acceptable. Consider this, too: the dog had been off-colour for some days *prior* to the salt's administration.

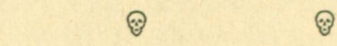
Buster showed no increased intelligence; not because the citrate was ineffective. Buster never really digested it. The thing that *did* digest it—the thing whose increased metabolism poisoned its host with excreted toxins in a matter of days—had the intelligence to leave Buster's body at death.

Tænia Echinococcus is its name, and its intermediate host is man!

Until I have made breeding tests with the mouse, I cannot say whether we face a whole new race of intelligent tape-worms or one isolated individual. In any event, we must act swiftly.

We might also pray.

Sincerely,
Erskine.



See my lips tremble, and my eye-balls roll,
Suck my last breath, and catch my flying soul!
ALEXANDER POPE (1688–1744).

BETWEEN PORTS

RICHARD CLAPPERTON

HEN HARRY went down to the pier that morning, the bay was warm and yellow with sunlight, though it looked dark in the east. He peeled off his sweater and sat in the boat, working the pump handle to and fro, as he had done yesterday and the day before that, for fifty of his sixty-five years.

Presently two men came down the wooden ramp, and the taller, elder one said, "Going to Port Hannah?"

"Going out a mile, that's all."

"We'd pay."

"No. I don't know you. Get off my boat."

The tall one was about thirty. His face was long and brown, blue eyes narrowed as if the sun was always in them. He said, "What they say about you's true. Hard to get along with. Anti-social——"

Harry looked up quickly. They knew about him. He had no friends; they knew that. The nearest Harry came to having a friend was on the sea because the sea was all he knew. The main reason people didn't like him was because he didn't need most of them and showed it; there was a man to sell his catches, a delicatessen for food and wine; all he needed. He operated the boat himself. Nobody knew his mind, and he didn't tell them. They left him alone, and he knew they couldn't care less if he sailed one morning and never came back.

He looked older than his years, though his hair grew low on his brow and its whiteness made his skin look red. His eyes were sharply grey and clear—the only young thing about him; definite lines deep-cut on either side of his mouth—they folded and darkened when his face worked; but in sleep they were the same. His hands were red and gnarled, with white hair; the knuckles work-swollen, fingers twisted aside like old paint brushes. His belly stuck out, and he wore his belt low, so his trousers concertinaed over his boots. That way he never looked to be going anywhere, and nobody paid any attention to him.

"Get off my boat, why don't you?" he said.

The tall one regarded him calmly. "What was it they said, Hymie? Damn niggety bastard. Never had any friends. Okay. . . ." The grin went from his face, and he took a gun from inside his shirt. "The name," he said, "is Stein, Johnny Stein . . . and we're going to Port Hannah."

Harry's forehead twitched and shrank. He shivered, staring into the tall one's unsmiling face. He looked about him at the other boats. Everyone busy. He paused, then turned to the engine, whipped it over, and they churned slowly away from the rundown. Stein said, "Don't go close to

the other boats." And put the gun inside his shirt.

Presently the boat surged between the port walls into open sea. Stein sat in the middle seat. The wind didn't move him; he was like a statue except for his hair. His eyes were level on Harry, mouth twisted. Harry frowned, afraid and indignant, not sure whether it was something in the man's mind, or the wind, twisting his mouth so.

Outside the port the boats separated. Stein threw two lines astern. "We're all fishing," he said. "Call a boat and I shoot. Hymie'n me got nothing to lose. Remember that."

Harry said, "What did you two do back there?"

"Shot a man, in Flamingo, in a bank. He was crazy. We had 'em all lined up against the wall. This guy thought he'd be smart, thought everybody else was his friend, would rush to help him when he made the move. Well, he dived for a gun and nobody moved. He died on the floor, and they all just watched him. He died alone.

"But you'll be okay. Hymie'n me don't want another corpse on our hands. We'll have a tough enough job dodging the rope for the last one."

"*I* didn't shoot him!" Hymie said in a high voice.

Stein looked at him coldly. "You had a gun, I had a gun. Just you steer this tub." He turned. "You'll be okay," he said again to Harry.

The words stopped in Harry's mind. You had a gun, I had a gun. You killed a man, his eyes accused Stein. Hymie didn't look confident, like Stein. His lips were pursed, eyes down, narrowed; and there was no wind. He huddled against the rudder-bar, young and cold, or scared. . . . Harry couldn't tell which.

Stein shifted suddenly, looking at the sky. "Rain up there." He looked at Harry. "Spent all your time on the sea?" Harry didn't answer. "Written all over you. I can picture it. Ran away from home when you were a kid, went to sea, sea's all you ever knew, so you got a boat. . . . Didn't have any friends, but you had a boat."

"You think because I got no friends you can kill me and take the boat," Harry said.

Stein grinned. "You're no fool, papa."

"What would you say if I told you I had a friend right here, with me?"

Stein shook his head, laughing silently. "Old man, you're crazy."

Harry looked out to sea. The fear was still in him, but almost controlled now. They're going to kill me, but they don't know about the sea.

The dark change came very quickly. The sun was ahead, but there was a coldness behind them, overtaking. They all felt it. They were like swimmers with their chests in sun-warmed water, their feet in pylon shadow. The sun dulled and misted slowly into the gathering greyness. Miles away, rain beams were down. And suddenly it was very cold.

Stein gripped the sides of the boat; his head shrunk into his shirt, like a turtle's, from the spray. "Speed it up!" he said sharply, like a man in the rain waiting impatiently for someone to open a door.

Harry watched the mounting

waves. "This boat hasn't the power to go against it. Have to go where she goes."

"How long before we get to Hannah?"

"In this," Harry said, "God knows."

Hymie was sick. From behind he looked to be headless. They couldn't hear him above the wind. Stein sat frozen. The sky was so dark now it almost merged with the sea and erased the horizon; the waves whipped back on themselves like serpents in the crosswinds, erupting to fine rain. The valleys deepened more. In the spray, neither Hymie nor Stein noticed the rain. It came down straight and savage, as if thrown, and in a few minutes danced in a growing pool at the bottom of the boat.

"We'll sink if you don't get in some place," Stein said.

"Where?"

"Get something off the boat then!"

"Engine's the only weight. It's fixed," Harry said, and immediately wished he could bite out his tongue. He watched Stein and his throat went dry. He held his breath, felt his ears go back and the whole skin of his head shrink with horror. Stein shot the boy twice in the back of the head and toppled him overboard. Then he twisted round suddenly, as if expecting attack.

"You didn't have to do that."

"Shut up and get in some place."

"He wouldn't've made any difference. We'll sink, anyway. We'll sink with the rain."

Stein's head jerked down to the water lapping round his ankles. "Pump it out."

"No use. Coming in too fast. The rain——"

"I said pump it out!" Stein grabbed the handpump and furiously jerked it backwards and forwards. It made no visible difference. He tried to stand, but sat each time. He looked wildly about him, his face wincing at the waves.

"Do something!" he yelled.

He leaned forward and sharply raked the gunbarrel down Harry's face. His head jutted forward like a snake's as he glowered at Harry. Rain patted the blood from the old man's face, washing it over his cheek. He leaned back against the cabin. "Go on," he said, "get it over with."

In the sea's roar, the shot was a small sound. For a moment, the cold wet went from Harry's body as the bullet's heat tore through him and up to his mind. The cold came back when he knew he was dying. He did not look to the wound; he lay back, feeling suddenly superior because he knew he was dying. It's all over now, he thought, looking at Stein's frenzied face. He almost felt sorry for Stein, yet he wanted to smile; now you know you shouldn't have picked me, his eyes said.

You made a mistake when you thought I had no friends. I have a friend right here around me; I know him and he knows me. I don't go out when it's rough because I know my friend's in no mood to have me; friends are like that sometimes. I wasn't going out today because I

knew, by the sky, he was in no mood to have me.

Stein didn't know Harry was dead. He raved still, glaring around him. "We've been floating for hours; must be near Hannah now. Christ, that wave, it's coming down! Oh God! This is it. Won't take that again. The motor, what's the matter with the motor. Stopped. You can fix it." He began to whine. "Come on. We'll get out of this. How d'you fix it? There's a belt off." He shouted, "Answer me, you old fool! That wave. . . ."

The tottering grey wall churned forward; they were under it. The boat twisted sideways, and Harry's body fell back into the cabin and floated, head back, under. The wave dropped sharply, stilled the boat and pounded; it seemed there was no interval between waves.

The boat went down and came up and went down again. Finally, when the wind dropped and it was quiet enough for the white birds to fly close to the waves, it was nowhere in sight.

Lord, Lord! methought what pain it was to drown:
What dreadful noise of water in mine ears!
What sights of ugly death within mine eyes!
Methought I saw a thousand fearful wracks;
A thousand men that fishes gnaw'd upon;
Wedges of gold, great anchors, heaps of pearl,
Inestimable stones, unvalu'd jewels,
All scatter'd in the bottom of the sea.
Some lay in dead men's skulls; and in those holes
Where eyes did once inhabit, there were crept
As 'twere in scorn of eyes, reflecting gems,
That woo'd the slimy bottom of the deep,
And mock'd the dead bones that lay scatter'd by.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (1564–1616).

THE AVENGER

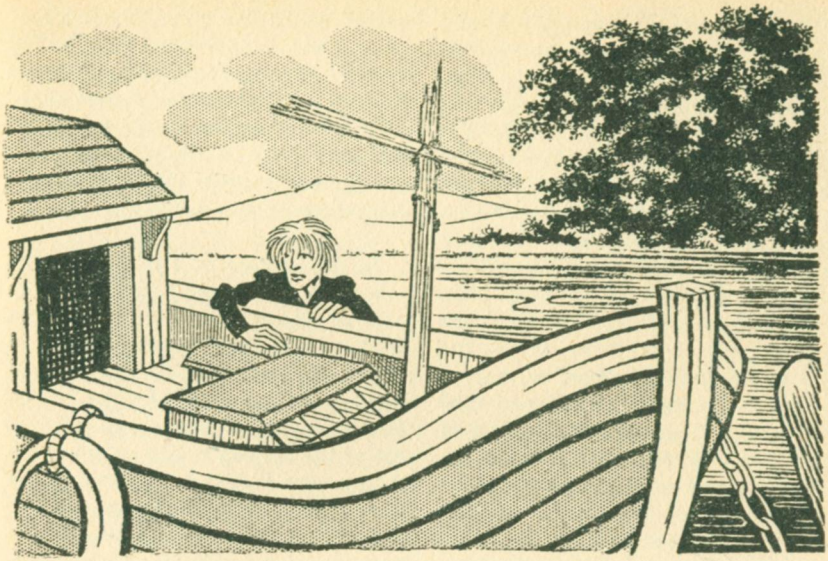
DENYS VAL BAKER

She came like a ghost out of the river on an errand of merciless revenge, but her triumph was a strange and sad one

THE HOUSEBOAT WAS long and narrow, the flat deck flanked with two solid brass rails, the white paint turned a muddy yellow from winter rains. What had once been a bright green canopy sagged over the upper deck, a great rent gaping across its centre; the portholes were rusty, the doors and glass partitions creaked and rattled protestingly. At the prow a long pole jutted upwards, but it seemed bare and forlorn without the usual fluttering ensign. The atmosphere, the very air, seemed to hang about like a dark, heavy shadow. The boat lolled derelict, clinging on to life by no more than the two greasy ropes that moored it to the small island in the centre of the river. It was a symbol of desolation, the last place likely to contain a breath of life, and Straker gravitated towards it, instinctively, for his refuge.

He caught one of the last electric trains out of London, keeping to himself, hat pulled down over his eyes, hoping that his luck would hold out. He knew they were watching him everywhere; the net was out, the massive proceedings instituted. There would be no peace in London, no peace where there were people, brushing past, touching you, always the impression of a hand on the shoulder; even the buildings seemed to be watching, their ten hundred eyes winking and staring. But there was some sort of peace out here, along the lonely towpath, away from the occasional blink of a house light, out in the dark and the silence. He walked along by the river, melting into the shadows of trees and bushes, hearing the tiny shingle stones crackling under his feet. There was a half-moon, rendered a little hazy by a shimmer of cloud, but sufficiently bright to throw a ghostly illumination around the river. He made out the white shape of the houseboat some distance ahead. At the last moment he grew frightened, and shrank into the shadows when he drew opposite, watching and waiting. But there was no sound, no sign of a light, only the desolate lapping of the water around the sides. Chancing it, he climbed into one of several dinghies moored at the bank and sculled himself across.

The moonlight came through the rent in the canopy, bathing part of the deck white, leaving the other in shadow. In the fringe of the lighted part he saw a door leading to the main part of the boat. He opened it; inside everything was damp and cold. He shivered, feeling in his pocket for



a match. As he was about to strike one, he paused. The window was uncurtained, showing out its secrets across to the other side of the river, to all the unknown watchers hidden in the darkness there. He took off his coat and managed to fix it up on the bare curtain-rails; its thickness should deaden the small light.

When he lit the match, he saw that the furniture was covered with dust-sheets. There was a fireplace at one end, a few lumps of coal and logs strewn around; but he couldn't risk a fire just now. He struck another match and held it higher. A bookcase, some blue Minton plates hung along one wall, a bare sideboard . . . at the far end of the shelf a candlestick with half a stub left. He lit it. The flame spluttered and danced, then settled down—a tiny, fragile, blue-gold light, but enough to bring a smile into the dampness. By its faint light he went round pulling the dust-sheets away, throwing them in bundles into a corner. Then, aware suddenly of his weariness, he threw himself down on a couch in front of the fireplace, and pulled out of his pocket the packet of meat sandwiches he had bought at Waterloo Station. It would be the first time he had eaten for nearly twelve hours. His teeth sank into the food with sharp movements, wolfishly. Only when his hunger was appeased did he relax, sitting back, letting his mind run free.

There had never been any delusion in his mind about escape, not even postponement. They could not fail to find him; there would be the inevit-

able tiny clues, exhaustively followed up, leading the human bloodhounds to the station, from there to the river, at last along the towpath. In some way he had long ago accepted the inevitability of his end. He had accomplished the tasks that he had set himself. Already he would be regarded as a hero among his own people—but they were far away, already part of another world. Here he was among alien people, here he was the criminal, the assassin, the brutal killer. It was too late to reach safety, there were hundreds and hundreds of miles of land and ocean separating him for ever from his own country.

Besides, the very inevitability, the clean pattern of it all, had a fascination. What would he do if he could get back? There would be nothing except the attempt to repeat exactly what he had just done; perhaps some other place, some other victim. Now the circle was complete. He had a mission, he had completed the mission. The tiny act had added one more push to the wheel that would slowly, certainly, bring the freedom for which he and his people strove. Another time he might fail, now he had succeeded. Nothing could hurt him; whatever happened, he would be a hero, a martyr.

He became wearily conscious of his heavy eyelids, the weight of his head. Awkwardly he stumbled across and lay on the sofa, covering himself with one of the dust-sheets. But sleep eluded him for a while, as he lay there listening, hearing strange and unfamiliar sounds of the night: clicking of birds and hissing of water, the tiny pricks of hidden mice, the whir of river ducks. For the first time he felt aware of his final separation—of how he had nothing but desolation ahead of him—and a tear curled out of his eye and trickled slowly down his cheek, for he could still remember a life where he was not alone.

In the middle of the morning he saw them coming along the towpath.

It was a wonderful day. The thin white mist of the dew had vanished in lazy puffs, and the early sunshine had burst upon the river and the houseboat like a shock of surprise. He had heard the sudden music of the chaffinches and blackbirds clustering the trees along the towpath, and he had been tempted to crawl along to the bow of the houseboat, and lay very still in the sun, while he rested his head on his folded elbows and watched the tall, swaying trees, the shadowy birds and the silver, glistening swirl of the river. He had lain there for an immeasurable time—alone save for an occasional passing cyclist along the towpath and, once, a big Dutch barge steaming up-river—half-dozing and inclined, as he stared up into the inscrutable depths of blue sky, to imagine himself already drifted into some untroubled nether-world of solitude. Then he saw the five movements against the distant trees, and he knew, by the tall one's limp and by the woman's flash of colour, that it was them.

Four men and one woman. He watched them slowly advancing along the towpath, walking in two groups one behind the other—so that they

might have been anybody, a party of friends out for the day, workers going to the waterworks higher up the river bank; even, he thought with an ironic flash, servants of the Thames Conservancy Board making a tour. But they were none of these things, they were a part (now become the whole) of his life, as familiar to him as limbs, as the face he looked at every day in the shaving-mirror. And yet he had never met them, never spoken a word with them. They had followed him from one end of the country to the other for three months; it had seemed three centuries; and though they had failed to stop him fulfilling his task, they had never allowed him to escape their long but inexorable net. Now they were here, at last, to wind the net in. His was the triumph of achievement, theirs would be the triumph of retribution. It was, he supposed, a fair exchange.

He had watched them—at railway-stations, in crowded streets, on race-courses, in dance-halls, across the murmuring smoky length of sophisticated restaurants. And he had come to know, and in some cases even to like, their characters, their little idiosyncrasies, the patterns of their behaviour. The tall one with the lazy movements, the squat one with the bubbly sense of humour, the rather taciturn one with the tight face that told of some strange repressed childhood—the youngest, rather boyish one who always looked as if he would have been happier playing football or driving a sports car. All of them, these four men in their low-brimmed hats and their quiet lounge suits, he knew and could place, professional agents of the government against which he worked, officially commissioned to hunt him down to extermination. He did not quite know what their personal feelings were towards him, whether they were detached about it, like ordinary policemen, or whether they were also urged on by other feelings—hatred, patriotism, disgust. He guessed that, at all events, it was for them a rational thing, a job of work.

But he had never been able to place the woman. She was not, he was sure, a professional agent, like the others. In some way she remained apart from them, almost a stranger within their group. And yet she was always with them, her purpose clearly the same—the relentless hunt. It troubled him, this problem that had remained unsolved. He had learned things about the others: that the tall man was consumptive, that the taciturn one sought out prostitutes, that the fair-haired freshness of the boy attracted the soft squat one almost as a woman attracts a man. He had learned nothing about the woman, except that she was beautiful and that she was unfulfilled. The unfulfilment and the cause of it remained a mystery to him, but the beauty was clear and visual, awaiting him like some perpetual flower. It was not a startling beauty, but one that grew upon the consciousness, slowly and irrevocably. When he first saw her he thought she was too tall, that she wore her clothes too profusely. But as he watched, catching her profile in distant doorways, seeing the passing reflection in a mirror, looking

down over a balcony at the gleam of her white neck, he realized that her limbs, if long, were never ungainly but possessed of a subtle flowing grace—that her clothes if profuse were deliberately so, as if to emphasize the rich sensual life burning underneath them. And of the delicate beauty of her face he had become aware almost, it might be said, as a lover becomes aware of the beauty of his love—by the increasing familiarity of each glance. Every time that he saw her his eyes traced the high rising cheekbones and the rich sweep of the brow, the wide generous mouth, the dark foam of hair; and every time he found the picture more complete in its tranquillity and perfection.

It was because of this heightened awareness of the woman, he was sure, that he had so often eluded final capture. For it had become a fact that he could feel the woman's physical presence where he could not see any one of them, where he could not hear a single voice. And so, with that precious element of forewarning, he had always been able to escape into the dark night, the protective side-streets, the bewildering forest. There had even been times—among the long hours which he seemed often to fill with thinking about the woman and her life, and now her place in his life, all unbeknown to herself—when he wondered if it was not a situation she had partly engineered herself. Then he had dismissed such surmises, because they would have meant the incredible—that the woman was a friend. And he was sure without doubt that she did not come as a friend, that she came of a purpose and as his enemy. But why he could not think, and it was the uncertainty that made him fearful of the woman where he feared nothing else; as if in some way he recognized her final significance in his life.

And now the journey was ended, for them as for him. He accepted the fact unemotionally, as he watched their five familiar shapes spread out along the opposite bank, like actors in some unreal play. He could not know how, but he knew that they would have estimated his final lair. Perhaps he had left a footmark, perhaps dropped a piece of paper, perhaps someone had seen him; it did not matter, the result would have been the same. Somehow or other the five of them would have been standing

opposite the houseboat, an eerie army of avengers.

It was now a question of time, and time was like the river that rushed by, hissing against the sides of the houseboat, as if in a perpetual hurry. For them, he supposed, time and the river moved slowly, perhaps seemed everlasting. The task of eliminating him had never been for them a simple one. Publicity had always been more dangerous than success. Their work had to be executed with as much secrecy as his own mission. They, as well as he, were lost in an alien land, so that movements had to be cautious, discretion complete. For that reason he would be safe as long as the daylight lasted; the towpath was never completely deserted, always there was the possibility of a stray cyclist, an athletic sculler, an old barge drifting down with coal or timber. But when night came they would take action.

All the same, he found the day interminable, a torture beyond belief. He knew that they were deliberately goading him, indulging in a crude sadism. Sometimes they stood staring, sometimes they walked up and down like idle trippers. One of them had even brought a fishing-rod, and sat stolidly on the grass bank gazing into the water. But every now and then he would pull in his rod and fling out the line—and each time it seemed to Straker that it hissed out in a wider arc, that the bait fell nearer to the houseboat. Such was the tension of his nerves. And sometimes they would call out, taking it in turns; the thin man, the squat man, the other two; not, he noticed, the woman. They jeered, they taunted, they threatened, they insinuated: he was interested to hear their voices so clearly, finding that they were as he had imagined according to each character. But the voice that he would most have liked to hear was silent. The woman sat alone, on a patch of green grass, staring in front of her, whether at the rushing water or at the houseboat, he could not be sure. It was almost as if she was lost in some world of her own thoughts, and no longer had any regard for where she was or on what pursuit engaged. If he had wished, he could have shot her as she sat. But not only did he not wish, he knew the futility of trying to shoot her or any of them. If there had been the remotest possibility of escape, it would have been a reasonable action. But there was not. He knew it. And was prepared; indeed, he was anxious now to face up to the issue, to conclude the problems.

Only it was a little hard, when one was so alone. And now, as if some final taunt to his aloneness, he was subtly aware of the faded atmosphere of the houseboat; lingering echoes, hidden memories of people, gay and happy and laughing people, old people sitting in the evening sun, young people linking arms and strolling along the decks. Colour and life, warm like wine. Now the emptiness and the loneliness. . . . It was possibly this that made him so taut and irritable, so that as he watched from behind the deck-rail his body grew to ache and throb, and he jumped at every slight movement or sound from the opposite bank. And gradually, re-

morselessly, the daylight began to fade.

But when the sun was setting, a red ball behind the plane trees, while the evening flies were rising over the plants and shrubs, his tired eyes saw an unfamiliar movement among the watchers. They had gathered into a group, apparently at the woman's request. He saw heads nodding, arms gesticulating; for a moment they were being almost violent, and he realized, curiously, that they were arguing. He found himself wondering at the cause of the argument, yet at the same time beyond caring. At last, with one or two protesting gestures, the four men parted from the woman, and began walking away down the towpath. He was prepared to believe that they would only go a little distance; his eyes followed them ferociously; but their walk was steady, and they seemed, unless his eyesight was failing, to be growing smaller and smaller, to be retreating into the same specks that he had first seen in the morning.

It was as he watched them that a sense of the inevitability of events grew upon him, so that he was half prepared when at last he turned his gaze away from the distance to see that the woman was no longer standing on the bank. He pulled his gaze inwards, and saw that she was swimming across to the houseboat with long, powerful strokes, her white arms flashing through the air, her dark hair spreading out behind her like some warrior's shield.

He stood at the door of the long sitting-room and watched, motionless, as the woman reached the side of the boat, as her two hands—they were, he noticed remotely, thick and strong, almost like a man's hands—fastened on the deck-rail. He had the sensation of being caught up in some predestined pattern of events moving as relentlessly, as smoothly, as the movement with which the woman pulled herself on to the deck, her body sliding out of the water as if out of some last urgent caress whose shape still clung to her, like her streaming dress, with a faint voluptuousness. He found that now he could not move, that he must preserve his strange statue-like pose, his two arms spreadeagled as they rested on either side of the french windows, his head cocked a little to one side, his eyes watching, as if already hypnotized, the woman's slow, purposeful movements—as first she ran her hands down the sides of her body, pressing out the clinging water so that it streamed in tiny, bouncing cascades upon the deck—as next she raised her hands and caught in them the tangled mass of dark hair hanging over her face and threw it over again to tumble backwards—as she turned her face towards him, a proud yet remote face (and again he had the confused sense of the high cheekbones, the long nose, suggesting a man's face), and at last he met her gaze that he had somehow always known he would be afraid to meet, and yet which now, in the despair of the event, he met and held with his own, burning, defiant eyes.

The woman, he saw, wore only a thin blue summery dress and sandals; these and, around her neck, a silver

locket chain. With the wild unruliness of her hair and the faint shimmer of heat around her where the warmth of her body was evaporating the water, she had taken on a strange, almost wraith-like quality. He began to wonder whether it was his imagination at work or whether she was really some strange creature, a mermaid or a witch, risen out of unknown worlds. Then she began to walk towards him, and his ears caught the steady thud of the sandals on the deckboards, his eyes leapt towards the firm brown shape of the legs; he knew that she was no figment but the living flesh and blood—and he understood suddenly, with a hissing groan, why she had come and what subtle torture, infinitely worse than any rack, she brought with her.

She walked right up to him so that he was aware of her presence all round him, the scent of her invading his nostrils, the feel of her jumping to him across the space between them, so that at the shock his body, prisoner to itself for so many lonely months, seemed to tremble. In her eyes he saw the wide, unhidden glint of triumph, of derision, and he averted his face miserably and stumbled back into the cabin.

Now it was the woman who posed in the doorway, now it was her body stretched into a statue—deliberately, provocatively, he knew, so that he could not take his eyes away from the richness that was in reality as much stone as any real statue.

"What do you want? Who are you? Have you come to kill me?" He was

aware of himself mumbling incoherent sentences whose meaning did not matter. If only she would go away, if only one of the men would come; across the wide carpet rug he felt her presence again, intruding into his flesh and bones, unbearable.

"For Christ's sake!"

He half-turned, and then cried out and slumped into an arm-chair.

"A woman. . . . What have I done to you?"

He felt ashamed of his voice, his manner, his lack of dignity, yet he felt helpless, engulfed into this half-animal world where in some way the initiative was lost to him, possessed by her.

"A woman . . . or a man?"

Half-dazed, he mumbled on, not knowing what prompted him to say the last words. Yet at the sound of them the woman's face moved for the first time, the mouth bared into a disturbing smile that at first was sneering and scornful, then changing (and he was almost shocked) into something unexpected and human, something transparent and weak and sad.

"A man?"

And now the woman was speaking, and he felt a sense of relief that at least she should do this.

"A man? Perhaps that is it, indeed; perhaps you are right. Perhaps that is what I am becoming, the man that was." Suddenly her eyes closed into slits, and he felt their hate jump across at him. "The man that you killed carelessly, like one might kill a fly."

"I?" He was too startled to protest. He had seldom, if ever, had to consider deaths, the removals of his trade, in human terms; he would have been unwise if he had allowed himself to do so. "No, surely——"

She cut him short with a look.

"You. It was a long time ago. No doubt it has escaped your memory. After all, what was one among so many? What was that to you?"

He stirred uneasily.

"When?"

The woman came forward into the centre of the room. She moved with what seemed to him a lazy, sensual grace that accentuated every line and curve of her body. He supposed his unbearable awareness of her arose partly from his own loneliness, stretching back over so many barren months in this alien world where he would not have dared to trust anyone, least of all a woman. Yet there was almost something beyond that, almost —though he hardly dared to frame the idea into words—a feeling of some other, quite deep contact between them, something forged out of a suffering, secret to the two of them, that had been shared over all the recent months. So that for a moment he was almost exhilarated, and looked up to search for even a spark of answering excitement in the woman's eyes—and was alone and despairing again, as he realized that it must lay submerged until she had spoken and freed herself of her hoarded burden.

"Two years ago."

The woman's voice had gone soft, as if in looking back to that time, and the time beyond it, she became gentle and untroubled, the person she had once been.

"It was in our country, in the city. At the ceremonial birthday parade. The President was there, and his wife. There were Ministers and diplomats, men in bright uniforms and women in long summer dresses with flowers in their hair and some of them carrying bonnets. It was a sunny afternoon—oh, a beautiful afternoon, the sun catching on the water fountains and turning them silver, the great avenue

blistering in the heat and the lines of oak trees throwing their branches over the crowds like cool hands."

"Go on." He was remembering the day, the spotless sky, the smiles of the street vendors, the buoyant sense of happiness that only for him was heavy with the shadow of death, the taste of blood.

"It was our honeymoon."

His eyes traced the design of the carpet, hardly comprehending what she was saying, only knowing that it was as necessary for her as for him that she should finish her story.

"We need never have been there—my husband had leave due—but he was conscientious, he felt it his duty to be present on such an occasion." She turned her gaze from some distant view to his half-averted face. "Duty makes a hard master," she said softly.

"Yes," he said, and in that moment was aware, however fleetingly, of some perception on her part of his own dilemma, his own sacrifices on that altar.

"My husband was a high official in the Foreign Office. He had a brilliant career before him. The whole of life lay open before him, and I—we were like some beautiful ship poised on the shore, waiting to be launched into a wide calm sea."

He locked his fingers together, and began rocking them backwards and forwards methodically. He was trying to remember, but all he could visualize was the sweltering sun, the gap in the crowds, the sudden sweep forward of the bejewelled carriage—the gun hidden, warm and squat, in the palm of his hand.

"You were hiding behind a tree. When the Foreign Minister's carriage came abreast, you shot him through an avenue among the crowd. Everybody was watching the carriage, no one saw you. No one except my husband—and, later, I."

Her voice trembled.

"He began running towards you, before anyone else had grasped what was happening. I called after him, 'Be careful, he'll shoot!' But he took no notice. And you did shoot."

The woman drew herself up, into some remote, cold attitude that yet meant nothing to Straker, for whom time had begun to lose its boundaries so that half of him was there in the sweltering sun and another half here taking part in some unreal charade.

"You shot my husband twice. Your hand was not so steady, my friend, as when you accounted for the Minister. Your first shot only wounded. The second one—extinguished. He was dead when I reached him."

"And?"

To his surprise the woman shivered slightly. With a slow, almost weary movement, she sat herself down upon a cushion stool.

"Between the two shots I saw you. I looked at your face with such intensity, the intensity of an immeasurable hatred, that it became stamped upon my mind, in my memory, indeed as real and vivid to me as my own reflection. Or as"—her voice sank to a whisper—"the face of my husband."

Straker stirred unhappily. He gestured with his hand.

"I am sorry. It was Fate."

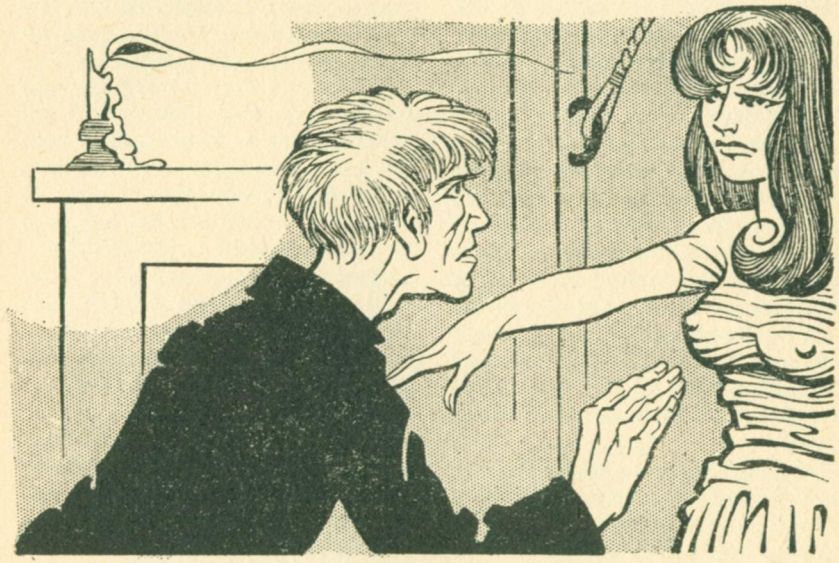
The woman laughed, but the laugh

like the smile, he noticed, began harshly yet ended softly, almost as if in despair for the futility of its own harshness.

"It is not Fate that has brought me here. It was not as easy as that. For a long time I lost you. But I was determined to find you. And determination——"

you would be more valuable to our government alive, that you must have information of the greatest importance."

He shrugged. "What is important? What matters any more? You have done your duty. I have done mine." He said the last words, despite himself, with a strange and authentic



"Solves all problems." He nodded. "I have found that, too."

"I followed you all over our country, and then across the border, here. I used to walk about the city, haunting the little cafés, the places where I thought you might be. Eventually I came across you, down by the waterfront, in a bar. You did not notice me. At first I was going to deal with you in my own way. Then I realized that

pride, so that the woman was momentarily pricked out of her reverie, so that her eyes for the second time saw him as a person, as a human being, as a man; and saw, with a ghostly compassion, his resignation, his acceptance—above all, his weariness.

She went on, her voice tiring.

"I contacted our secret service. Their agents came over and joined me. It has not always been easy. You are

very clever, but somehow we never quite lost you."

He sighed.

"No; never quite. Because you were there."

She nodded slowly, and he felt her eyes wide and round, appraising him, judging him, sentencing him. He wondered, almost idly, if she was going to shoot him there and then.

"Yes," she said. "Because I knew you so that I could have smelled you out no matter where you hid."

But somehow as she said the words they seemed to wilt, to lose their original intention of fire, so that both the woman and Straker were surprised. And for that moment they looked at each other wonderingly; without emotion and with a strange sort of understanding. It was, for Straker, as if he had a sudden and blinding revelation of the pitiful helplessness of human beings—seeing them as straw puppets in the meaningless whirlpool of some chaotic pattern of events; and the realization, creating in him a tremendous surge of warmth and pity, bound him suddenly to this woman opposite. It was for the woman something that sank deep into the heart of her being—but something that, he sensed, he would never know.

And the next moment the woman's mask was back, behind it she was withdrawn again into her stone wall of impenetrability. Again he was conscious, almost painfully, of her physical presence, as if it was almost a whip that flailed him.

And something inside him broke, releasing the locked-up river of words.

"You do not know . . . what it has been like. You imagine the most terrible thing in the world to be a bullet —yes, let us say the bullet that killed your husband. But you have no idea. That was quick and simple—there was an end to it. He lived his life freely; he was happy, no doubt, up to the second he died." Straker's voice, that had begun with the hotness of a passionate advocate, now quietened, became strangely intimate.

"I have been dying for years. Oh, no ordinary sort of death. Not the death of the flesh, nor even of the mind. But the death of the spirit—the worst of all. And going on all that time. You cannot imagine that . . . one embarks on the journey knowing there is only one end. It is not the actual end that matters—it is the years between."

His face crumpled, turned pale as the sadness within his heart overwhelmed him.

"One is always alone, always surrounded by enemies, always moving into the unknown from the unknown among the unknown. It is like losing your identity—becoming nothing, less than nothing, a great cipher." He bowed his head. "One is all the time dying, perhaps dead."

He looked up again, met her eyes once again with defiance.

"You do not see me as a person really, any more than I saw your husband as a person. The Prince, the Ministers, the generals. . . . They were ciphers to me. I am that cipher to you. And worse, worse still—I become that cipher to myself. Perhaps I have to, otherwise I could not carry on, would

never accomplish my mission."

He hesitated over the last word, so that she suddenly wondered if he would say it with sarcasm, dismiss it into cynicism. But she understood from his tone that still he was sincere about that, still he believed and had his faith. And the understanding forced upon her a respect.

"It would not matter so much if only you had left me in peace." He put his hand across his eyes. "If only you hadn't come. . . . But you did. You came out of the water like something warm and lovely, out of the past I have tried to extinguish with finality, like a thumb on a candle-flame. And then, in a moment, you made the flame burn again, and now I am the centre of the flame, burning. . . ."

His voice sank even lower, and, watching uncertainly, the woman had the impression that this man's whole life was slowly ebbing away, like the tide around the houseboat. And something deep down in her, something beyond her rational control—that same thing that had been disturbed in that earlier moment of intuition—moved restlessly, cried out in protest.

"You remind me, in one flash, of everything that I have left behind. My country, my people, my home, my friends—and, most, the woman I loved, that I had spent years pretending to forget, you make ten times more alive in a moment."

All at once his voice broke and he cried out:

"Damn you! Damn you!"

The words jumped out of him in jerks, as if he did not really know what he was saying; and as he cried out his body slowly crouched forward until, with a gesture that was at once penitent and yet unashamed, he was at the woman's feet.

"Torture me. Do all that you came to do. . . ."

His head bent down again, as if under the weight of some infinitely weary burden.

"I'm sorry. . . it is the strain," he whispered, letting out a long hiss of air. "I used to watch for you in some strange way, and over these long months I've grown to know you as if you were my own beloved. But you are made of stone."

And then, almost without thinking, his hands reached above him and touched the woman's hands with a strange movement of familiarity. And at the touch his fingers quivered and the woman trembled; as if some delicate river of life had flowed between them, some subterranean burst of life that would deny his capitulation to death, would melt her mask of stone.

And yet, for some moments, the woman remained like some graven image, motionless, while Straker's hands pressed hers gently, pleadingly, conveying with each touch some message and meaning that could never have been put into words.

And now Straker was aware of an immense stillness in the room, as if together they had entered into some fleeting cloud, a kingdom entirely their own. And at that moment of their awareness Straker's gentle, almost wistful, fingers touched the woman's face, her cheeks, and at last her eyes, that had been wide open and

staring into space. And at that touch it seemed that she was made human again, and the tears spurted out like unexpected rain.

And slowly, the tears trickling unheeded down her face, she put her hands down to Straker's bent head and lifted it, and bent forward until she almost enveloped him with her body, and her long dark hair, falling forward, sealed them off into their secret and impenetrable world.

"There," she whispered out of the darkness around him. "There, my love," and her warmth flooded through him like a new sun, like a new life.

And simply, like children, they took each other.

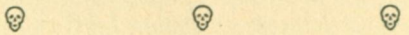
Straker did not wake again.

The woman awoke soon after a grey straggling dawn had lifted the darkness from the houseboat. She looked down at Straker lying beside her, curled up into a deep, peaceful sleep. He lay there utterly exposed; in the wrinkles and lines of his face, all the sorrows and despairs, all the cheatings of his life-time; and yet over them, now, the innocence of the child. Looking at him, knowing that he was caught up in a moment of happiness, the woman knew a deep thankfulness, that she had helped to create that happiness.

The woman looked at Straker for a long time. Her brain now was ice-clear; her movements became methodical and inevitable. She got out of bed and went over to the door, where she had left her clothes. She took out the small silver revolver from its waterproof case and clicked it ready for firing.

Then going back to the bed she took very careful aim and shot Straker twice through the head. He died instantaneously, the faint smile lingering at his mouth.

The woman walked out on the deck. The opposite bank was desolate. She sat down to await the return of her comrades. Around her the morning sun was painstakingly dissolving the grey river mist. Soon the pattern of scenery, the process of life, would resume their familiarity. But for a while the woman leaned over the side of the houseboat, and her slow tears mingled with the river's ocean of tears. She was weeping for herself and her lover, and for Straker and his lover, and for all the lost loves of this life and world; and only time flowing onwards like the river would bring the healing.



He is not here; but far away
The noise of life begins again,
And ghastly thro' the drizzling rain
On the bald street breaks the blank day.

ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON (1809–1892).

THE NIGHT NURSE'S TALE

JOSEPHINE WESTREN

I WAS AFRAID OF the woman from the beginning; she had terrible dark eyes which fixed themselves on my face with a relentless intensity that made me want to back away or cover my face with my hands, anything that would release me from that intense stare. She was a heavily built woman of about sixty years, with iron-grey hair, but by some laxity on the part of nature her brows and lashes had remained jet black, making a sharp, even dramatic, contrast to the grey hair and the starched, unrelieved white of her matron's uniform. I had been engaged at short notice to take over her duties from her, it being half-term; as soon as I'd learned the school routine, then, it seemed, she would be leaving, going immediately into retirement. This appeared an unusual arrangement to me. I should have liked to ask her about it, but she was almost completely deaf, and talking to her was an exhausting business for both of us, so that I avoided conversation with her whenever possible. She was, too, the head-master's sister, and I felt it wiser to keep my own counsel, knowing only too well that relationships in a place so small could be dangerous to an outsider.

Even during my first day at the school this silent woman, with her piercing eyes and grim, unsmiling face, filled me with dread as she padded after me on rubber soles into linen-room or dormitory; never leaving me for long, yet saying little when she had hunted me down. It was, then, with a feeling of relief that I was put on night-duty, to "special" a boy named David who had been taken rapidly and desperately ill with a virus infection which, on that first evening of his illness, had not yet been diagnosed. Too ill to be moved, he had to be nursed in the school's small isolation ward at the top of the gloomy old house, and I was detailed to sit with him all night. I wondered why matron hadn't given herself the task; but supposed that she was afraid of falling asleep, and thought that I, being much younger, would stand up to the long night better than herself. I know differently now, and I know, too, that I wasn't alone in that sick-room, that someone else was there, sharing the silent hours of night with me in that white-walled room, someone whose form cast no shadow in that place of shadows.

Full of pity, yet feeling all but helpless in the face of my patient's mounting fever, I did what I could for him, then I settled down to watch and wait through the long night ahead, wishing as I did so that his parents, who were abroad, could have shared the vigil with me. There was too little light to sew or read, the room was lit only by a shrouded lamp near the bed and a fitful glow from a fire in the small grate. Having no other occupation, I sat there, thinking of the desperate,

almost haunted look in the matron's eyes, and her restless, tense manner as she gave me her last instructions for the night. I felt that something unspeakable had happened to her at some time, as though she carried some fearful secret locked up in her tormented mind. She seemed a strange person to be in such a post, but I supposed that having the head-master as a brother made all the difference.

As I let my mind wander on, I realized the weight of the silence which bore in on me. Outside the wind soughed mournfully in the darkness; occasionally a floor-board creaked as though someone was at the door or my starched apron rustled stiffly as I eased my cramped position; sometimes the boy would mutter through cracked lips or fling out an arm wildly. Yet these sounds hardly seemed to break the silence before it had closed in more stiflingly than ever. There was something about that silence that I shall never forget; it had a thickness, as though the room was full of people standing there yet invisible, and there was a weird, muting quality about it that I had never experienced before. I felt that if I'd had a dog beside me its hackles would have been up, it was that kind of silence.

Hour after hour passed, while I became steadily more cold in spite of the fire, more alert, keyed-up, watching for David's slightest need, my eyes on his flushed, waxy-lidded face, my finger-tips rarely leaving his wrist where the pulse raced so much too rapidly under the clammy skin. Longing for morning, for the interminable night to end, I allowed my gaze to wander for a moment round the room, when I suddenly felt compelled to raise my eyes to the blank white wall above his bed. At once I knew what had inexorably drawn my eyes to that place, as, paralysed yet fascinated, I saw something up there that made the blood drain from my face, leaving it stiff and cold. High over the bed a spiral of smokelike vapour was silently writhing and curling; then it began slowly, very slowly, to descend towards David, and as it descended I was able to discern it forming itself gradually, almost imperceptibly, into a childish hand and forearm. Hardly breathing, I watched the phantom fingers stretch out very gradually, as if with difficulty, towards the boy on the bed, and remain outstretched, reaching down to him as though beseeching to be held, to be taken by him; then, so slowly as for the movement to be almost undetectable, it began withdrawing again, silently upwards, losing its shape, dissolving once more into spiralling vapour till the last wavering trace was gone.

Throughout the visitation I had lost all power of movement; it was as if invisible hands had held me down. I had watched speechlessly in utter astonishment, but, amazingly, had felt no fear. It had all been so peaceful, so silent, like something experienced in a drugged sleep, so that I had become as though hypnotized. Yet instantly it was ended I leapt up, terrified, released into normal feeling, shivering with apprehension for David, certain that its only meaning could be that he was dying. Hastily, trembling violently, I fumbled for his pulse once

more, watched his face as my fingertips received their message—his pulse had slowed! I listened, holding my own breath, to his even breathing as he slept, noting the gentle rise and fall of the sheet which covered him, took his temperature—it had dropped several degrees, was almost normal, and then I knew—he was going to recover! Excited and still terrified by the weird thing I had seen, I stood there, uncertain what to do next. It seemed impossible that I should sit down calmly again, wait for the night to spend itself as though nothing had happened. Restlessly I crossed to the window, pulling the heavy curtain apart. Outside, far in the distance, pale, clear streaks of light lay across the night sky, and I knew that dawn would soon break.

Suddenly, with my back to the room, I heard a stealthy sound behind me, the creak of a hinge as the door opened slowly. Framed in the doorway, in a thick, shapeless dressing-gown which made her look like some humped, unnatural creature in the half-light, stood the old matron, her face a grey mask. She started to speak, "I couldn't sleep, so I came to——" Then she broke off, her black-lashed eyes under the shaggy brows boring into my face. Her voice became hoarse, almost a whisper, as she said, "You've seen it, haven't you? You have, I know it, you're so pale!"

I saw her eyes travel to my lips, waiting for my words as I answered. "Yes, I saw something—the ghost of a child's hand, and it saved David, I'm sure it did. But who is it? Do you know, and why does it appear?"

Questions poured from me, but she stopped me by saying, "Wait, I'll tell you in good time, I must tell someone, I can't bear it any longer, keeping it to myself." Anxiously she moved over to the bed. "How is he now; better did you say?"

I nodded, but she wasn't satisfied with my report, and checked everything for herself before she beckoned me to leave the room with her.

Outside, in the dimly lit passage, she put her hand on my arm, curling her fingers tensely round it as I asked her again, "Please tell me, who was it I saw? Did anyone die in that room, I must know?" Her eyes were terrible then, her voice like someone crying out in grief and desolation. "Yes, someone did die there—David's friend, a month ago. A ghastly mistake was made, he was given an overdose, though everyone thought it was his illness that he died of, but it wasn't. . . . I know that because—I killed him!" Her voice seemed to choke in her throat as she went on, "And now he comes back, I've seen him—he reaches out his little hand for comfort, as he did then, and it'll drive me mad unless I get away from here!"

Horrified yet pitying, I stared at her for a moment, at her grey hair hanging in straggling wisps about her grim, tortured face, and at those piercing eyes. Then suddenly, without warning, she broke away from me, flinging herself madly at the window beside me. As my arms pinioned her I felt the insane strength, the writhing muscles of mania that struggled beneath my grip, and then I began to call wildly, frantically, for help. . . .

THE CABIN BY THE BRIDGE

MIRIAM ALLEN DE FORD

Illustrated by Leslie Domeny

I BEGAN PRACTICE IN a little town in the Mother Lode country of northern California. The place was not exactly a ghost town, but it had once been far more populous and it was entirely a child of the gold rush. The mines were long since worked out, but here and there in the hills, like puddles left from a retreating inland sea, were isolated groups or individuals who panned our river and its creeks for placer gold, and managed to subsist somehow between that and the little clearings they had made in fairly level plots, where they planted small orchards or kept chickens.

You may wonder why I, city-born and bred, should have chosen such a place in which to begin my career. The reason was the end-product of eight hard, bitter years as a poverty-stricken medical student. In the same month, I received my diploma and a positive tuberculous report. The high air of the mountains was what I needed, and after five years or so of it, I came back to the city thoroughly healed. The old man who had been the town's only physician had died recently, and I was able to take over not only his practice but also his home. It was a two-story house on the outskirts of the town, with office and waiting-room downstairs and my living quarters above, and his housekeeper came every day to cook and clean for me.

It was a busy, useful and not unpleasant life. There was little in the way of entertainment, but then I had not much leisure. I met a few agreeable people, with one of whom I could play chess occasionally; and for the rest, when my evening office-hours were over, if I had no further calls to make, I could always read till bedtime.

That is what I was doing late one May evening, about nine months after I had first put up my plate. I was so absorbed in an article in a medical journal that at first I did not hear the knock. It was repeated, and I flung aside the magazine and went to the door.

It was a bright moonlight night—full moon, and one of the brightest I have ever seen. Every bush and plant in the little garden cast a sharp shadow. A rose vine covered the front of the porch, and in its shade the surroundings were very black. At first I could see no one; then my eyes dropped, and I discovered a child, a little girl of eleven or twelve wrapped in some kind of dark shawl from which her white face peered anxiously up at me.

I did not recognize her, and with a sigh I realized what that meant. The people in the hills seldom sent for me except in an emergency; they were a

tough breed, and if they needed a doctor they managed in most cases to hobble down the trail to town. There was no way to reach most of these lonely little holdings except on foot; no horse and no bicycle could manage the steep, rough trails.

The child stared at me with strange deep eyes, and asked in a faint high voice, "Where's the doctor?"

Apparently no one in her family had been to town for almost a year, since my predecessor had died.

"Dr. Warren is dead and I have taken his place," I told her.

"My mother's awful sick," she said in that high, piping voice. "Won't you please come right away?"

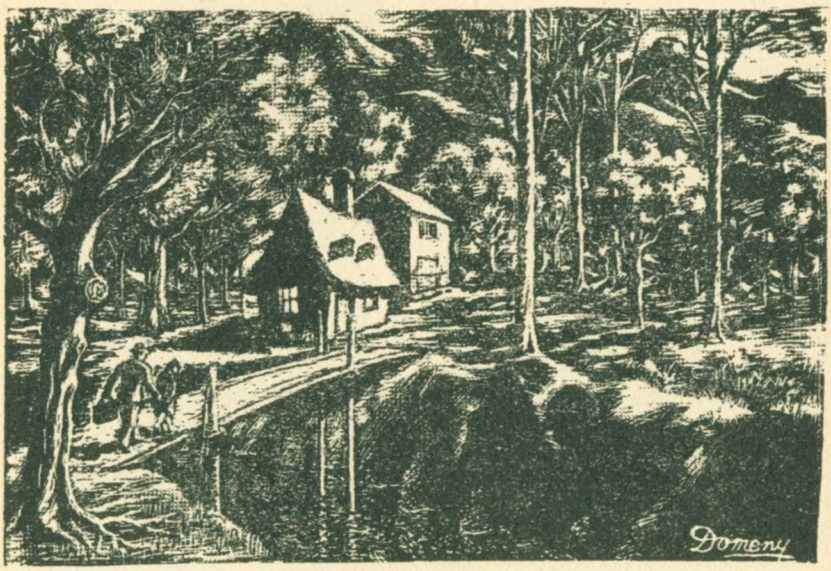
"What is your name?"

"Catherine Evans. It's the house by the bridge."

That meant nothing to me, though I knew vaguely that somewhere a rough bridge crossed the river.

"We can get there in half an hour," she pleaded. "I came down the trail in less than that."

I sighed again, but there was no help for it. It was nearly ten o'clock; this meant an all-night session.



"What's wrong with your mother?"

"I don't know, but she's in terrible pain. She keeps crying, and she never cries. She's been sick all day. And her face is all red."

I was tempted to ask why, if the woman had been ill all day, they had waited till night to summon me. But

I knew the answer; only in extremities would these people come for a doctor. As if she read my mind, the child added, "We haven't any money now, but later on——"

"Never mind about that," I said brusquely. "Wait here."

I hardly knew what to pack in my bag except that this was not an accident case and should have no broken bones to set. Fever and pain might mean anything. I got together what I hoped would meet any emergency, and shut the door behind me. Catherine Evans had left the house and was waiting for me at the gate. In the wash of moonlight even her dark little figure seemed silvery and translucent.

Without a word she trudged at my side until we left the wooden paving of the last street and began to climb. Then she went before me to point out the increasingly narrow trail.

I had never seen such a night. The bushes of wild lilac were like silver mist, the sage and live-oak like stencils cut in silver. The child walked surely, her sturdy little legs climbing steadily upward. Often she had to push away overhanging twigs and branches from my path. I tried to talk to her, but my questions found few answers. She was taciturn, and it was still difficult for me to do much rough climbing; I found myself panting a few steps in her rear.

"Is your father there with your mother?" I asked her.

"My father is dead."

"But you have brothers and sisters?"

"No; I am the only child."

So the sick woman was all alone in a cabin somewhere up by the river. She might be dead by the time we got there. I tried to quicken my pace.

"Has Dr. Warren treated your mother before?"

"Yes, when I was born."

"Did she give you any message, except to say she was sick?"

No answer. I could hear the river now; we must be near the place.

"Here is the bridge," said Catherine at last.

It was dignified by the name. It was little more than some planks fastened to uprights over the river—not the torrent of winter, but still deep and rapid enough. The child stepped on it sure-footedly, but even she, I noticed, cast a side glance of dread over the frail structure. There had once been a rope stretched at one side to hold by, but it had been broken and the frayed ends sagged at either end of a huge gap. I am always slightly dizzy on high places, and involuntarily I reached for the girl's hand. But she evaded mine and flitted in front of me again. Shamefacedly I followed after her as best I could.

On the other side I could see the cabin before me, a faint light in its window. Around it was a small cleared space, where the mother and child somehow scratched their living from the ground; though what they raised, except vegetables for themselves, I could not imagine. A bigger building showed behind the cabin—some sort of barn, I imagined.

"There's the door. Go right in," said the child. She darted across the yard and vanished into the shadows of the barn. I realized suddenly how

frightened and anxious the poor little creature must be, so that she was afraid even to look at her mother again until I had seen her first.

I opened the door and by the paraffin lamp that flickered on a shelf I saw the house at a glance—one room, with little furniture in it, and an alcove-kitchen. On a cot against the farther wall lay a woman. She was moaning softly, and as I laid down my bag and stepped over to her, she opened eyes that were dazed with pain and only half-conscious.

It needed no thermometer to tell me at once that she was in a high fever, and the hands clutching at her belly told me the rest. I examined her quickly; the rigid abdomen and the whimper of pain at my probing finger were clear enough indication. It was a good thing the child had come for me at last; a few more hours and the appendix would have ruptured, and peritonitis and probable death would have followed.

It was bad enough as it was. The appendix must come out at once—and how was I to perform a major operation in such surroundings, with sketchy equipment, and with no help unless I could commandeer a child as assistant? I looked about for Catherine, but she had not come in—still crouching in the barn, probably, waiting and fearing. Well, I had no time to go and look for her; I had my hands full here.

"It's going to be all right, Mrs. Evans," I said soothingly. "Everything will be all right now."

Her eyes followed me, but I doubt if she more than half-understood my words.

I set my instruments to boil in a pot of water on the oil-stove in the alcove, and looked about me for an operating table. The one bare table in the cabin would have to do. A pile of old newspapers from the town stood on the floor, and I used them to pad the table. A chest against the wall yielded a quilt and two clean cotton sheets which I laid above the papers. The place, thank heaven, bare as it was, was clean.

I moved the table under the shelf on which the lamp stood, to get the best light possible. The only anæsthetic I had with me was chloroform, and it seemed I was going to have to be my own anæsthetist as well as nurse and surgeon. Catherine had not reappeared. I went to the window to look for her, and caught just a glimpse of her little figure skirting the barn and darting into the woods behind. That was really too bad; upset as she might be, she should have known that her mother and I would need her now. Then I remembered that she was only a little girl who had already run down the trail to me and climbed up it again that night, and that it was too much to expect more of her. I would have to handle this as best I could myself.

With years behind me since that night on the mountain, I know now that at moments of necessity some inner force rises from within us which enables us to do the impossible. This was my first experience of it. Single-handed I lifted the woman on to the improvised operating-table, prepared

and anæsthetized her, opened up the abdominal cavity, and excised a gangrenous appendix, all by the light of a dim paraffin lamp hardly brighter than the moonlight coming through the windows—and with half the necessary equipment lacking. By the time the moon was down and the child to carry. As I laid Mrs. Evans on the cot again and straightened up to wait for the anæsthetic to wear off, I caught a glimpse of a little figure watching through the window; but when I went to look it was gone.

I suppose that to live at all under such conditions as this woman faced

lamp had begun to give out, the wound was stitched and my patient was ready to be lifted back on to her bed. Twice I had had to hold, first a knife, then a clamp, in one hand, while with the other I poured more drops of chloroform on the lint over her mouth and nose. The daughter still absented herself. It was just as well by this time, for if it could be avoided this was no memory for a daily, one must be fundamentally robust and strong. At all events, my patient was in better shape than many on whom I had witnessed operations performed under the very best of hospital surroundings. The whole time since I had entered the cabin, I saw with surprise when I looked at my watch, had been scarcely an hour and a half.

Mrs. Evans came to sufficiently to

turn her head and move her pale lips questioningly. "It's all over now," I told her. "I am going to put you to sleep and then you will need only a week or two of rest and care to be quite well again." I gave her a sedative, and when the injection had worked I took the quilt which had padded the table, wrapped myself in it and lay down on the floor at her side. In the morning the child would come back—doubtless she had fallen asleep in the barn, worn out by worry and exertion—and I would tell her how to nurse her mother until I could come again. I was utterly exhausted; hardly had I lain down than I was drowned in deep slumber.

I awoke suddenly to broad daylight. My first thought was of Mrs. Evans. We were still alone in the cabin. She was most assuredly a woman of indomitable strength. There was colour in her face and her pulse and temperature were normal. It was plain that the half-delirium of pain and fever had passed; her eyes were clear, and she spoke quite rationally, though her voice was weak.

"I've been awful sick," she said. "I don't rightly remember what happened. I don't think I know you, do I?"

I busied myself in the things that had to be done for her. As I searched the shelves in the alcove for some kind of liquid food for her, I told her my name and explained that I was old Dr. Warren's successor.

"There's coffee up in that can," she instructed me, "and bacon and flour if you want to make yourself some

breakfast. Land, I'm ashamed to have you look after yourself like this, but I feel plumb worn out."

I caught her trying to raise herself on one elbow, and rushed back to her.

"Don't you dare to move," I said sternly. "Good heavens, woman, do you realize I performed a major operation on you last night? You came as near to a ruptured appendix as any doctor would like you to come. You're to lie right where you are until I say you can even sit up. And you're not to eat anything solid for days yet. I'll get some soup and stuff up to you later on today. I don't recommend coffee, but I guess that's what you're going to have till I can find something better."

"There's some fresh eggs from the hens," she said meekly. "You might poach one of them for me—that would be kind of liquid. I feel right hungry.

"Lord," she added after a pause, "I can't do like you said, doctor. I've *got* to get up—there's nobody but me to tend to everything."

"What's the matter with——" I began. I stopped abruptly at the strange expression in her eyes. She looked suddenly frightened and awed.

"Doc," she whispered, "how come you knew I was sick? How'd you get to come here last night at all?"

She wasn't as rational, after all, as I had thought, I decided. I smiled.

"You'll remember soon, when you're feeling better," I said. "Your daughter came for me—Catherine."

All the new colour seeped away from her face, leaving it like tallow. I could hardly hear the words that came from her stiff lips.

"Doc," she breathed, "don't you know who I am? I'm *Mrs. Evans.* Don't you know about us—last December? It was all over the front page in the paper, down in town."

And then I felt my own face grow white. For I did remember.

Just before Christmas a quiet, patient man named Thomas Evans, driven to the breaking-point by years of toil and failure, had all at once gone berserk. He had thrown down the pan in which he had been hopelessly washing for gold, had dashed up to his cabin and had snatched up a carving-knife and attacked his startled wife. She had rushed, shrieking, into the woods and escaped. Evans had followed her for a few paces, then had run back into the house, caught up his twelve-year-old daughter, who had stood there paralysed with terror, and, holding the struggling child to him, had run with her to the bridge, where with the little girl still in his arms he had broken through the guide-rope and gone over into the swollen, icy, rock-bedded river below. The bodies had never been recovered.

The girl's name, I remembered now, was Catherine.

THE BABE

EDMUND H. BURKE

IT WAS beginning to rain when the woman peered in through the doors of the store. Seeing room in the ranks of baby carriages lined up at the front, she carefully manœuvred her own carriage in through the double doors. Within seconds she had steered it into a vacant place among the row of carriage-bound children.

She rolled back the hood of the carriage, revealing the sleeping child as she did so. Absent-mindedly one hand removed her rain hat, ran negligent fingers through the thick hair. A trickle of water from the hand splattered down on the taut blue webbing that stretched from side to side across the carriage, like the spray shield on a kayak. She watched the water land and rebound, the drops breaking as they bounced, and one corner of her mind saw the dirt and food her son had dropped. One corner of her mind saw and said, "I must wash that off tonight. What a messy child he is, really."

Another corner of her mind said, "I do hope he sleeps 'til I get back. He's been in such a bad temper all day. If he wakes up and screams. . . . But I must match this wool or I'll never finish that little sweater for him. . . ." And the thought drifted off as she walked into the vast whirlpool of the store, where women jostled and matched wool and buttons and imitation pearls. Where women bought soap and tooth-paste, bulbs for the garden, poorly cut popular records, cheap candy, cheaper perfume, and where men stood like unhappily isolated rocks in the swirl of pushing, roaring, seething petty sales.

Outside the rain sheeted down, while people hid in doorways or under poorly folded, inadequate sheets of newspaper. Three little girls pushed open the doors of the store, and stood like miniature Furies, surveying the scene. Water plastered their hair to their heads and their clothes to their bodies. Water ran in tiny streams off the crowns of their heads, down the necks, to disappear inside long-sleeved sweaters; water ran down past knobbed knees, over stick-straight legs, and into the shoes run over at the heels.

Two of the three moved into the store, their heads barely clearing the tops of the counters so that they were lost almost before they had entered the crowd. The third stood irresolute for seconds, then plunged a hand into her skirt pocket, to withdraw clutching a half-eaten lollipop of the all-day variety. Then she began to dance up and down along the row of baby carriages.

Her mind darted about along quick, erratic paths of thought. "I wish it'd stop rainin'. How many babies are there here? Where did They go? If we don't get home soon, Mom'll tan us all. I wish it'd stop rainin'. This sucker sure tastes good. I wish I had

one every day. These babies, so many of 'em! One, two, three, hop."

In the carriages the babies regarded her solemnly, their pseudo-thoughts captured by the jerk-and-dart of her movement. All except the centre carriage. There the boy slept on, completely unaware of the drone of sound coming from the store.

The woman came back up from the murk of the trading, saying to herself, "I hope he's still asleep. That girl told me to try another counter, but I'm sure she's wrong. Ah, thank God. . . ."

Carriage line was like an island of quiet at the end of the store; an oasis of silence in the midst of the noise. An island patrolled by a small, drenched, candy-smeared sentry, who returned the woman's look with a pop-eyed stare. An island rosily lit by the neon glow of the big scales, which gave bad weight for a penny.

The woman went up to her carriage and looked down to make sure. The boy slept quietly, half over on his face, a damp spot spreading from under the corner of his mouth along the pillow. One hand stretched out over his head, fingers tight together. Her mind said, "Such little hands—and yet so strong. . . ."

Instinctively her right hand went to the other wrist, and found the spot where, hours before, her son had grasped her. It was still red. "Tomorrow I'll be black and blue." Then she was gone, back into the mass of shoppers.

The little girl tired of jumping about and began to swing on the shiny chrome-plate of the carriage handles.

"This is more fun," she thought. "Now, I'm a trapeze lady, up, up, way up in the air." When she came to the centre carriage her whim changed, and she became an acrobat, chinning herself on the handle.

The motion woke the sleeping boy. Slowly he turned over on his back, and for minutes lay motionless, looking up. Then, even more slowly, he raised himself up so that he was sitting, peering out, like the children around him. He was bigger than the others, and looking out, his face was smooth and round and devoid of expression. His eyes slanted up in the fair white skin, giving him a faintly Oriental look, and the corners of his mouth hinted at petulance. The fine silk of his hair clung to his skull, held there by the fast-drying sleep-sweat. His hands clutched the sides of the carriage, while the head turned quietly from side to side. The movement of his body forced wind up from his stomach, and he belched loudly, the taste and smell of sour milk strong in his mouth. The corners of his mouth drew out, parallel with lines which came from alongside his eyes.

Two women passing stopped to look at the row of children.

One said, "Aren't they lovely. So sweet."

"Just look at them, all in a row. Don't you just wish . . . ? Oh! See! See, that one in the middle! That's that Lingwall child, the one I was telling you about."

The first one said, "Oh! Is that the one? It's such a shame, too. My husband says they should do something about them at birth."

"He's so strong, too. But my neighbour says there's nothing——"

"I heard he's terribly strong. But can't they——?"

"No. Nothing. Except special schools, when he's older."

Their voices drifted away with them, and the boy didn't cry, after all. Instead, he looked around the carriage, seeking for something.

He wanted his ball. He remembered just a little while ago—his mother had the ball and he wanted it. His little hand had reached out for the ball, and instead, he'd gripped her—and she'd dropped it, right into his lap, suddenly and jumped away. Now he wanted the ball again. As he searched around him, carefully and slowly, intent on the silent quest, he didn't notice the girl.

Abandoning her short career as an acrobat, she was now standing by the side of his carriage, silent, solemn and still, with slightly pop-eyes. The two regarded each other calmly and with no emotion. Then the girl, sticking the lollipop in her mouth, reached to the top of the carriage, and extracted a woollen doll from where it had been wedged by the mattress. She handed the toy to the child.

His grasp was quick on the doll, but his eyes never left the girl. Her finger traced the line of black reindeer that followed themselves in rows around the blue background of his sweater. She took the sucker from her mouth and offered it to the boy, but he was busy swinging the doll from side to side.

There was a wild frenetic rhythm to his swinging, his body turning from side to side as the doll struck the carriage. His breath came in almost-sobs, which were punctuated with grunts at the end of each swing. Eassssssssssssgggggghhhhhht. Each time the circuit was a little faster, the sound a little louder.

But if the boy was fascinated with the swinging and the primitive self-sounds, he was no more so than the girl—who watched in complete rapture, her head turning with the same imbecilic regularity which characterizes tennis spectators. Her eyes were glued to the doll, which crumpled each time it struck the metal frame of the carriage. It had originally been a gay toy soldier, but now the colours were dimmed with time, with dried spittle, with dirt, with wear. Each time the soldier struck the frame the impact threatened to tear the head from its last remaining strand of wool. The little girl's eyes were bright with eager anticipation, her whole body tuned to the movement, her breath matching the sobbing, punctuated sounds which bubbled out of the boy.

Now the carriage itself began to take on the swing—the boy's body, moving faster and faster, had imparted the rhythm to the whole scene. Suddenly his hand collided with the frame, the grasp loosened, and the doll flew, landing in the next carriage.

Across the open space it went and in, stopping just beyond the head of the baby sleeping there. Stunned, the boy looked over at the out-of-reach toy. Slowly he realized his loss, and the tell-tale lines formed again about eyes and mouth. But the little girl leaned over and pushed. Pushed hard

enough so that the carriage rose on one side and the boy could almost reach the doll.

Dully, suspiciously, he watched the toy come closer and closer. Slowly he turned on his side, stretching farther and farther until his fingers almost clutched the dangling soldier's head. Past the sleeping head the hand groped—almost but not quite; and now the fingers seemed frantic as they wormed across for the last half-inch. They took on a life of their own, and were detached from the boy, twisting, stretching, writhing, straining, urging to bridge the gap.

As though exhausted, the boy sank back a little on his side, and the hand moved back, to rest on the neck of the sleeping child. Rested, while the fingers explored, felt the soft, smooth baby flesh underneath, felt the steady beat of the pulse—like the beat in his mother's arm.

In the unformed, unformable mind a memory stirred—of mother and the ball. A cause-and-effect relationship. That same hand had brought him the ball by squeezing; only now it was a doll he wanted. Like this he'd gripped, gripped harder and harder on his mother's wrist. His mother's wrist had been stronger and harder than this smooth softness, which gave beneath the groping fingers—and, suddenly, his mother had dropped the ball.

Only the boy in the carriage and the little girl with the lollipop heard the smothered sounds or saw the tiny arms writhe and fall, in the red-lit oasis of silence where the children lay.

Come little babe, come silly soul,
Thy father's shame, thy mother's grief,
Born as I doubt to all our dole,
And to thy self unhappy chief:
  Sing lullaby and lay it warm,
  Poor soul that thinks no creature harm.

NICHOLAS BRETON (1545–1626).

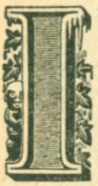
. . . . . .

Cruel children, crying babies,
All grow up as geese and gabies,
Hated, as their age increases,
By their nephews and their nieces.

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON (1850–1894).

ROPE

R. H. WHITTAM



N THE MISTY FIRST light of the morning the prison wall rose, a vast tombstone of the buried men inside. Opposite the cavernous arch of the gateway a motor-car stood with its carrier laden with the paraphernalia of a jungle tour. The solitary human figure squatting by the roadside was Hamid, Graves's servant.

Despite the thick nose and heavy lips, the young Malay's face was sensitive, and his eyes held a haunted sadness. He was struggling with a grave problem: what was the reason for his master's silent brooding and heavy drinking all the past week? Surely it must be a very grievous trouble. Hamid had found Graves a generous employer, but it was the personal quality of the Englishman's infrequent smile which had won the Malay's devotion.

Again Hamid asked himself—this evil thing which oppressed the *Tuan*, whence did it threaten? From the north where the Governor had his palace? The great city on the south coast? Could it be connected with that letter—the one with the English stamp? He had seen the *Tuan*, many times, go and stare silently at it as it lay on the table. And why had the *Tuan* taken to sleeping in the visitors' room instead of the bedroom he and the mistress had occupied before she went home? If only he knew what it all meant, perhaps he could help in some way. Of course the *Tuan* could never unbend with a mere servant, but to speak even a little word would surely relieve him. Hamid's eyes climbed the towering wall beyond which Graves was performing the most unpleasant of his duties as a District Officer. He shivered. He knew that the *Tuan* had sometimes to witness such events, but a dark presentiment warned that now it was unwise since his mind was so distressed.

Inside the prison the night's last shadows lingered about a square, unroofed enclosure. In the centre stood a high timber platform which supported an empty rectangular frame. A small group of men waited before it quietly.

Graves had drawn apart from the others. His tall figure drooped, but his hands moved restlessly from the pockets of his shorts and back again.

Suddenly he swung round. "Why the delay?" he barked. "They should have been out by now!"

The Malayan Chief Jailer stepped forward and clicked his heels. "It's only two minutes to six, sir," he said respectfully.

The next moment tramping feet sounded from outside the yard, and with a clatter the steel grille set in a side wall opened. A squad of Sikh warders, stalwart and bearded, marched in and saluted smartly; but their symmetry was marred by the lonely figure they surrounded.

The Malay was young, slightly built and dressed in white. He stood with meek resignation, his arms crossed upon his breast. Slowly his chin rose, and he gazed at Graves as from across a great gulf. Piteously he stretched out his arms, palms pressed together, and made obeisance three times.

The Englishman's set face softened momentarily, but he only shook his head in dissent.

As though at a signal, the waiting group broke into brisk activity. The platform creaked underfoot as they man-handled the small, white-clad figure, so child-like in its submission. Then the boards were clear again, but now the stark frame silhouetted a terrible picture.

Time ebbed silently. Death waited, but still no word came from Graves.

"It must be now, sir," the jailer murmured, looking curiously at his superior.

A spasm shook Graves. He jerked together and muttered the fateful order.

With a crash the gallows discharged its ghastly load. The harsh sound filled the yard—it seemed to beat frantically against the barren walls. Then it found the open sky and escaped.

Graves's eyes flickered, up—down—up again, as though fleeing after the echoes, but the scaffold dragged them back. The men were working more leisurely now. At a corner of the platform the jailer was busy with a sheaf of yellow forms. He turned round expectantly.

"Not there!" Graves said hoarsely. "Bring them to me!"

The man was evidently surprised, but obeyed.

Seizing the papers, Graves scrawled his signature. Then he broke away for the exit.

Hamid saw his master's harrowed face, and his heart sank. But there was something he had to know, and it was best to ask now. As the car lurched forward, he said softly, "Master, did the murderer weep before he died, or was he courageous?"

Graves made no response.

Hamid stifled his longing. He felt he had been right not to tell the *Tuan* that the criminal was his brother. Not that it would have caused any change in the *Tuan's* attitude towards him; he was sure of that. He comforted himself with the thought that he had done his duty in arranging for the body to be claimed. His other duty lay in remaining with the *Tuan* while his mind was so dark with trouble.

The car droned steadily on. Mile after mile the road rushed towards Hamid and the frozen figure which gripped the wheel as though it were part of the machine. The dense, overhanging jungle thinned and fell back, leaving green paddy-fields on either hand. Ahead, the embanked road bisected the country, taut and white.

Graves said suddenly, "Look, Hamid! The road is just like a rope!"

Shuddering, Hamid turned away from those staring eyes. Once again the presentiment of evil smote him. He must say something striking to di-

vert the *Tuan's* thoughts. Desperately he searched his mind, and smiled. "Master!" he cried, "my mother's house is in the next village!"

Graves swung the car round a bend, and they saw the cluster of houses a short distance away. As they drew closer, Hamid caught the demeanour of the crowd before the well-known hut. His smile vanished. "We meet trouble, *Tuan*!" he whispered.

Graves pulled up and dismounted heavily, and Hamid followed, a terrible fear pinning his eyes upon the door of the hut. The people saluted the Englishman respectfully, but fell back in silence.

"What's happened here?" the District Officer's voice held some of its customary authority.

"Your Honour," the elderly villager who answered stared past Graves at Hamid, "an old woman is dead inside."

Hamid drew a hissing breath, but stood motionless. The *Tuan's* work must come first, he warned himself, but his eyes shouted a thousand questions at the old villager.

Graves mounted into the low verandah, pushed the door in and entered the hut. The sudden darkness was blinding. Then he saw the narrow stairs which rose before him, and —half-way up—the woman hanging by her neck, her small feet close together, and a wisp of grey hair lying across her cheek.

As though struck in the face, Graves recoiled against the door. Then he blundered out into the sunlight and fled to the car.

The man in conversation with Hamid said quietly, "It was about six o'clock. She cried out loudly several times. The neighbours say it was your brother's name. When we arrived, she was dead. I have sent to call the police to come and cut the rope."

"The rope!" Hamid gasped. "Why didn't you warn the *Tuan* that she was—still—hanging?" He glanced at the car in which Graves sat, his head inclined at a curiously stiff angle, and knew he dared not delay. Quickly he went into the hut, and stood there with his own burden of sorrow.

"Mother! Mother!" he whispered. "You always loved him more than a mother usually loves a son!" Reaching up, he touched the cold face and hands in farewell.

Outside again, he produced a few currency notes and gave them to the old villager. "This will pay for the funeral expenses," he said. "My master's mind is badly hurt, and I must go with him. I shall return as soon as I am free."

In the car he was relieved to find the driving-seat empty. Slipping in beside Graves, he asked, "Does the *Tuan* wish to return home?"

Graves, however, could have been made of stone.

Hamid pondered earnestly over the problem. Then he started the car and drove on. When at last they came to open gates, he turned between them and drew up at a Government rest-house. The *Tuan*, he knew, was expected at his destination some twenty miles away, but immediate rest was imperative, and this quiet place was very suitable.

"Tuan," he pleaded, "it would be

best to rest here for a while, and perhaps you'd care to eat some food later." He did not await approval, but unlashed the luggage and carried it up the stairs of the bungalow.

Graves followed without demur, and threw himself into a long-armed cane chair. Hamid busied himself with his chores, flitting about like a ghost, but watchful for expression on his master's corpse-like face.

The table was ready, cheerful with its spotless array, but Graves said dully, "Bring me the whisky bottle."

Dismay filled Hamid, but his was only to obey. Patiently he waited while the bottle's bright surface increased as its tawny contents dwindled. When it was empty, Graves drew up his feet, turned and pillowed his cheek upon his arm like a child.

In the living-room the encroaching dusk made dark places of the corners. Hamid brought a light blanket and spread it gently over Graves. He lit the paraffin table-lamp, but turned the wick low behind its glass chimney. Then he laid his sleeping-mat near the front door, and settled down with his chin upon his knees.

It was very dark outside and very still in the living-room. Hamid's thoughts went back to his mother and brother. He had never dreamt that the world could be so full of sorrow. But surely the *Tuan's* pain must be far, far greater than his own. Therefore, he must keep his heart from failing and be ready to help if the *Tuan* needed him. For a long hour he watched the face of the man in the chair, contorted with anguish.

Suddenly Graves said distinctly, "Jenny—Jenny!"

Hamid started. That was the mistress's name! What did it mean? Like a great flood, his heart went out to the Englishman, and in that moment of infinite love, knowledge came to him by some mysterious channel beyond the senses. He knew of the cruel loss which ate into the roots of the mind, mercilessly destroying it while it fought for escape into schizophrenia. He knew, too that nothing in his own power could avail.

He bowed his head and slept.

Once again Graves was the boy of ten who had played at hanging himself. He had climbed upon the window-sill with a noose around his neck, and fastened the other end to the top of the frame. His mother's unexpected appearance had spoilt the game.

Graves rose from the chair. Hamid's shadowy figure had no significance for him, but the luggage-rope sprawled with evil invitation. Graves picked it up and climbed into the window behind the chair. He made a slip-knot and adjusted the noose around his throat and tied the free end above him.

Some instinct awoke Hamid. The dim light of the paraffin-lamp revealed an empty chair. Wildly his eyes searched and found the frightful form in the window.

"Master!" he screamed, "don't do it! Please don't do it, Master!"

He screamed again, "Merciful God!" and bounded to his feet, arms wide-spread; but Graves plunged . . checked . . . hung jerking. . . .

THE PARROT SHOP

JAN EAGLES

Illustrated by T. Hodgkison

THE SHOP FASCINATED Martin. It seemed to cower at the end of the cul-de-sac as though it were playing hide - and - seek. Every time he slipped round the corner, leaving the brilliance of the promenade for the shadow of the tiny cobbled street, he expected, in his own words, "to find it gone." But so far it had always been there, its small bottle-glass window half covered by the hanging cages and the bright plumage of the parrots flashing even in the shade, golden, vermilion and ultramarine.

They were very quiet parrots, and looked tired and dispirited as though they had waited so long to be purchased that they had all but given up hope of escaping from their dingy backwater. Only when Martin crept right up and poked a nervous finger between the bars did one bird arouse himself sufficiently to mutter, "We're sailing Friday."

Martin was so startled that he dropped his bucket in which he had been carefully carrying a starfish and a piece of unpopped bladderwort. The sudden clatter set the parrots squawking, and out of the black doorway of the shop, like an old crab disturbed from the secret recesses of a rock pool, came a small bent figure leaning on a stick.

Martin felt as though his rubber soles were glued to the cobbles. He stared at the apparition, and saw that it was a woman in a grey dress with a black apron tied round her shapeless waist. Her scanty hair was hanging in white rats'-tails to her shoulders. Her face was shrunken and colourless, but was brought to startling life by a pair of hooded eyes so green and shining that Martin thought at once of the rocks under the headland where the deep water sucked with a strange, secret purpose of its own.

She beckoned him with a yellow finger.

"So you like my birds, little boy?" she croaked. "I've something else that would interest you. Come inside and see my shells."

Martin hesitated, but his innate curiosity overcame an unusual reluctance. The old woman disappeared into the shop, chuckling, and the sound, issuing from the darkness within, reminded Martin of the sea washing among the pebbles of invisible caves when you lay on the warm grass of the headland and listened. Only then it was fun, because you were safe. Now it was different.

He paused again in the doorway, and looked back along the little street. Down at the far end he saw his new friend Jim Sand wheeling a freshly varnished row-boat out of his

shed. The sight of the strong bronzed figure of his hero gave him confidence. He caught Jim's eye, waved and disappeared into the shop.

It was some time before he could make out details. He saw the bulk of the old woman behind an overloaded counter and a tiny square of light at the back where a window no bigger than a port-hole looked out to sea. Slowly other objects detached themselves from the darkness: a ship's bell, a cask, coils of rope, nets, lobster-pots, all the fascinating paraphernalia of the sea. And when he looked down at the counter and saw the marvellous collection of shells displayed beneath the glass, he was glad he had come.

There were pink shiny shells large as plates or tiny as a baby's fingernails; there were huge spiky shells like porcupines, and the great curly ones which promised the sounds of the Seven Seas to all who listened; there were flat shells shining like shot-silk with all the colours of the rainbow; there were twisted, warped, evil-looking shells, and exquisitely shaped and tinted ones surely created for the delight of angels.

"My lovely, lovely shells," muttered the old woman. "But they're not for sale, even if you had plenty of money, dearie."

"Why?" asked Martin with interest. It was a question he was rather too fond of asking.

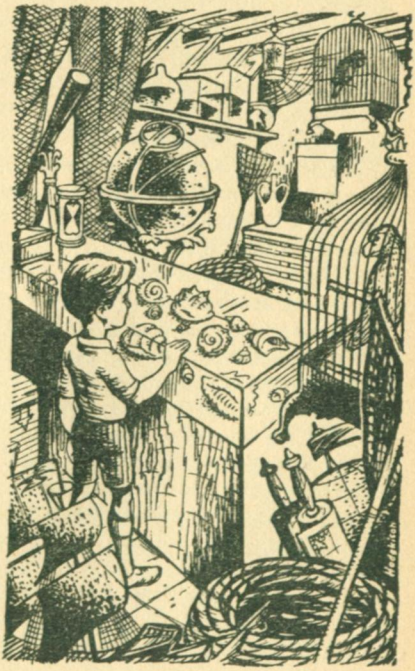
"I wouldn't sell one of them, not even for a thousand pounds."

"Yes, but why?" Martin asked again.

"Little boys shouldn't ask why," she told him gruffly, "or one day they might be told." And she started to chuckle again in that sinister, watery way.

Martin backed to the door, trying hard to understand the import of the strange remark. He was rather glad when he had only to take one more step before he was outside again. He turned to jump on to the cobbles when behind him her cracked voice called, "Come again, dearie, and I'll find you a shell for your own."

It seemed dazzling outside, even in the shady street, and he was surprised and relieved to see that Jim Sand was



still there, leaning on the bow of one of his boats.

"I was wondering when you was coming out o' that there shop, sonny," he said. He gave the bow a heave and started the boat moving on its two-wheeled carrier. Then he lowered his voice. "I shouldn't go in there, if I was you," he told Martin. "Not a nice sort of place, that isn't. You don't want to 'ave nothing to do with that old witch."

Martin, jogging along beside him, had already forgotten his uneasy feeling. So she's a witch, he thought; now, that *is* interesting. All the same, it was nice to cross the busy promenade and feel the sun warm his chilled skin once more.

He left Jim, wearing only rolled-up trousers and looking very brown and muscular, escorting giggling female passengers along the rickety plank to his bobbing row-boats.

The family were still up the rocky corner where he had left them on the pretext of buying ice-cream. His parents, immobilized by the heat, were spread-eagled on the sand. Margo, in her new, nearly grown-up two-piece, was wandering aimlessly through sea-weedy pools. His baby brother tirelessly built sand-castles. There was no one to listen to his adventure; no one who would appreciate its strangeness. Even Jim didn't understand. The old woman might be a witch, and he was not quite sure what that meant, but she had been kind in her way, asking him into her shop and showing him her special shells. And, best of all, she had said that if he went to the shop again she would give him one. Not one from the counter, of course, but it was sure to be better than any he could find on the beach. He tipped his own collection away in disgust, and thought of the family's surprise when he presented them with the exotic, strangely coloured shell which had already grown in his imagination to gigantic proportions.

It was two days before he was able to return to the parrot shop. He took advantage of the family's afternoon siesta in the shade of the cliffs to go for a short walk along the promenade.

"Don't be more than ten minutes, dear," said his mother lazily. "We don't want to have to come looking for you in this heat."

"The tide's just right for a dip now," Margo yelled. "By the time you're back, it'll be out on the rocks."

But nothing mattered to Martin at that moment but getting to the parrot shop. The cul-de-sac looked darker than ever when he reached it, and this time Jim Sand was nowhere in sight. His boat-shed was locked, and on the door was painted in faded letters, "James Sand and Sons. Boats for hire. Established 1896." Those words seemed to Martin to be the last signs of the everyday world as he advanced slowly over the cobbles towards the silent parrots.

He was glad of their company today. Their beady eyes seemed to take notice of him as he passed, and a few of the curved beaks turned towards him. He was surprised to see that the eyes of one bird were blue. Another

with a shock of carrot-coloured feathers squawked, "Don't go in! Don't go in!" He didn't like that, and very hesitantly he crossed the threshold, stopping just inside.

In the dim light he could see the outline of the old woman approaching from behind the counter, and something in the featureless shape frightened him. Only her words prevented him from running back into the street.

"Ah! I thought you'd come back, dearie. Now, just you wait there and I'll fetch the shell I promised you."

This chance was too good to miss. He waited, balanced between the eerie marine world of the shop and the everyday sun-drenched life outside, where Jim dragged boats over the stones and people laughed and splashed in the sea. His curiosity won. He waited impatiently, his wide grey eyes wandering round the extraordinary room, where shadows seemed suddenly to condense into solid objects, and things which had looked real dissolved into an insubstantial greyness. Only the little window at the back looked ordinary. It stayed the same. The hard line of the dark blue horizon stretched across it, and above that the pale sky of a perfect summer day.

Martin felt drawn to the window. He crossed the littered boards carefully, and found that there was a long packing-case under it which he could kneel on and peer out into the sunlight.

The old woman was a long time and his knees began to hurt. He slipped off the case, and for the first time looked directly at it. The light was better here than elsewhere in the shop, and between the slats which had been nailed a little apart he caught a queer moving gleam like the ripple of water. He peered closer. Inside was a glass tank, and inside the tank, which appeared to be filled with water, was a faintly seen greenish body.

Martin began to feel sick, but moved his eye farther up the crack and saw a face with staring eyes half-covered by sinuous strands of dark hair. He thought the face would have been beautiful, in a weird, unearthly way, if it hadn't been for the eyes. Farther still down the tank he saw the glint of scales and the outline of a great fish-tail. A mermaid! Martin's fear gave way to excitement. So there were such things, after all! He had always believed in them despite the teasing remarks of his elder sister Margo. If only he could bring her here. . . .

A scraping sound behind him made him jump round. The old woman was only a few feet away, a look of fury on her face. Her green eyes blazed with icy flames. Really frightened at last, Martin opened his mouth to scream, but no sound came. He watched her horrible eyes coming closer, closer.

"How dare you?" she hissed. "How dare you pry into secrets that don't concern you? But I'll see to it that you never do again—never—never again. . . ."

Martin's shell dropped out of her hand as she grabbed him.

That evening Jim Sand came again up the cul-de-sac, but this time he was not concerned with his boats. Martin had not returned to his family that afternoon, and Jim was helping in the frantic search. His face was both anxious and angry as he strode towards the parrot shop. He knew that the old crone who kept it lived at the back, and he thundered on the closed door.

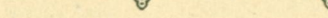
She could not be far away because the parrots were still outside on this mild evening, and they opened hooded eyes in tired surprise to look at the intruder.

When at last the old woman opened the door he pushed past her with a curt explanation. He did not wait for her permission, but, with the aid of a powerful torch, began at once to search the shop and the sordid room behind.

There was no sign that Martin had ever been there. The shell that was to have been his lay cracked and unnoticed on the floor. There was nothing Jim could do here. Reluctantly he made for the door, but paused suddenly on the step.

"I'm going now," he said, staring hard at the old woman, "but I'll be back—and so will the police."

"Yes, but why?" squawked a parrot beside the door, looking inquiringly at him with young, grey eyes.



When the voices of children are heard on the green,
And laughing is heard on the hill.

WILLIAM BLAKE (1757–1827).

MY FRIEND MR. SATAN

J. A. SIMONS

IF JONATHAN WARD'S business had been doing well at the time his son was home from school on holiday, all this might never have happened.

But maybe it was one of those things that was bound to happen. One of those things beyond human control.

The Wards—there were three of them, Jonathan, a tall, lean man who looked older than his forty years, his wife Margaret, and their son William—lived in a modern house in a select suburb.

Every year they spent three weeks' holiday at a small private hotel in Torquay, and for the remaining two weeks of his school holiday William had to fend for himself. There were no children of his own age in the district he could play with, and boredom, which can descend so quickly upon an eight-year-old, forced him to accompany his mother on her shopping expeditions during the day. But he looked forward to the evenings when his father came home. He could always be relied on to join him in some really super games, until mother called them for dinner.

They would play pirates, soldiers and even big-game hunters in the expansive garden. That was the game William liked best.

But this year things were different. Jonathan had even been undecided about going with Margaret and William to Torquay. He did not think he could afford to take the time off from his business. He gave in, however, when Margaret insisted she would not go without him.

They had returned that Saturday evening, and Jonathan went back to his business on the Monday. To make up for lost time, he began bringing some book-work home to complete during the evenings, and for four nights William had played on his own and was becoming more and more morose.

He knew his father was getting home later and bringing work with him. But surely he could spare half an hour to play big-game hunters.

On Thursday evening William heard the key in the lock, and ran up the carpeted hall to greet his father. His young face shone with happiness when he saw that Jonathan had no work with him. "Let's play big-game hunters, Dad," he cried.

Jonathan put a loving hand on his son's head and ruffled his already untidy fair hair. "Not tonight, William," he said apologetically. "I've had a very heavy day and I'm tired."

"Aw, Dad," William said, his spirits, which had risen higher than they had been all the week, fell below zero. "You haven't played with me once since we've been home." The look of disappointment in the child's blue eyes hurt Jonathan, but he was tired.

"I know, William, and I'm sorry," he said. "But you don't need me to

play big-game hunters. Make believe you're Tarzan and go hunting alone."

William turned on his heel, his head sunk on his chest, and made his way through the french-windows of the living-room and down the big garden, kicking at the grass as he went.

Jonathan followed him into the comfortable living-room, greeted his wife and sighed wearily as he sank into the comfort of an easy chair. For a while he sat looking out at his son aimlessly throwing stones at an apple tree at the bottom of the garden. Each time a stone hit it blossoms fell, sparkling like a miniature snow-storm in the mid-June sunshine.

Then he took an evening paper from the occasional table and became engrossed in the news.

It must have been about half an hour later that he glanced up from his paper and caught sight of William. He was talking and gesticulating away to some imaginary friend or adversary. Jonathan was glad that the lad had forgotten his disappointment and was making the best of things. William wandered out of sight round the side of the wooden tool-shed, still talking and nodding, and Jonathan returned to his paper and read until he heard his wife calling William to come in and wash for dinner.

The sound of his son's footsteps running on the concrete garden path brought back the memory of those sad blue eyes when he had told him that he was too tired to play. Maybe he should have spared half an hour for a game with the child.

He had the strangest feeling that he would never play with his son again, but he shrugged it off and joined his wife in the dining-room, where the table was already laid for dinner.

It happened unexpectedly. William, his mouth full of roast beef and potatoes, suddenly asked, "Dad, what does it mean to sell your soul?"

"William," his mother interposed sternly, "how many times must I tell you not to speak with food in your mouth?"

But Jonathan Ward put down his knife and fork with a clatter and looked sharply at his son. "Where did you hear that?" he asked. And an icy hand touched at his heart.

"The old man I was playing with said something about it," William answered, pushing more meat on his fork.

"Old man? What old man?" asked his father.

Margaret sat looking from husband to son, half afraid of what was to come and wondering why she should be afraid of anything at all.

"The old man who played with me at the bottom of our garden," explained William in a tone which implied they should have known what he was talking about.

"William," interrupted his father, "I am not interested in your imaginary playmates. I want to know where you heard the words you just used."

"But he wasn't imaginary, Dad," William put all the emphasis his childish force could muster on the word "wasn't" in an effort to make his father believe him. "He was real. He was a little old man with a wrinkled face and long pointed eyebrows. He said his name was Mr. Satan." He

went on in a rush to stop Jonathan interrupting him again. "He said if I sold him my soul, he would never let anyone hurt me again. And I said I would."

A heavy silence fell on the group at the long refectory table. Jonathan could feel his wife looking at him, but did not meet her gaze. It was as though the little old man with a wrinkled face and long pointed eyebrows had entered the dining-room and was standing laughing silently at them.

Margaret felt as though her throat had constricted and she could hardly breathe, but she was first to break the silence. "I think I'd better clear the plates away," she said, striving vainly to make her voice sound normal, but she made no effort to move.

Jonathan shook off the coldness that had returned. "You had better go up to your room, William," he said sternly. "I will be up in five minutes. If you do not admit then that you have made all this up and tell me where you heard such nonsense, I shall have to give you a caning."

William rose obediently from the table and made his way to the door. He turned the white porcelain handle and, with the door half opened, paused and turned. "You won't be able to cane me, Father." It was the first time he had called Jonathan "Father" and not "Dad." It was like a stranger speaking. "My friend Mr. Satan will take care of me."

Jonathan's self-control snapped. "Go up to your room," he roared.

William left and slowly climbed the stairs.

After he had gone, a sense of normalcy returned to Jonathan and Margaret Ward. "I'll have to teach that lad the difference between phantasy and reality," said Jonathan, placing both his hands palms down on the table so that his wife wouldn't notice they were still shaking with emotion.

"Don't be too hard on him," said his wife, clearing the sweet dishes which had remained unused; "he probably heard it from one of his school friends and doesn't know what it really means."

"Don't worry," said Jonathan. "After he's thought it over for a few minutes, with the threat of a thrashing hanging over him, he'll be only too glad to tell us where he learned such drivel." But his voice didn't carry much conviction. He consulted his wrist-watch, opened a lower drawer of the walnut-veneered sideboard, took out a thin cane and gave it a tentative swish. Then started across the hall, his wife following.

At the foot of the stairs he stopped, put his arm round her waist and smiled reassuringly at her. "We've never had to use the cane," he said. "And I don't think we'll have to start now." Then, a little reluctantly, he ascended the stairs. The haircord carpet deadened his footsteps and gave to Margaret the illusion that he was gliding up like some demi-god out to avenge a wrong. She remained at the bottom looking up at his tall figure, his shoulders slightly bowed, as though some invisible imp was sitting on them pushing them down. She wanted to return to the living-room, but found her body would not obey

the dictates of her mind, and she remained rooted to the spot.

Jonathan reached the top of the stairs, breathing a little heavily, and turned the corner of the square landing to where William's room was. He hesitated a moment, as though he could not remember why he was up there. Then his hand reached for the door-knob, and he went in leaving the door open behind him.

William was standing looking reflectively out of the window. At the sound of his father's footsteps he turned. His eyes brimming with unshed tears had the colour of an April sky before a shower. "Why didn't you play with me this afternoon, Dad?" he asked plaintively.

Jonathan felt as though he wanted to take his son in his arms and ask his forgiveness, as though this whole horrid business was his own doing. But he steeled himself and looked stern. "Are you ready to admit that this nonsense about a little old man with long pointed eyebrows is all make-believe?"

William looked steadily at his father. "But it isn't, Dad," he insisted. "It's all true."

"Very well." Jonathan swished the cane. Any feeling of tenderness he had was replaced by one of anger. Anger at himself for not giving his son a half-hour of his time. Anger at his son for lying to him. "You know what to expect, then," he said, indicating the bed with the cane.

"It's no good, Dad," William said in a flat tone without any trace of emotion now. "Mr. Satan won't let you hurt me."

"Bend over that bed," commanded Jonathan. His voice was quiet but shaking with rage. "We'll see if Mr. Satan will let me hurt you or not."

William's voice rose to a high pitch. "You can't hurt me, Dad," he shouted. "My friend Mr. Satan will take care of me."

At the foot of the stairs Margaret bit her lower lip in an effort to stem her tears. Her knuckles showed white where she gripped the polished banister-rail. She heard the swish of the cane, and almost simultaneously a shrill, unearthly scream. Then there was silence for a full minute.

She wanted to run up the stairs, but her legs would not carry her. She was petrified with fear of the unknown.

She heard slow, shuffling footsteps emerging from William's room, and Jonathan appeared at the top of the stairs. He was sobbing softly to himself and mumbling, "God, forgive me. Please God, forgive me." Slowly he descended. In his arms he held the inert body of his son.

A piercing scream rent the air and Margaret realized it came from her. She ran forward to take her son from Jonathan's arms. Then she recoiled in horror. He was dead. And in death she could hardly recognize him. His face was wrinkled like an old man's and his eyebrows had grown long and pointed.

She turned away, her body wracked with grief, and covered her ears with her hands in a vain attempt to drown out the sound of her son's voice repeating over and over again: "You can't hurt me, Dad. My friend Mr. Satan will take care of me."

THE HANGING STONES

G. E. FOX

SLOWLY THE MIST enveloped the moors until the poor, unsurfaced road, grey as the clouds themselves, vanished and made driving a plain impossibility. This was a fine start to a honeymoon—lost in fog on the Pennines, the very roof of England, and as cold and bleak a place as any in the world in rain and fog.

John decided it was eerie, and he thought of their conversation. Janet had maintained that an aura of the past hung over ancient buildings and sites of tragedy, and that the human mind could be attuned to sense it.

John stopped the car. Janet smiled, and he thought it was a rather apologetic little smile. This was her country —the high, wide moors, the becks, the "lone green lanes"—and she had praised it to the skies. Their austere beauty, she had told him, were the essentials of any honeymoon country. He smiled back at her and hoped his smile was sympathetic.

"Looks as if we're stuck, darling," he said. "I can't see an inch ahead!"

"Couldn't we go very slowly?" she asked. "We have only about ten miles to go, John dear."

"Too chancy with those quarries alongside the road and sheep for ever ambling along it. Will it clear, do you think?"

"I doubt it. I know this sort of day only too well. Oh, John, don't think it's always so awful. There are times when heaven itself couldn't equal the moors for loveliness."

"I know, darling. Don't worry. It is exciting at least. I like exciting honeymoons."

"I like prosaic ones!" she retorted. "My last three were very prosaic."

They laughed at each other's nonsense.

"Do you know where we are, Mrs. Bluebeard?"

"I think so. There should be a farm quite near under two huge rocks on a hillside. They call the rocks the 'Hanging Stones' and the farm 'Hanging Stones Farm.' I don't know if anybody lives there. Most of the moorland farms are empty now. The lane to the farm should be on your left if we haven't already passed it."

"I believe I saw your 'Hanging Stones' above the mist a little while back," he said, slipping the car into gear once again and nosing it gently forward into the fog. "I'll go slowly. Keep your eyes skinned for the turning, darling."

He had almost decided it was impossible to go any farther when Janet cried, "Here's the turning. Be careful! The lane is narrow."

There were dry-built walls to show him where the edges of the lane were, and so progress was now a little better than on the moor road.

"Stop a moment, John. Here's a signboard of a sort," said Janet after a while, and faintly visible in the

swirling vapour he could see a rickety board pointing down the lane. On it he could discern, in crude lettering, the words "Hanging Stones."

"Ominous phrase, darling," he bantered. "Any aura or echo of the past about it?"

"You'll find out soon enough," she retorted cryptically.

John slipped in the clutch again, and the car again moved slowly towards "Hanging Stones Farm."

They arrived at the farm sooner than they anticipated, for suddenly in front of them they found a stone-built house with rows of small deep-set windows. A rift in the fog disclosed the "Hanging Stones" themselves, brooding over the farmhouse like crouching giants.

"The 'Hanging Stones,' " Janet exclaimed.

"My! What a grim place!" John commented, grimacing in disapproval.

"There's somebody living here, at any rate," added Janet. "There are lights."

John drew up in front of an ancient-looking door set in a massive stone arch above which he could see the date 1604 clearly, though the centuries had weathered the figures considerably. Before he could knock, the door opened and an old woman stood framed against the dim light from the interior. She scrutinized them closely, wrinkling her eyes and pursing her lips as if in annoyance. To John she appeared to be suspicious of them, and as she neither asked their business nor invited them in he was constrained to mutter to Janet, "Not welcome, I see."

"Sssh!" hissed Janet, squeezing his arm urgently. "She might hear. The Yorkshire folk are queer with strangers at first."

"What's t' want?" demanded the old crone abruptly.

John was reminded of the wrinkled and weathered hawthorns he had seen along the moorland road.

"Good evening," he replied politely enough. "We cannot go any farther because of the fog. Could you put us up for the night?"

"We couldn't!" she snapped decisively. "This is no inn."

"But it really is impossible for us to go any farther in this fog," he protested.

"Tha got here! Tha mun get back by t' same road. It's not possible for tha to stay here."

"But we can't see the road," put in Janet. "We only need shelter for the night, and if you won't let us in then we'll have to stay here all night in the car."

"Ah'll see what t'others have to say," the old woman conceded at last, "but ah can promise nowt, mind! Come wi' me." And she led the way to a whitewashed parlour full of heavy oak furniture and decorated with a cheerful array of copper pans and other utensils hanging on huge black hooks hammered sturdily into the walls wherever a convenient space offered.

There were three men in the room, seated at a black, round table set with crockery and cutlery for a Yorkshire "high tea." The men were obviously

brothers. Their faces were lean, rugged and unutterably solemn. They looked up dourly and questioningly.

"They say they're lost," explained the old woman with something of apology, and more of contempt in her voice than explanation.

"This is no place for strangers. What ails them at walking to Stonecrop?" asked one of the men, the eldest John surmised.

"T'fog's thick," muttered the woman. "Ah know it's not right for 'em to stay under this roof this night, but ah wouldn't turn a dog loose on t' moors."

John felt resentment rising within him. If this was Yorkshire hospitality, then give me the polite insincerity of more civilized society, he thought.

"My wife isn't dressed for walking miles over your moorland roads in thick fog, but if it's putting you to inconvenience, then I suppose we could attempt it. If I had just myself to consider, I wouldn't hesitate to walk—or sleep in my car."

"Nay, Roger, let 'em stay. What's it matter, anyway? It's nobbut a night," put in one of the others. "Tha needn't tell 'em owt."

The one called Roger muttered in a low voice.

"Nay let be, lad," said the one addressed. He was black browed and of a bitter, ironical cast of countenance. "They'd nobbut end up in t' bogs! There's neither on 'em looks as if they could stand ower much o' t' moors. Tha can see they're not o' these parts."

"I'm Yorkshire born," flared Janet suddenly. "I know the moors as well as any!"

"Nay, lass, we meant nowt. It's no house for honeymooners—tha's gotten confetti, lass, in thy hair—but stay if tha will."

To John's considerable surprise Janet showed neither embarrassment nor did she blush, but instead seemed to stiffen as if with sudden premonition of danger, or perhaps she was more angry than her words implied.

"Well, let's get down to some'at to eat. Bring in t' pie, lass."

The pie, a substantial stand-pie of the kind the Northerner loves, was brought in, and soon they were involved in the intricacies of Yorkshire "high tea"—a heavy, taciturn, stowing-away of pie, meats, potatoes and bread, helped along with dark-brewed tea and no conversation.

When it was over, Roger pulled out a black pipe, and began to fill it with tobacco that looked like moorland peat.

"Tha'd better get thisens off to bed," he growled. "Tha'll ha' to be up early to mak' an early start. T' woman'll show thee to a room. It's t' best we can let thee have. Tha can tak' it or leave it, as tha likes."

"We'll take it and thank you," said Janet. "My husband will get a case out of the car, and then we'll leave you to enjoy your pipes in peace."

The room they were taken to was dismal and uncomfortable. In the light of the oil-lamp they had been given they saw a great old-fashioned bed, dark walls, dark presses and a dark polished floor quite bare of coverings.

"John," cried Janet as soon as they were alone, "I do not like this house. It's all wrong!"

He could see that her dismay had intensified, that she was suffering under some tension of nerve or thought. He himself felt the dark oppressiveness of the house. He opened the windows, and saw the whitish gleam of fog and, beyond, the grey shadows of the "Hanging Stones." He closed the windows hurriedly.

"It's grim, darling, but better than that," he replied, coming over to her and taking her consolingly in his arms.

She nestled close as if seeking protection.

"John dear, do you remember our talk in the car—about atmospheres?"

"Of course, darling."

"Well, I sense something awful in this house. I believe it's been the scene of a tragedy. It's as if there were ghosts—something evil watching."

"It's just gloomy, darling," he reassured her.

"Roger and the others—they—they—weren't real. There was something uncanny in their manner. They seemed to be hiding something."

"What a beginning to a honeymoon," he sighed. "I doubt if I could sleep in that bed."

"Hopeless, darling. Let's sit up and talk."

He was about to examine the room, and had lifted the lamp to do so when he saw that Janet was staring at the window with frightened eyes.

"Listen, John!" she exclaimed. "There it is again!"

Far, far away, it seemed, he heard a thin wailing voice calling, "Janet! Janet! Janet!"

He rushed to the window and dragged it open, but there was nothing—only the drifting fog and the drip, drip, drip of moisture somewhere just outside.

"There's nothing," said John.

"We both heard it!" cried Janet a little hysterically. "A voice quite clearly calling 'Janet.'"

"Yes—maybe—yes, I suppose it was 'Janet.' Could it be a nightbird?"

"I'm scared, John. This house terrifies me! Let's go downstairs to the others. Even their glowering faces are better than ghosts."

"Ghosts . . .?"

"I'm off!" she said decisively and, realizing the futility of matching logic against feminine superstition, he followed; yet they found no one below; the house was silent and empty and seemed almost unlived in. They decided to seek the kitchen-living-room in which they had had their meal, but as they crept along the stone-flagged passage of the lower floor a door swung silently open. They stopped, for the moment alarmed, but as nobody challenged them they cautiously peered into the room. Janet went first and John followed, but as their eyes became accustomed to the dim light, objects became identifiable—a table, chairs, pictures, a fireplace and a long draped box on a trestle. With one accord they approached the box and

looked in. Janet screamed and John seized her quickly with his free hand. "My God!" he cried, and then they were fleeing back to their bedroom as if a legion of demons were on their tracks. The box was a coffin—a rough affair such as moorland people would perhaps make themselves—and in it was a woman, pale and wax-like in death.

Janet was shaking in terror, and John himself could hardly restrain his own fears and superstition. He was beginning to wonder if Janet's theories and presentiments were not correct, after all. The whole house reeked of death and mystery. Could there be that aura of a tragic past? Could there be ghosts? What had called in the night? What was the explanation of that—he could not give it a name—in that shadowy bedchamber. He took the trembling Janet to the window and threw open the casement.

"There's somebody on the 'Hanging Stones'! The fog has lifted. Look!" cried Janet hysterically.

"Careful, darling," he admonished. "It's maybe a trick of the light."

He was perplexed, for though he thought he could discern a figure on the "Hanging Stones," he really couldn't be certain in that light.

"There are others now. Look, John," she said excitedly. "Four!"

"Mmm," he muttered indecisively. "Might be, but in this light. . . ."

"How can you be so blind, John?" she asked impatiently. "There's something awfully funny going on. What with corpses below and voices calling my name, and now men up on those rocks. . . ."

He felt uncomfortable, for he was not seeing things in quite the same perspective as Janet. He remembered an argument he had had in the jungle once with his staff-sergeant. There had been a little green frog in a marsh, and to John he seemed to be saying quite distinctly, "Fifty-six, Fifty-six, Fifty-six"; but the staff-sergeant laughed and said he heard nothing but a frog croaking in a pond. It was like that now. He couldn't see quite what Janet was seeing, nor hear what Janet could hear. He saw dim shapes on the rocks, which might be shadows, vapour or moonlight transformed by imagination into men. Yet Janet seemed convinced; it was as if she had access to some fourth dimension denied to him.

Suddenly she gripped him fiercely in some deep and terrifying apprehension, the reflection of which he could quite plainly discern in her face.

"Oh, pitiful heavens, John! They're throwing somebody over the 'Hanging Stones.' They're struggling! What can we do? Oh, this horrible, horrible house!"

He could feel the distress in her taut body and frenzied tones, and all he could see were shadows and dim uncertain movements like objects seen in slowly rippling water under dark trees.

Then again the cry—plaintive, distant as a voice in the wind of a deep canyon.

"Janet! Janet! Janet!"

Still perplexed, he stared up at the

"Hanging Stones," trying to bring that moving indefiniteness of light and shadow up on the rocks into focus not only of his eyes but of his mind, and yet it evaded him and all he achieved was eyestrain and a feeling of strange futility.

"It's no use, Janet dear," he muttered, turning to look at her; but to his utter stupefaction she was no longer there, nor was she in the room, and the door was wide open.

He was suddenly afraid. Fear and superstition at last surged up from some dark primeval deep in his being. He became convinced of the evil and the decay of "Hanging Stones." Horror at what might happen to Janet in that haunted place drove him from the room, yelling, "Janet! Janet! Where are you?"

Blundering, he ran into rooms disconcertingly empty, along corridors cold as death and finally into the clear night. Intuitively, he began to climb to the "Hanging Stones," struggling with the wiry heather and the steep hillside.

"What's to do?" called a voice, which he recognized as Roger's.

"My wife!" yelled John. "She's gone!"

"Why it's t'other!" he heard a voice call in some amazement.

He stumbled on to a rough path almost into the three brothers who loomed huge and savage against the luminous stars.

"My wife——" he reiterated in wild anxiety.

"She's safe enough. We found her on t'hillside in a faint. What's to do?"

"Janet!" cried John, lifting his dazed wife from the bank of heather on which she was lying. "What made you run out like that?"

"We'd been up to a ewe up yonder. She'd gotten hersen in difficulties and was lambing. Didn't hear t'poor beast bleating? Then up t'hill comes thy lass like a mad woman."

"I must get her back to the house. The fog's gone. We can go now."

He realized that they were looking at him quizzically, and he knew that he was behaving oddly. Janet moaned and he became cool once more.

"Come on, lad! We'll help thee. She'll be right in a moment. There's a drop of whisky in t'house. That's what you both need."

They got the half-conscious Janet back to the house, and soon they had her revived, though still her eyes held little lights of apprehension in them.

"Now," said Roger, "tell us what the trouble is?"

He didn't seem half so dour and sinister nor did his brothers, though they maintained their silence.

"Take me away, John! Take me away! I'm frightened. Please—oh, please!" screamed Janet.

"Nay, lass——" began Roger, while the others looked on grimly.

"It's no use," said John. "We'll have to go. I'm sorry. . . ."

"As tha wishes."

He and Janet left, awkwardly, feeling both ungenerous and yet thankful to be away from that uncanny place. Their last glimpse of "Hanging Stones" was of the three men and the old woman standing silently and unsmilingly in the door, their faces pallid in moonlight.

"Oh, John, I shouldn't have taken you there," confessed Janet when they had travelled some distance. "I knew the 'Hanging Stones' was haunted. A murder took place there years ago."

"A murder!" he said incredulously.

"Oh yes. The story is quite well known in these parts. It was a girl. They hanged her from the 'Hanging Stones' because . . . she had . . . oh, she hadn't behaved herself. That's why they call them 'Hanging Stones.'"

"You knew this?"

"Of course, and I could feel the place was evil. Couldn't you?"

"I—I really. . . . To be honest, Janet dear, I didn't."

"Oh, John, how could you be so unreceptive? Those cries of 'Janet!' The murdered girl was called Janet."

"It sounded like a sheep, darling," he said apologetically. He really couldn't get the story of the frog out of his mind.

"The corpse, then?" she demanded triumphantly.

"That is a bit inexplicable."

"It wasn't there! It was all part of the ghostliness."

"Don't you think, darling, with knowing of the murder you might have got yourself a bit strung up and that there might be some natural explanation?"

"No, I don't!" she snapped.

He had to leave it at that, but when they reached a moorland inn and had found accommodation he took the landlord on one side and asked him about "Hanging Stones Farm."

"'Hanging Stones Farm'?" he asked thoughtfully, and Roger noticed a queer and rather startled look in his eyes. "What dost know about 'Hanging Stones Farm'?"

Roger told him briefly of the evening's adventures, and all the time he was speaking he noticed astonishment creeping into the other's voice.

"So there's truth in it?" muttered the landlord at the conclusion of the tale. "Nay, I allus thought it war superstition."

"What do you mean?" demanded Roger. "Don't tell me the place is haunted, though I could well believe it if I were superstitious."

"It maybe depends on what tha calls superstition. When did thy lass last see 'Hanging Stones Farm'?"

"I don't believe she ever saw it. She heard of it. She was told never to go near when she was a child."

"Ay, tha's right. Nobody goes near 'Hanging Stones' for two reasons. One, there's nowt but a ruin there. Two, it's a place of evil."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Roger. "We met people there. We ate stodgy pie and the men smoked black tobacco. There was a woman in a coffin. . . ."

"Then maybe tha'd better go and see for thisen in t'morning," said the landlord dryly. "And now I'm off to bed, and I'll bid tha good night."

Roger could see the landlord was offended, but he could not believe that incredible thing he had just been told—"nowt but a ruin."

"Hell!" he muttered angrily. "Wedding night or not, I'm damn well going to find out." And he slipped into the inn yard where the car was parked, and within five minutes was speeding back over the moors to

"Hanging Stones." He was back at the inn within the hour, and there was Janet and the landlord waiting.

"Ah heerd thee go," said the latter. "Ah guessed what tha was up to."

"You were right, landlord," said John. "What does it mean?"

"God alone knows," said the landlord. "All I know is a story told me by my father. It was of a like nature to thine, only the young couple—aye, young newly-weds like thee—saw a man's body hanging from a beam, and then a voice outside called 'Eva! Eva! Eva!' And that wasn't young wife's name. That was fifty years ago, but I remember t' tale well enought. 'Hanging Stones Farm' war a ruin even in those days."

It was Janet who spoke next. She spoke as if in a trance, dreamlike.

"The tale I heard when I was a child was of a brutal crime committed at 'Hanging Stones'—I can't say how long ago, but it must have been a very old story because it was my grandmother who told me and she had been told by her granny. It was very naughty of her to tell me. My mother was very angry at the time, I remember. However, this is the story briefly: at some period the 'Hanging Stones Farm' and lands were inherited by a young girl at the death of her parents; but as she was unable to manage the farm her three uncles and an old woman came to live there and run the farm for her. The arrangement seemed to satisfy everybody until the girl fell in love with a young man from a neighbouring farm, and then the uncles saw the possibility of losing what they had almost begun to believe their own. Now, they do say that the devil is to be found on the moors at certain seasons. There's the 'Devil's Cave' and the 'Devil's Oven,' as you know—caves on the moors. Well, the uncles entered into a covenant with the devil to get possession of the farm."

"Aye, I've heerd some'at o' that old tale," commented the landlord.

"And did they?" asked John.

"The devil showed them the way," said Janet. "They hanged the girl from the rocks and bludgeoned the young man to death when he came for her calling her name across the moors. The uncles got the farm, but the old servant became frightened and had to be silenced."

"Well, Janet, what next? How does that explain what we experienced tonight?" asked John.

"As the old woman died at their hands she screamed the strangest curse at the uncles."

"Yes?" prompted John.

"She said, 'Never shall a young girl come beneath this roof but her worst nightmares shall take shape.'"

"Good God, Janet!" exclaimed John. "Your worst nightmare is of a room with a coffin in it!"

"Yes, and seeing in it a waxy death-like face," murmured Janet, "and I do not doubt but that the worst nightmare of that other young girl the landlord spoke of was of finding a man hanging in an empty room."

"But if it's been a ruin for so long —fifty years or more—what made you go there?"

"What made the others go there?" said Janet illogically.

CHECKMATE

ALAN REEVE-JONES

T'S NOT TOO bad in here. Not when you can play chess, I mean. I don't like the game, never did; that's where I'm different from my uncle, poor old John Waring.

I say "poor" old John Waring, but when he was alive, believe me, he was anything but poor. Probably one of the wealthiest tobacco importers in the country, and certainly one of the meanest.

He married late in life, and when he did it was quite a blow to the rest of the family, I can tell you. I didn't mind rubbing along on the five thousand a year he allowed me after I came down from Oxford, and Mother had the two country-houses and the income from one of his stock farms in Canada; but obviously our hopes were pretty well dashed when we heard he was going to get married. Admittedly, he made both of us a gift doubling our money after the wedding—which, of course, we didn't attend—but, as his only relatives, we felt entitled to come into all his property when he went. If he had an heir, it stood to reason Mother and I would be left out in the cold.

Luckily for everyone, his wife turned out to be quite a disappointment to him—spent most of her time in the South of France with Mother, and Mother has a very strong personality. Before long she had the girl nicely under her thumb, and everything looked as though it would be all right. She even got her to agree to split the money into three equal shares when the time came. Had proper legal papers drawn up and everything.

Even so, it might have gone on for years like this, but one day we all had an amazing bit of luck. The three of us had gone down to see the old man about increasing my allowance again. He'd rather drawn into himself, if you see what I mean, when he'd found his wife and Mother got on so well, and used to spend hours alone in his study. Well, he was supposed to be alone, but when I went up the stairs very quietly that night—there was a valuable painting in the upper hall I intended to take back to London with me—I heard my uncle talking to someone in his room. Naturally I put my ear to the keyhole and listened as attentively as I could. The one-sided conversation was extraordinary.

"How did you manage during the Great Fire of London?" I heard him say. There was no reply. "Good Lord, that must have been terrible," he went on. "Lost the whole shipment, did you? We had a nasty blaze in my Bristol warehouse last year, but they soon got it under control. Wouldn't have been so easy in 1666, would it?" There was silence for a moment as though my uncle was waiting for an answer. Then he laughed. "What did you say her name was?" he said. "Estella?" After that I heard the sound of clinking glasses.

This was where I burst open the

door and rushed in. My uncle was seated in the chair by the fireplace; a glass was in his hand, and opposite him was another chair, empty, and beside it on a low table stood a second glass half filled with wine. Old John Waring seemed startled at my sudden appearance, almost frightened. I have sometimes thought he did not like me very much, but I can't think why.

"Who were you talking to, Uncle?" I asked him.

"No one," he replied furtively. "No one at all."

I went down and told Mother and Ellen about this—Ellen was his wife's name. They laughed, of course; but then Mother had one of her inspirations.

"I've always told you he isn't right in the head," she told Ellen, "and this proves it." Ellen nodded in that dull way of hers.

"We'll send for that nice young doctor you met in Venice last year and that foreign specialist friend he had," Mother continued. "They said they wanted to open a sanatorium over here if only they had the money. We'll supply the cash, and they can certify John at once." Mother is like that. When it comes to clear thinking, I'm not to be compared with her.

Three days later Doctor Kurtz and Professor Cramer arrived at the house. Guests, we told Uncle John.

And that same night I heard him talking to himself again, all alone in the study. Now, this time I wanted Mother and Ellen to hear for themselves before we brought the doctors in; so the three of us stood outside the door, trying not to giggle, you understand, while the old man rambled on.

"Did you ever meet Samuel Pepys?" we heard him say. "He would have been in the middle forties by the time of the plague. You did? How wonderfully interesting."

Of course, we couldn't stand it any longer. Mother pushed the door open, and we all trooped in.

"Won't you introduce us?" she said.

Uncle John jumped back as though someone had bitten him. I turned to Ellen to say something or other, but, well, you'll hardly believe me, Ellen had turned as white as a sheet and was staring at the wall between the fireplace and where Uncle John was standing. There wasn't anything there —only some smoke from the fire— but Mother was looking at the wall, too. She had a funny expression on her face. I was going to say hard, but nobody could ever say Mother was a hard woman. Then, she pushed me and Ellen out of the room, leaving the old man where he was.

I didn't mind her pushing me, but, after all, I do look after her investments, and if I hadn't sold at the right time last April and bought that oil stock, she'd have dropped about six thousand. As I said to her afterwards, she'd better watch who she's pushing. I don't take that from anyone, including her. But she didn't seem to be listening, and went in to where the two doctors were.

"He's talking to a ghost," she told Cramer. "A man in buckskin, with a cloak and a plumed hat."

"Yes," Ellen added. "You can't quite sort of see him, but he's there

and he's got a beard."

"Of course, of course," said Doctor Kurtz. "Just keep calm and we'll all go and question Mr. Waring."

The Professor agreed, adding: "As you're all here, perhaps you'll sign the papers for the sanatorium first."

So we signed the papers and went in to see Uncle John. He looked very old sitting there with the five of us bending over him, old and rather silly.

"Now then, who were you talking to? Speak up! Who was it?" Cramer said in his deep voice.

Uncle John told us. He could hardly do otherwise.

"It was my friend Erasmus Frazer," he said. "I suppose you would call him a spirit. He lived about three hundred years ago. In the tobacco-importing business, just like me. We play chess."

"Chess?" shouted Kurtz.

"Yes," Uncle John said, "he's very good at it."

It wasn't very difficult after that. Kurtz and Cramer opened their sanatorium; the old man was duly certified, and that was that. He died three years later.

Oh, we didn't get his money. He'd left it all to the descendants of a man called Erasmus Frazer, and the lawyers actually managed to trace them. The law ought to be changed. Mother and Ellen weren't left a penny. Not that they need it where they are. I heard Doctor Kurtz saying only yesterday that poor Ellen showed very little improvement, and as for Mother, he only shook his head.

All I got from Uncle John was his chess set. And there's no fun in it because Erasmus beats me every time.

But, as I said, it's not too bad in here.

"Fair youth, do you know what I'd do with you if you was my sun?" "No," sez he. "Wall," sez I, "I'd appint your funeral tomorrow arternoon & the korps should be ready! You're too smart to live on this yearth."

ARTEMUS WARD (1834–1867).

. . . . . .

For that fine madness still he did retain
Which rightly should possess a poet's brain.

MICHAEL DRAYTON (1563–1631).

AFTER SUNSET

FRANK MACE

CONNOR RAN A SMALL sisal plantation thirty miles or so inland; and it had remained small, for he was an easy man, and without real ambition. Nevertheless, he was satisfied; he liked the interior and its people, and was always glad to get back after a trip to the city. Now, negotiating his battered Ford along the narrow, winding track that led erratically towards his home, he felt once more a little tingle of pleasure as the small, one-storied house came into view. He brought his vehicle to a halt in a swirl of dust, and saw Joseph, his housekeeper and second-in-command, coming down the pathway to meet him.

"You did good business, boss?" asked Joseph. He seemed, for some reason, to be slightly ill-at-ease.

"Fair." Connor looked hard at the negro. "What's the matter?"

"Matter? Nothing. Except—well, except that Leclerc was here today."

"Go on."

"He was very angry, boss."

"Angry, was he? Well, did you tell him to get out?"

"I told him what you said. I told him you didn't want him around when you got back. That he was not good for the men."

"And I'm dead right," said Connor; "he's *not* good for the men. They're afraid of him. Oh, they can believe whatever damned nonsense they like, that's no concern of mine, but he's getting too much of a hold on them. He'd have been dictating to me before long, probably trying a spot of blackmail on the side; I'm familiar with the type." He spat. "Has he gone yet?"

"Boss," said Joseph nervously, "he wouldn't go. He was very angry."

"Wouldn't go?" Connor said quietly. "Wouldn't?"

"There were drums all last night. The men in the fields say he has put a Wanga, a curse, on the house. On you." He paused, licking his lips. "And on me also."

"Yes?" Connor smiled. "Well, I've an idea we'll survive it." He opened the door and entered the house, Joseph following. "Pity the law's so weak with these self-styled 'priests.' But, believe me, I'll have him out of this area if I have to kick him out personally." He sank heavily into an arm-chair. "Is there a meal ready? I'll turn in early tonight, I've had a hell of a day. And, Joseph, for the love of Pete try to look a bit more cheerful! Leclerc'll be gone within a week, I guarantee it."

Joseph, however, refused to be comforted, and Connor dismissed him for the night and retired to bed, the matter of the witch-doctor and his Wanga nagging intermittently at his mind. That crude superstition could exert so much influence might seem incredible elsewhere; but here, Connor reflected bitterly, it was the

natural order of events. Voodooism was an ever-present terror in the lives of his workers, and Leclerc was its local deity. *If I once let him dominate my men,* thought Connor, *I can say good-bye to the plantation.* He lay for a while, savouring the sour taste of these unpleasant facts; he must do something, and do it pretty quickly. He drifted, imperceptibly, into an uneasy sleep.

Something was wrong. *Wrong!* He awoke with a start. It must have been about two in the morning; the sky was fine and clear, and a moon that was almost full flooded the room with its thin cold light. No, no, everything was all right, the house was still. Connor sat up in bed and fumbled for the cigarettes that were invariably at his bedside. He lit one and inhaled deeply. He was about to sink back against the pillow when he fancied he heard a faint sound, like scratching. He listened intently; the sound stopped and a moment later was repeated.

"Joseph?" There was no answer.

"Joseph!" he called again; then froze, as he heard the faint but unmistakable click of the door opening.

He swung himself out of bed, and quietly opened a drawer of the cupboard that stood at his bedside. He felt for his revolver; it was ancient but serviceable, and it was one of his prudent idiosyncrasies to keep it loaded at all times in case of prowlers. He cocked it, and pointed it at the widening crack in the door.

There was a faint rustling sound from the doorway. "Answer me, who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you, I'm armed. . . ."

The door opened a little more; he could see somebody standing at the entrance to the room, unmoving, watching him. The doorway was in shadow, but the figure seemed to be small and slight, and it was certainly not Joseph. "Who the hell are you?" said Connor; the intruder's motionless, almost sullen silence was beginning to unnerve him. "What are you doing there?"

The figure began to move. It was coming in towards him. Slowly it came, slowly but purposefully. . . .

Of course, thought Connor with sudden panic, this is one of Leclerc's men, one of my own men, perhaps; I should have dealt with that madman long ago, before he became too powerful. . . . "Stay there!" he shouted, as the dark shape moved softly towards him. "Stay where you are or I'll shoot!" The intruder was almost upon him. "All right!" roared Connor, "I warned you!" He fired, once, twice, into the body of the advancing figure.

It came on.

I couldn't have missed, thought Connor wildly. I couldn't have missed, not at this range. The glare from the shots had momentarily blinded him, but he struck out wildly and saw the intruder stagger. He made for the door, and as he reached it ventured a frightened glance behind him. The figure seemed stunned, but was turning about slowly to face him; and slowly—lethargically almost—it began to move again. . . .

Connor slammed the door behind

him. "Joseph!" he shouted. "Joseph!" His voice echoed through the deserted house. He heard shufflings and scratchings from behind the door, and a sudden tremor of fear went through him. He's dazed, though, thought Connor; I've been lucky, I've a little time. . . . He moved swiftly across the passage and opened the door to the verandah outside. Where the devil had Joseph got to? He ran down the pathway of the little garden and into the dusty road, gleaming whitely in the moonlight. He paused there, panting. "Joseph!" he called.

Whoever was inside the house, it certainly wasn't Joseph. He felt a little better, though, now that he was outside. He was not a coward, but a revolver was no match for a knife, particularly in the dark; and Leclerc's man would certainly have a knife. Out here, in the open, he would be less vulnerable to surprise. But he could have sworn he'd hit the devil. . . . He looked again towards the house. Something was moving from behind the bougainvillæa-covered latticework on the verandah. Connor crept away silently into the shadows at the side of the road.

His bungalow stood in a small clearing, but beyond this the track was bordered with banks of thick foliage and overhanging trees. For about a hundred yards Connor moved quietly along the ink-black shadows at the road's edge. I've been seen, he thought, that's certain. He looked about. A large clump of foliage, man-high, stood back slightly from the roadside, and he took refuge behind it. Surprise would have to be the keynote of this little enterprise. He waited, his breath coming quickly, and stared intently along the white moonlit road. There was not a sound; everything was still, as if sharing his tension with baited breath. He seemed to have been waiting for hours in that hushed moonlit silence; then, with a sudden excited leaping of his heart, he caught sight of a distant figure, a small silhouette, moving slowly, but with no attempt at concealment, in his direction. It drew nearer, nearer; Connor's fingers tightened on the gun in his hand. Keep calm, he told himself, keep calm. . . .

His pursuer was now not more than a few yards away. Connor raised his revolver slowly; then paused in sudden bewilderment. It was a woman! She approached with exasperating slowness; suddenly, with a tingle of shock, Connor recognized her. It was Rosanne; she worked for Duval, a retired planter who lived near by. My God, and he'd nearly killed her!

He stepped out from the shadows, trembling with relief and excitement. "Rosanne," he said, "what are you doing here?"

The girl stood facing him, silent, unmoving.

"Are you all right?" said Connor apprehensively. And then he saw her white teeth glinting in a small idiot smile; her arms jerked upwards, and her hands were about his throat, tightening, tightening. . . .

Connor struggled violently, pushing against the girl's body with one hand, and jerking his head frantically in an attempt to free it from that

terrible grip. His free hand still held the revolver; raising it in a wide sweeping arc, he brought it down with all his force on the grinning face in front of him. The thin hands clawed deeper and deeper into his throat; he heard a roaring in his ears, and blind panic seized him; again and again he struck, with every ounce of his strength, again and again. . . . There was a sickening crack; the fingers slackened from his throat, and the face before him swayed. . . .

Connor coughed and fought for breath; he stood, swaying dizzily, for some moments, and the red mist before his eyes receded by degrees. His first clear impression was of the girl lying at his feet, her blood-matted hair glistening darkly in the moonlight. He stared down at her for a long time; then turned, shakily, and began to walk away. And then he broke into a lurching run. A corpse with a crushed skull; and it had twitched, slightly, he could have sworn it! He remembered the fingers, too; they had been cold, ice-cold. . . . He ran on and on in the moonlight, on and on down the dusty white track; he would not go back to his own house, he would go to Duval's place, he would be safe there. He ran on, stumbling over stones in the road—a dark pit, like a great pot-hole, yawned up before him, and he barely avoided it in time—and there ahead of him, at last, was the familiar yellow glimmer of light. Duval was a friend, Connor had known him for almost five years; he would be safe with Duval. . . .

Here was the small villa, the neat tree-bordered garden he knew so well. Almost weeping with relief, he ran up the pathway to the front door and hammered against it. He stood back, panting; there was a few moments' agonizing silence, and then the sound of a bolt being drawn. Duval, a plump and cheerful mulatto, stood before him, grinning at him broadly but somewhat perplexedly.

"Connor?" said Duval, blinking. "What is it?"

"Thank God," said Connor, "thank God. Let me in for a minute."

Duval's grin faded. "Yes, yes, come in. But if you would, please, as quietly as possible; my wife's asleep —or was." He smiled and, taking Connor's arm, drew him inside. "Why," he said slowly, as he studied Connor's face under the lamplight, "you look dreadful, man; what's the matter?"

"Your girl, your servant girl. I killed her."

"You——"

"I killed her. I had to."

Duval regarded him steadily for a moment, then put a hand on his shoulder. "Come over here," he said, and led him to a chair. "Sit down there. You look half-dead. Now, what's all this about. You say—you killed——"

"Listen. . . . I was asleep, and something woke me up; I heard someone come into the room, it wasn't Joseph, I know——"

"Take your time, now," said Duval. "Take it easy."

"You see, I was worried about Leclerc; I thought he'd sent one of his gang. I called out, but nobody

answered, so I fired. I fired twice; I don't see how I could have missed, but I did. Then I ran out of the house, and she came after me. . . . It was your girl. She came after me along the road. . . ."

"Drink this," said Duval. "You say it was my girl? You mean Maria?"

"No, no, Rosanne. She must have been mad, drugged; I don't know. She tried to kill me there on the road. It was a terrible business. I hit her with my revolver, I had to. I smashed her skull. Leclerc!" said Connor with sudden vehemence. "It's Leclerc's doing, all of it. It was self-defence, though. I want you to believe me, self-defence; but she had such strength, it was incredible, horrible!" Connor shuddered.

"Of course I believe you, of course," said Duval soothingly. "Someone tried to attack you in the road, and you defended yourself; that much I understand. But—you say it was Maria?"

"No, no, I tell you it was Rosanne!" said Connor excitedly. "Rosanne, your servant girl; I saw her as clearly as I see you now!"

"My friend," said Duval gravely, after a moment's pause, "you have had a profound shock, but this I must tell you. I must tell you now, since you'd discover it for yourself, in any case. I don't know what you saw on that road, but if it was Rosanne, you have seen something that I have dreaded to see for the thirty years I have been in this country."

Connor looked up at him suddenly.

"Rosanne is dead," Duval said abruptly. "She was buried early this morning."

Connor's face remained set in a haggard blankness. Duval regarded him uncertainly for a moment, and went on: "Rosanne's mother—she's a very superstitious old woman. Rosanne was buried in the road. It's done commonly enough farther inland, as you know, but not often here. However, her mother insisted. Connor, are you all right?"

"I'm all right."

"She said she wanted her daughter's body to remain at peace. And I," said Duval slowly, "I was almost angry with her for her absurd superstitions."

"I remember now," said Connor oddly. "I passed her grave tonight. On the road. As a matter of fact," he added with a queer smile, "I almost stumbled into it."

And then he began to laugh; it was a strong, harsh sound, and not pleasant.

The three men sat on the verandah of Duval's house: Duval himself, Connor, and Bonnehomme, a trader new to the interior. They gazed at the sky, crimson above the dark hills; and Bonnehomme again touched on a matter which Duval had been trying studiously to avoid.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to rationalize this," he said. "I'm firmly convinced the whole thing's nothing more than suspended animation. Look, there must be poisons in this island that no one's ever heard of. Antidotes, too. The natives used to tell stories of a magic tree-bark that

could cure fever. Some scientists took them seriously and investigated. They 'discovered' quinine; but the Amazonian Indians had known about it for centuries."

"What does that prove?" Duval asked.

"Well, it could mean there's a poison not yet known to us but well known to the negroes in the hinterland, something that would produce an illusion of death capable of deceiving the best doctor; it's not impossible; and that an antidote could be applied which would restore bodily functions to some extent."

"I'm familiar with the theory," said Duval dryly.

"I think it's the only theory that fits. Oh, the voodoo rites, the spells, and so on are no more than ingenious paraphernalia, clever child-psychology. Because that's all most of these people are: children. Easily frightened, and therefore easily led. What did this girl die of? I'm willing to bet the cause of death was indeterminable, vague—some unknown virus, or possibly a sudden 'heart attack.' Am I right?"

Duval glanced at the silent Connor and back at Bonnehomme. "Did you know Rosanne at all?" he asked.

"No, I never met her. Why?"

"She was a pretty girl. The boys were fond of her. She was fond of the boys, too; apparently she was fond of too many at once. One of them was waiting for her outside the village as she came home one night." Duval raised his glass to his lips. "She was stabbed to death."

Bonnehomme stared open-mouthed at Duval, and no one spoke for a long time. They watched the red fading from the sky; it was beginning to grow dark now, and a little chilly. "I think we'd better go in," Duval said.

Caged in old woods, whose reverend echoes wake
When the hern screams along the distant lake,
Her little heart oft flutters to be free,
Oft sighs to turn the unrelenting key.
In vain! the nurse that rusted relic wears,
Nor mov'd by gold—nor to be moved by tears;
And terraced walls their black reflection throw
On the green-mantled moat that sleeps below.

SAMUEL ROGERS (1763–1855).

CRIME CLUB

Agatha Christie — DEAD MAN'S FOLLY

"**'A classic Christie'** and one of the best."
ELIZABETH BOWEN, TATLER. *12s. 6d.*

Ngaio Marsh — OFF WITH HIS HEAD

"I doubt if she has ever written a better thriller."
NEWS CHRONICLE. *12s. 6d.*

Ellery Queen's Awards: — 1957 EDITION

"Compulsory reading for connoisseurs. Literary standard distinctively impressive."
MAURICE RICHARDSON, OBSERVER (of the 8th) *12s. 6d.*

Catherine Arley — WOMAN OF STRAW

New discovery for the Crime Club in a young French writer who has already "greatly impressed" Francis Iles. "Quite horrifyingly good," he writes. *12s. 6d.*

Douglas Rutherford — THE LONG ECHO

"A splendid descriptive writer." MANCHESTER GUARDIAN
This new novel takes place in the mountains of North Italy.
10s. 6d.

MYSTERY

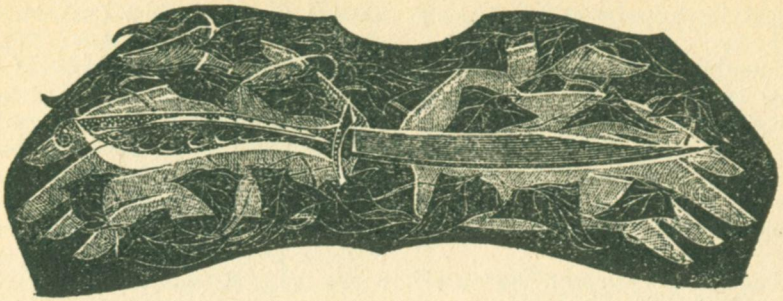
William McGivern — THE SEVEN FILE

A powerful new story from the author of ROGUE COP and THE BIG HEAT showing how the F.B.I. react to kidnapping. *10s. 6d*

Ben Benson — BROKEN SHIELD

A fast-paced thriller of the State Trooper who has to play a lone-hand against a killer. *10s. 6d.*

FROM COLLINS



CROOKS IN BOOKS

A review of some recent crime, mystery and detective books

ANTHONY SHAFFER

"CONSIDER THE LILIES," by Harriet Ainsworth (*Hodder & Stoughton*, 10*s.* 6*d.*).

A really cosy, English village, closed-circle murder. The characters are sympathetically drawn, with just the right touch of being not quite all they appear to be, and the final denouement, shrieking with traditional artifice and well-bred contrivance, is made all the more felicitous by the glittering coronet of coincidence which hovers over the entire proceedings, casting its light before the stumbling feet of the good-looking young detective. Three cheers for Miss Ainsworth! While considering her lilies, let us give thanks that she knows her Victorian onions.

"DEATH BY PROXY," by E. B. Ronald (*Boardman*, 10*s.* 6*d.*).

The proxy here is really England for America. It is a competent enough book, cleverly concealed and complicated, and iced with all the usual nice things, like dope and sex and murder and a private op, but somehow, set against a background of Eastcheap and Hampstead, it all seems rather silly. It's a hard fact for writers to realize, but an undeniable one, that by the banks of old Father Thames the hardy perennial, double-talking shamus withers and dies.

"THE BIG STEAL," by Earl Basinsky (*Boardman*, 9*s.* 6*d.*).

The Big Steal here is from maestro Chandler. The rich man in his penthouse castle, the poor cop at his gate; the two spoilt junky daughters; the hard-eyed police department; all, all the old familar faces are here.

Hero, and initially misunderstood servant of public probity, Steve Conway, is wrongly accused of stealing some ransome money it is his duty to

protect. So naturally he is kicked off the Force.

Many beatings, corpses, pages and rather less women than usual. Later he unravels all, to confound a sceptical and singularly lethargic Police Force and clear himself in the process. All it costs him is his dog and his wife!

"THE GOLDEN MONKEY," by Victor Gunn (*Collins*, 10*s*. 6*d*.).

Another "Ironside" book, with this time the old war-horse investigating a murder on the stage of a huge variety theatre. It is all very intriguing; so much so that those readers who play the least-likelihood rule may come to suspect a trained chimpanzee, used as a "live" ventriloquist's dummy, of the killing, and the backstage atmosphere, though a little sketchy, is always fun. However, it is unfortunate that Mr. Gunn has seen fit to drop two of the detective story's hoariest chestnuts into his mixture.

Not only do we get twins, with the inevitable attendant mistaken identity, but we get a mysterious stranger making a dramatic reappearance from Australia. Not, it is true, a cousin, but surely the next best thing —a knife-thrower!

"THE THREE WIVES," by Alex Fraser (*Bles*, 11*s*. 6*d*.).

A typically English detective story, devoted to proving that murder is really ever so cosy—"Poor chap (the murderer of four people), one almost feels sorry for him"; that the police are fools for most of the time, but that they always muddle through in the end, God bless them (policeman speaking, four corpses late: "I'm afraid we people don't come out of it all very well"); and that the murderer always gives himself away by a small slip ("It was only a small thing, but the more I thought of it the more important it became"). (If only a murderer would give himself away by a wopping great slip, I'm sure no one would notice it. All the class A subscribers are always too busy tracking the tiddlers.)

The Three Wives, for all its triteness of format and crushing reliance on the conventions of the genre is an ingenious and carefully worked puzzle that deserves to be given the opportunity of creasing a brow for an evening by many a fireside.

"ROBBERY WITH VIOLENCE," by John Rhode (*Bles*, 12*s*. 6*d*.).

John Rhode gives us two crimes for the price of one, in this, his latest offering, which is just as well, in view of the price now being asked by his publishers (and many others) for the humble 'tec story. This *is* Robbery With Violence—twelve shillings and sixpence indeed! If this inflationary trend keeps up, it will soon be a case not so much of whodunit but of whocanaffordit.

The crimes are a bank robbery, and eighteen months later a murder. Naturally, being one novel and not two novelettes, there is a connection between them, and the solution of one leads to the solution of the other. As for the merits of the two crimes, they are as different as chalk from cheese. Where the bank robbery is

original and brilliantly designed, the murder is clumsy, circumstantial and improbably motivated. It really isn't good enough for Mr. Rhode to provide us and himself with such a brilliantly watertight problem, and then proceed to escape from it so limpingly. It must be added that the dust-cover is unusually revelationary.

"DAGGER BEFORE ME," by Manning O'Brine (*Hammond Hammond*, 10*s.* 6*d.*).

The title of this book recalls the insomniac Macbeth held from his sleep by the vision of bloody deeds. It must be admitted that your humble reviewer was held, if not from sleep, certainly until well past his bedtime by Mr. O'Brine's extremely active, and as usual blood-bespattered, account in his latest book of a search for a missing war criminal. It is a search that ranges from Cairo to Damascus, across the Sea of Galilee to Tiberias. And it ends, as one might expect, with victory for the intrepid hero, Michael O'Kelly, and confusion to his sinister, though manifestly careless, enemies.

"DEATH IN ANOTHER WORLD," by Robert Cross (*Putnam*, 13*s.* 6*d.*).

The locale here is a barren, semi-lawless, remote valley in the Andes. The story is not a detective story, nor yet a thriller in the conventional sense of the word, but it certainly does grip. An Englishman, arriving to take up his new post at a large agricultural estate, finds to his surprise that his employer is a woman. Further, he discovers that she is a woman

Good Detection

Henry Brinton

COPPERS AND GOLD

An ingenuous story in Brinton's best manner

[*February* 10*s.* 6*d.*]

Arthur E. Jones

TOO DEAD TO TALK

A Felix Holliday story

[*March* 10*s.* 6*d.*]

Thomas Muir

TROUBLE ABOARD

Murder on the high seas

[*February* 10*s.* 6*d.*]

Hutchinson

E. H. Clements
BACK IN DAYLIGHT

Alister Woodhead visits France and stumbles on an unsolved mystery from "underground" days, which spells danger. 12/6 net

John Creasey
THE BLACK SPIDERS

Where did the black spiders come from — the fearful, creeping horror that threatened to overwhelm England? 11/6 net

Vincent Hill
THE CUNNING ENEMY

A mysterious commission for Morgan and Avon, Investigators: is it the client who needs investigating? 12/6 net

Charles Eric Maine
THE ISOTOPE MAN

A brilliant thriller of the Atomic Age. 11/6 net

HODDER & STOUGHTON

haunted by a terrifying past. Little by little, in short quasi-poetic bursts, the story emerges, until it finally fizzes to its sour little end. Strongly recommended to lovers of the arid, the thorny and the hot blooded.

"THE WIDOW'S MIGHT," by Maurice Dekobra (*W. H. Allen*, 10*s.* 6*d.*).

This book would have been better titled Maurice Dekobra's Almanack of Literary Types. Set in India, we get a fat, rapacious millionaire; a sinister, ascetic Indian lawyer; a rich, beautiful widow; a loyal, nothing-shall-hurt-my-memsahib servant and a young, perfectly married couple. They all meet in an explosive soufflé in India, where the widow's might becomes the widow's weeds. The crime itself, if crime it can be called, is uninspired and feebly explained. The translation is abysmal. All in all, it's pretty stale brew from the author of *Poison at Plessis* and *The Man who Died Twice.*

"THE TOFF ON FIRE," by John Creasey (*Hodder & Stoughton*, 10*s.* 6*d.*).

The class-conscious Rollison, alias The Toff, is back once again to greet the new year with a merry romp round the East End of London. This time he is in pursuit, more or less all alone, of a master criminal known as The Doc, who runs a sort of protection racket among lesser thieves and fences. (A representative of the police speaking to The Toff: "If ever there was a case for working along with us, this is it. We'll give you all the protection you need, and——" The Toff:

"You've plenty of people to look after. I'll look after myself.")

And he does, too, in the haphazard and resourceful manner well known to his devotees.

"POISON IN THE PEN," by Patricia Wentworth (*Hodder & Stoughton*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

Anonymous letters, village feuds, suicide and finally murder are all investigated by the indefatigable Miss Silver. Miss Silver, as her many admirers already know, is as hand-stitched as a sampler—a walking pile of lavender and Honiton lace, emerging every so often from her den of curly walnut chairs and tables, plush upholstery and silver filigree work by the yard, shrewdly to embark on some involved case or other. The upshot, as Miss Wentworth tells us, is always the same—virtue vindicated, crime exposed and justice done in the manner of the Victorian tract. This is the twenty-seventh such cautionary tale. All that need further be said is that, to quote Miss Silver's favourite Lord Tennyson: They broaden down from "precedent to precedent."

"THE FAR TRAVELLER," by Francis Gaite (Manning Coles) (*Hodder & Stoughton*, 11*s.* 6*d.*).

This is another in the series of Mr. Gaite's light-hearted tales of ghostly gentlemen. A musical comedy of the *Student Prince* type is being filmed in the castle of Brauhugel in the Siebengebirge district of the Rhineland. The leading man breaks his leg, and is replaced, unknown to the producer, by the phantom Adhemar Hilde-

THRILLERS
OF THE MONTH

Two successes by new authors

INTENT TO KILL

by Michael Bryan

"The tension almost hurts."
Pat Wallace
"Exciting all the way."
Yorkshire Post
"Very fast and effective."
Christopher Pym
"Moves swiftly and ruthlessly... Mr. Bryan has clearly come to stay."
Francis Iles

REBECCA'S PRIDE

by D. McNutt Douglass

"A first novel of great quality, introducing a new detective already fit for the gallery of the great."
Christopher Pym
"The narrator is an endearing Negro captain of police, of whom we shall certainly hear more."
Francis Iles
"Exciting, out-of-the ordinary."
Alan Melville
"Unusual, engaging."
Laurence Meynell

Choices to come

The Strange Bedfellow

by Evelyn Berckman
(author of *The Evil of Time* and *The Beckoning Dream*)

The Power

by Frank M. Robinson

Thrillers of the Month from
EYRE & SPOTTISWOODE

THE BLOODHOUND

has a superb collection of mysteries for the addict

Put these titles on your must-be-read list

American BLOODHOUND choices:

THE LONER
Fan Nichols

DEATH IN THE WIND
Edwin Lanham

THE SPLINTERED MAN
M. E. Chaber

MUCH ADO ABOUT MURDER
Fred Levon

If you prefer a British setting try these British BLOODHOUND choices:

A GRAVE IS WAITING
Andrew MacKenzie

INVESTMENT IN CRIME
J. Cooper Crawley

SOFT AS SILK
Murdoch C. McDougall

From your BOOKSHOP *or* LIBRARY

BOARDMAN

brand, and his servant, Graf von Grauhugel. These two, whose knowledge of moving pictures extends only as far as the Zoetrope, proceed to give a most authentic and expert account of their parts in the film. The fun throughout is fey and fanciful rather than fast and furious, but those who like Topper *et al.* will assuredly have a bit of a giggle.

"SOFT AS SILK," by Murdoch McDougal (*Boardman*, 10*s.* 6*d.*).

Bulldog Drummondry in East Germany. A member of a Military Intelligence Unit in Hamburg disappears, and his wife believes him to be a prisoner of the Russians. An ex-army friend agrees to set her mind at rest by going over to Germany to find out what has happened. He accomplishes this mission with the aid of fortitude, luck and poetic licence, all of which we have come to expect as the inseparable allies of the modern thriller hero. His enemies on this occasion are the sinister ex-S.S. doctor Drecksel and his creator's laborious writing style.

"THE LONER," by Fan Nichols (*Boardman*, 10*s.* 6*d.*).

An hysterical account of a fugitive from a mental hospital's attempts to recover a photograph of himself and a night-club hostess, which he believes might lead his captors to find him.

It is all painstakingly set out: his doubts, his clouded mind, his loathing of harlotry and fear of shock treatment, and, above all, the careful associative way sick minds are taught to cleanse themselves.

But unfortunately the plot through which this sympathetically drawn character stumbles is so tricked out with clichés (it even ends with the good old roof-top chase and the villain plummeting to earth while his attractive victim escapes his avenging knife) and garnished with a style of weary flatness that even that which has been made credible and exciting loses it.

"THE ASSASSINS," by Robert J. Donovan (*Elek*, 21*s.*).

A fascinating case-book of assassins and would-be assassins of United States Presidents, written by an expert in presidential security problems. Each portrait has been painstakingly fitted together, and we learn some surprising facts, notably about the failure of firearms in a crisis and the summary nature of American justice under emotional pressure.

We learn also of the fantastic bravery of Zangara, would-be killer of Roosevelt (he complained there were no Press photographers present at his execution); the lingering death of Garfield at the hands of the fanatical Guiteau; the criminal folly of Coltazo and Torresola, who shared the naïve belief that they could just walk into President Truman's home on the off-chance that he would be wandering about in the hall, and shoot him.

All this and very much more, including incidentally an intriguing insight into the measures now taken by the American Secret Service to protect the President, make *The Assassins* a really unique book.

Erle Stanley Gardner

THE CASE OF THE FIERY FINGERS

One of Perry Mason's toughest assignments. "The best I remember of this author's many excellent stories."—*Western Mail. Just out.* 12s. 6d.

A. A. Fair

TOP OF THE HEAP

Donald Lam, hired to get a playboy out of a fix, finds himself up against a gang of thugs, the police and Bertha Cool. *18 Feb.* 12s. 6d.

Denzil Batchelor

THE TASTE OF BLOOD

"Undeniably a brilliant book . . . a powerful picture of a harassed man's agony."—*Daily Mail.* 15s.

Colin Willock

DEATH AT FLIGHT

"Unreservedly recommended . . . has everything a thriller should have."—*Manchester Gdn.* 13s. 6d.

HEINEMANN

"MUCH TO DO ABOUT MURDER," by Fred Levon (*Boardman*, 10*s.* 6*d.*).

A truly delightful whodunit set against a background, of all things, of a class in mystery writing. The writing throughout is crisp and light, and the plot a particularly neat one worked out to a nicety. This apart, there is something irresistibly comic about the Homicide Squad searching for a criminal in a class-room filled with fictional murderers all plotting and scheming their story-book crimes.

One for the cognoscenti.

"IMAGINE A MAN," by Nigel Fitzgerald (*Crime Club*, 10*s.* 6*d.*).

A famous actor, Mr. J. D'Arcy Strutt, entrained for Cahimore in Ireland to adjudicate the plays in an Amateur Dramatic Festival, suddenly disappears apparently into thin air. Murder follows, and the scene moves from Ireland to Italy, along with the murderer. Mr. Fitzgerald has succeeded admirably in creating what many people consider to be an ideal compromise—a book that is half detective story and half thriller.

"DEATH'S BRIGHT ANGEL," by Thurman Warriner (*Hodder & Stoughton*, 11*s.* 6*d.*).

That amiable couple the Venerable Grantious Fauxlihough Toft, Archdeacon of Tenchester, and Mr. Ambo investigate a seemingly meaningless murder with their customary brand of courtliness and ecclesiastical divination. The plot itself is inclined to be insufficient (certainly in these over-stuffed days—only one corpse, no changes of identity and the minimum of red herrings hardly count as a detective story at all), but none the less it is carried off with an air light enough to captivate the most gluttonous reader.

"YOU FIND HIM—I'LL FIX HIM," by Raymond Marshall (*Hodder & Stoughton*, 10*s.* 6*d.*).

A thriller with a background of Rome and the Bay of Naples. A newspaper man forms a liaison with his boss's daughter, and they plan a month together in a lonely villa in Sorrento. He arrives to find her dead of a cliff-top fall. After this promising start, the book starts to go downhill, ending in rather a flabby denouement which is as anti-climatic as it is contrived. Mr. Marshall has found a good beginning, but he could not fix the whole novel.

"THE STUFFED SWAN," by John Appleby (*Hodder & Stoughton*, 11*s.* 6*d.*).

Certainly not a whodunit, probably not even a thriller in the true sense of the word, Mr. Appleby's latest is most properly described as a novel of intrigue. This centres round a background which proves beyond all reasonable doubt that Shakespeare's plays were written by Queen Elizabeth. The literary world is stood on its head, divers interests are threatened and pompous personages lampooned before the ironic end hoves in sight. Slight but a lot of fun.