



LONDON  
**MYSTERY**  
MAGAZINE

33

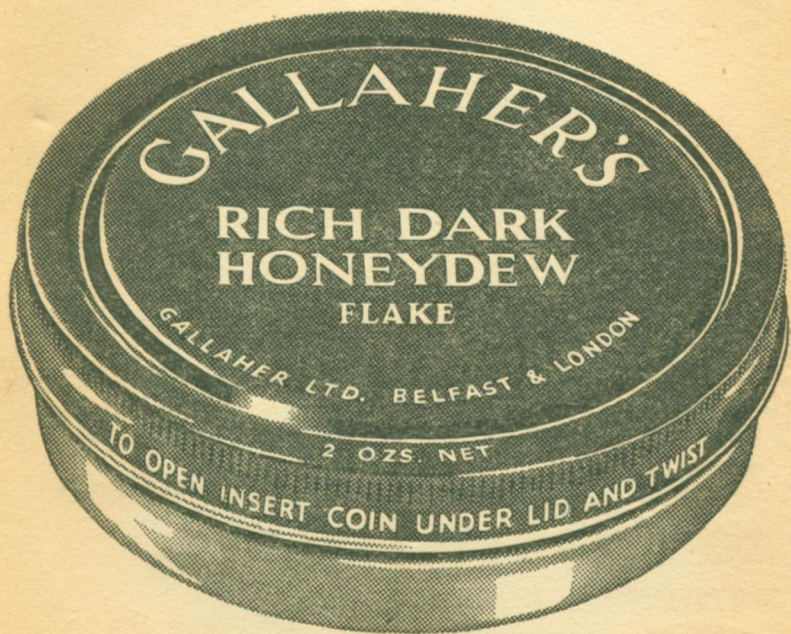


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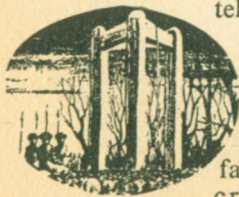
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## THE LONDON MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Horror is part of our lives. We can shut our eyes to spectral and macabre happenings, incidents that defy comprehension, but they still occur. And you, reader, cannot want to shut your eyes to the supernatural, for you have chosen to read THE LONDON MYSTERY MAGAZINE, the magazine which continues the great tradition of international mystery writing.

In THE LONDON MYSTERY MAGAZINE we give you stories by writers of every nationality; stories in every kind of setting; stories to stimulate every palate.

If it is the horrific for which you are looking, L. B. Gordon's "The Bridge," a tale of a wife who found her husband more useful dead than alive; "It's All Over," by Peter Thornhill, who tells of a man no one recognized was alive; and "The Tip," a gruesome story by Alan L. Onions of a man who lived and died by rats, will provide good meat for digestion.

Readers in search of the unusual, the inexplicable and the eerie will shiver as they read of "The Imprisoned Child," by Rosemary Timperley; of the man who saw death in a painting in Robert McDonald's "A Face in the Crowd"; and of the music-box which held a secret in Freda L. Cookson's "The Letter." Into this category, too, fall A. Donovan Young's frightening tale of "The Yellow Spider," and C. J. Riehle's terrible account of the hideous pursuer with "A Grey Beard."

In this issue we would particularly like to bring to your attention an intriguing ghost story taken from an original document. G. C. Stanray compiled his story—"The Apparition of Mr. Peter Metcalfe, 1757"—from an original manuscript which came into his hands describing the apparition of two hundred years ago.

For good detection, both ancient and modern, we recommend "Chess Puzzle," by Roswell B. Rohde, a clever anecdote of scientists, murder and the denouncement of the criminal through the positioning of chess-men; Tom Girtin's quick-moving "Watertight Alibi," which tells of a trumped-up alibi which just did not hold water; and another solved case in the Roman series of "The Slave Detective," by Wallace Nichols, this time concerning a theft of valuable jewels which were not stolen at all, and the auction of an Empire.

The lover of intelligent murder stories will enjoy plunging into the tale of the modern highwayman, "Except for Murder," by F. E. Evans; the dramatic story of murder and suicide by F. L. Pugh entitled "The Failure"; "Foundation for Murder," by Michael Jacot, which tells of the grasping man who saw wealth and success within his reach . . . and then saw them slip away, replaced by death; "Night Shift," by George Saunders Robinson, a slick and stunning story of American hotel life; and P. L. Howard's "The Weathervane," a story of modern witchcraft.

This issue of THE LONDON MYSTERY MAGAZINE, too, is given an added fillip by the inclusion of a story competition, which we hope you will enter. Details of conditions of entry and the prizes are on page 116, so don't miss the opportunity.

Once again time and care have been put into the choice of stories, which we know will thrill and terrify you. We hope we have accomplished our task. EDITOR.

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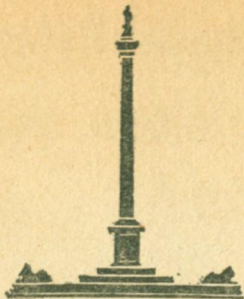
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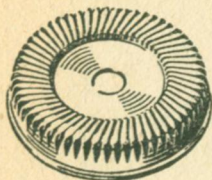
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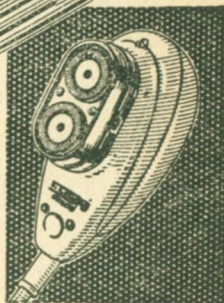
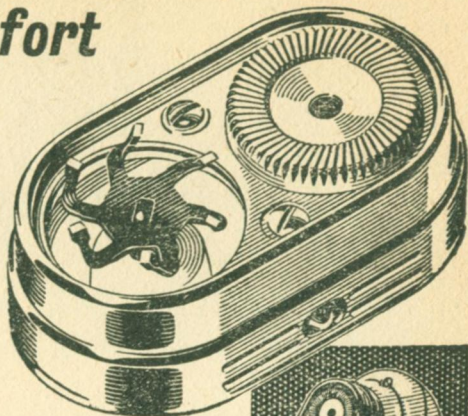
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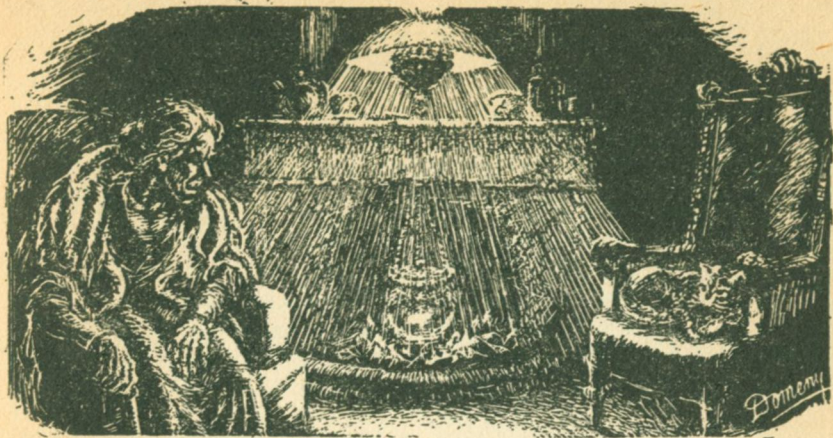
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## THE BRIDGE

L. B. GORDON

*Illustrated by Leslie Domeny*

*He was more useful dead than alive—but no more dependable.*

**T**HOUGH HER HUSBAND, Bill Lammon, had been dead these several years, he was still a useful man to her, much more useful in fact than he had ever been during his idle lifetime.

Meg Lammon rocked herself in the faded red and green chair. Over the fire hung a black pot suspended by a chain from a cross rod embedded in the stone-work of the cavernous chimney. Her black cat dozed in the seat opposite her, the seat that had once been her husband's. Like him, it was a lazy, good-for-nothing beast, fonder of its love-making at nights than it

was of a good honest job, such as the killing of a rat.

She looked round the room. The oil-lamp cast a yellow light down and a circular shadow on the whitewashed ceiling. There would be no electricity for her, no fancy pull or push sanitation. She would not pay more rent, so the laird was allowing the place to go to pieces about her. She had heard that it was condemned, but she had no complaint to make. It was a shelter, she had a cow, some hens, a little land where she could produce potatoes, vegetables and corn for a little meal.

The wind screamed a soprano shriek round the eaves and through



the cracks in the window-frame, and in the chimney roared a muffled bass thunder, making the flames of the fire cower and squirm before reaching up again when the giant breath had passed. Just such a night it had been when she had converted Bill into something useful.

Her grin showed gaps in her teeth. She had done nothing about this deformity, and now she was over fifty, who cared about her personal appearance? Certainly not herself, and before Bill had died he had long since ceased to notice what she was like. In truth, he had been responsible for her scarred mouth. Three times the back of his huge red hand had struck her on the lips, and three times there had been the sudden agony, the taste of blood and a tooth lying on her tongue. Once he had excelled himself and had knocked out two with one blow.

But she had had the better of him in the end. He was dead and she was still here, alive and enjoying the memory of how she had disposed of him. Every time the wind howled and pitched buckets of rain against the trembling building, she heard again the screams and sobs of it as Bill had passed. It had been a queer kind of Dead March, but good enough for the likes of him.

She reached for a cracked mirror from the mantelpiece. It threw back at her the face of a woman lined and grey, with eyes that were once as sparkling as the face of the loch under the April wind and sun, but were now as dull as the waters under the snow-filled clouds of January.

Bill had done all that. The last years

had added nothing to the desolation he had wreaked during his lifetime. Her grey hair, the lines and marks on her face, the missing teeth, they were Bill's souvenirs. Nay, they were more. They were his tombstone, his epitaph, the only ones he would ever have, for he had no known grave. That is, no one knew but her, and she would not be telling.

She lifted the heavy steel poker and stirred the fire. A good friend this poker—it had been in her hand when she had met Bill outside that last night of his life.

There was the cat staring at her. The green in its eyes was shot through with red from the fire. It had never reminded her so strongly before of Bill, with his red hair and green, taunting eyes. She had married him under the spell of those dancing eyes; in final protest against their cruelty, she had killed him.

"You don't like the poker, eh, Bill?" she chuckled, brandishing it before the animal.

The cat spat and leaped on to the table. Her eyes followed it as it sat beside a basinful of eggs. Funny, it had been the hens that had started it all. . . .

"I tell you, Bill, I need a new bridge over that mess to get to my hens."

"Take a walk round about instead. I've no time to be making bridges for you."

"You'd have plenty of time if you stayed away from your drinking, and worse, in the village. I want a bridge or even a heavy plank here where the

mud is shallow, the only point where it *is* shallow."

She watched him walk off. His mocking laugh floated back to her on the rising wind. She was left to stare at the nine feet of slime that separated her from the ground where stood the shed that contained her poultry.

The slime looked like delicious milk chocolate, and was a death-trap. She had seen that playful puppy leap into it. It had been just out of her reach, and by the time she had run for a rope and pole, its head had disappeared. There had been some twitchings to disturb the surface mud for a minute, then all was placid chocolate again. She had been violently sick.

When a neighbour came asking about the dog, she denied ever having seen it.

So Bill would do nothing about a bridge for her to replace the one farther up that had collapsed. Where she stood was the narrowest point on this stream of mud, and a crossing here would save her a walk round of two or three hundred yards.

Dusk was falling. The February wind hurried out of the west. She could see it trail great grey wintry clouds as though drawing a shroud over the dead day. Standing there in the twilight she made her resolution, a resolve that was as a mighty rock that had suddenly sprung into being, but that had been in reality growing slowly but surely over the past years. Composed it was of the innumerable stones of insult and injury cast at her by Bill and solidified by the burning lava that had poured from her own resentment. The secret tears, the open



pain, were as the spots of mica that gleamed on the face of the rock.

Tonight, if she could, she would be quit of him once and for all.

She returned to the house and waited while the wind grew to a gale and boomed like cannon firing the hail that rattled on the windows. She sat crouched by the fire, waiting.

About a quarter-past nine she went outside. He would be coming home now if he had only been drinking. If not, she might have long enough to wait—though wait she would.

Then she heard him, singing drunkenly, his hoarse, unclean voice violating the pure, powerful anthem of the wind in the trees.

"Bill!" she yelled.

"Where are you?" he called back, flashing his torch about.

"Over here."

He came then, up to her. He swayed a bit and she judged that it was not altogether from the drive of the wind. "What are you drivelling out here for?" he snarled. "Have you some supper ready?"

She flashed her own light over the sleeping slime.

"This is where I wish a bridge, Bill, and you are going to provide it."

His laugh of derision was cut short as she hit his head with the poker. He half swung with the impact, and fell face down into the mire.

"A bit farther out!" she cried, pushing his feet off the firm bank.

She listened to the sounds as the clinging death got to work, as the bog enveloped his threshing limbs. She took a step forward. His head was still raised in the air. She reached out and

struck it again with the long poker.

Soon after, she put on rubber boots and tested her new bridge. It was not exactly a bridge, but it made a crossing-place. Bill was nicely covered by some inches of mud, but, when she stood on him he seemed to bear her weight without subsiding. There could not be the same depth of slime here.

In the light of next morning she had a further test. His body felt like a firm log with his head as a convenient stone which formed the last necessary foothold. She could now cross to her chickens without either having to make a long walk of it or having filthy mud nearly up to her middle. Bill was of more use to her now than he had ever been.

She saw the cat at the door. It was but a kitten, black and looking as though it had been out all night.

"Come in and stay." She picked it up. "I'll call you Bill. Bill the Second."

She leaned back. That was how it had happened. There had been a bit of a hue and cry, of course, when she reported her husband missing; but the police had not over-exerted themselves. Soon the matter had died down, and she had crossed to her hens in security.

There was that cat wanting out. It spat at her again, and she aimed a blow at it as it dodged through the doorway.

She returned to her chair. Nearly nine o'clock it was, about time for a bite of supper and bed.

She was a bit concerned about Bill. He was sinking into the sludge, and she reckoned, too, that he must be near

breaking-up point. Some time soon she would need another bridge. That was the only possible spot, anyway, for she had poked with a pole on both sides of where Bill lay, and the depth was beyond the measuring of the seven-foot pole. There must have been a slight rising of the ground beneath to make that shallow crossing feasible.

The wind had stilled, and she heard clearly the sudden noise of alarmed poultry. She rose, grabbed a torch and the poker. There might be a fox amongst her chickens.

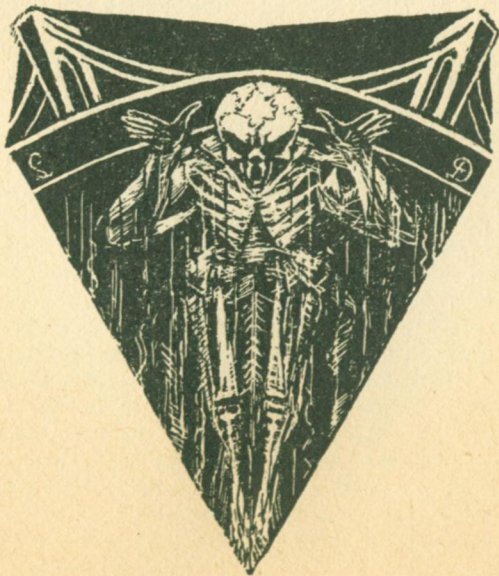
She hastened to the crossing-place, and began feeling a cautious way over. One foot was resting on the head preparatory to her final little jump to the other side when, from the direction of

the hen-house, the cat ran and, with a hideous wail, sprang on her, clawing her face.

She screamed and lost her balance. Her torch flew from her hand.

She fell into the viscous mass. Slime filled her nose and mouth, slime that was thrice potent in stench and putrefaction, *graveyard* slime. As the horror closed over her, one hand, desperately clawing through the glutinous depths for something, anything whereby she might drag herself clear, touched the head. It held, gripped, pulled.

But her last sensation before merciful oblivion overtook her was the tiny jerk as the head parted from its body. . . .



# THE IMPRISONED CHILD

ROSEMARY TIMPERLEY

*He was a very quiet little boy, but would he never come out to play?*

**I**T WAS THE TOYS that first made me realize there was something queer about her.

She lived in the flat alongside mine in the large block, and although she'd been there for nearly a month, I'd never spoken to her. I knew her name was "Mrs. Bland" and that she worked for a living, for she went out at the same time each morning and got home shortly before seven each night. I concluded that she was either a widow or separated from her husband. She was a thin, shabbily dressed young woman, with short dark hair, a squarish, pale face and big dark eyes. As far as I knew, no one ever visited her.

The first chance I had of speaking to her was when the toys arrived. The postman knocked on my door one morning, said he couldn't get an answer next door, and would I take in this parcel for Mrs. Bland? The parcel bore the label of a well-known toyshop. So that evening I listened for Mrs. Bland to come in and, when I heard her quick footsteps on the stairs—she always hurried home as if someone were waiting for her—I came out into the passage with the parcel.

She was at her front door now and had her back to me. As she opened the door with her key, she called in a gay, affectionate voice:

"I'm home, darling."

"Mrs. Bland," I said. "This parcel came for you when you were out."

She turned quickly, almost guiltily.

"Thank you so much," she said, unsmiling. She grabbed the parcel and disappeared into her flat.

I wondered vaguely who "darling" was. Evidently she knew someone would be waiting there for her. I hadn't heard anyone arrive, but that meant nothing, as my days were too busy for me to bother with comings and goings next door. Whoever it was must have a key, and he (or she) must have arrived in the afternoon, otherwise he'd have answered the postman's ring. Or wouldn't he? It was quite mysterious.

"Young Mrs. Bland has turned into a mystery woman," I said to my husband that night. "There's someone in her flat, and she got rid of me very quickly when I spoke to her this evening."

"What's so mysterious about that?" asked my nice, stodgy husband, eating his enormous meal.

"Just that the visitor must have let himself in and she knew he was going to be there, because she called 'I'm home, darling' as she entered."

"Perhaps her husband's come to live here."

"Possibly, but it's a single flatlet, a bit small for two."

"Not nowadays," Jack said.

"They're still living six in a room in some parts."

"Not in a respectable block of flats like this."

"You haven't enough to think about, that's the trouble with you," he mocked me. "Mystery indeed! Can't the poor girl have a visiting husband or a surreptitious boy-friend without your going into a tizzy? You women! Why did you speak to her, anyway?"

"Because the postman left a parcel of toys for her. That's another mystery."

He said: "Remember when we bought that toy railway for young Colin?" Colin is our nephew.

"Yes."

"It was delivered here in a big parcel. Mysterious, wasn't it?"

"All right, you win," I said, "but heaven help me from ever being an unimaginative clot who thinks everything's ordinary."

"Everything is," he said, "and Mrs. Bland strikes me as an ordinary young woman."

He was wrong. Mrs. Bland was not an ordinary young woman. She was hiding someone in that flat. As the days passed, I became more and more certain of it.

One or two mornings I heard her say: "Good-bye, then, darling," as she left the flat; on several evenings I heard her greet whoever was there; and one evening, when Jack and I had been to the pictures and returned home late, we heard her talking and laughing. Voices from the flats could be heard on the stairs, although one could seldom hear what was said. Her voice sounded tender and indulgent.

"There's Mrs. Bland with her visitor," I said to Jack. "I'm sure he's living there."

"How do you know it's a he?"

"I don't. I just guess."

"People do have visitors sometimes," he said heavily.

"Maybe, but the visitors sometimes go out. They don't stick indoors all day, refusing to answer the bell."

"How do you know he does that?"

"Because another parcel of toys came for Mrs. Bland today, and the postman had to leave it with me. I couldn't let her have it because I left the flat to meet you before she came home. I'll take it to her now, as she's obviously not in bed."

"How do you know?" asked Jack with a wicked grin.

"You men! Your minds all run on the same lines!"

I collected the parcel and rang the bell of Mrs. Bland's flat.

She came to the door immediately. She was looking flushed and rather pretty, but there was a queerness about her eyes that I'd never noticed before. They looked beyond you all the time, yet without seeming to see anything.

"Another parcel for you, Mrs. Bland," I said. "Sorry I'm so late with it, but my husband and I have only just come back from the cinema."

"Thank you." She smiled brightly, falsely.

"Some little boy or girl is very lucky to get all these toys," I said—a leading question and horribly arch.

"He loves them so," she said. "Good night."

The door closed in my face.

It was after this that I began to be really concerned about Mrs. Bland. So far my speculations hadn't been more than interesting imaginings. I did have a regrettable tendency to make drama out of ordinary events—domesticity-bound women often do. For that reason I didn't receive much sympathy from Jack when I said:

"I think we ought to find out more about Mrs. Bland. I used to think she was hiding a man there, but now I think she's keeping a *child* there in secret."

"Nonsense," he said. "Have you ever known a child able to be kept anywhere in secret? Noisy little wretches!"

"There are ways of keeping a child quiet."

"Tell me them. I'll give those little beasts upstairs who wake me every Sunday morning some of the treatment."

"Jack, don't laugh about it. Suppose she has a child there and something happens, we shall wish we'd done something about it."

"What makes you think it's a child?"

"The toys."

"I've no doubt she posts them to some child she knows. It might be a nephew or niece, or some kid in hospital, or maybe, if she's separated from her husband, she has a kid of her own still living with him, and she sends the kid toys. If that's the case, she must be pretty miserable, and I think you'd do well to leave her alone and not poke your nose in. People don't want their personal affairs delved into by neighbours."

"I'm sure she doesn't post the toys anywhere. Every morning, when I'm cooking your breakfast, I see her pass in the street below. I've never yet seen her with a parcel."

"Perhaps she's saving the toys until Christmas. For goodness' sake mind your own business."

"If Mrs. Bland is keeping a child prisoner in that flat, it *is* my business and yours."

"How could she have a child in the flat all day? If she did, the kid would soon creep out, or sing or shout, and you'd hear."

"Perhaps she drugs him."

"You talk as if you're going round the bend."

"I'm frightened," I said, and my voice sounded suddenly harsh and uncontrolled. I found that I was trembling.

"I say, old girl——" He was all sympathy and treated me rather as if I were a mental patient. I didn't mention Mrs. Bland to him again. I decided that I'd work out some plan of action and solve the mystery by myself.

Next day, when Mrs. Bland was out, I went to her flat and rang the bell several times. There was no reply. Then I opened the letter-box and called through it: "Is anyone there? Do come and talk to me. Don't be afraid." The silence was unbroken. Whoever was there was asleep, or drugged, or hiding.

I went to the little spare room in our flat—my son had slept there until he was called up—and climbed out on to the small verandah. By risking life and limb, I could climb from here to

the verandah of Mrs. Bland's flat. As it was two floors up, I didn't enjoy this part of the adventure, and felt very shaky when I landed safely on her verandah. I prayed that no one in the other flats had seen me.

Now I peered through the window into the small room that corresponded to ours.

It was furnished as for a little boy, with a small bed, a chest-of-drawers and a corner curtained off for outdoor clothes. There were lots of toys—teddy-bears, engines, balls, a golliwog, a miniature cricket bat, a little pistol, a Davy Crockett hat and, in the centre of the floor, a set of toy bricks and a plan of how to construct buildings from them. These had been left as if whoever had been playing with them had stopped suddenly and left the "building" unfinished.

As well as I could, I looked into the corners of the room, although the wall alongside the window itself was outside my vision. There seemed to be no one there, but it was possible that someone might be flattened against that wall.

Could a frightened child be trembling there, having heard my clumsy approach on the balcony?

I tried to open the window. It was locked from the inside. I couldn't get into the flat without breaking the glass, and although that sounds easy enough when you read about it in books, it's not an easy thing to do when you've never deliberately broken any glass in your life before.

As a last resort I knocked on the glass, but of course nothing happened. I climbed back to my own flat, feel-

ing exhausted out of all proportion to what I'd done.

The only thing to do now was to call openly on Mrs. Bland and somehow force her to let me in. Jack was going to be home late tonight, as he had to see a client, so all I had to do was find a pretext for calling on my neighbour. The pretext came by the afternoon post—another bulky parcel from the toyshop. The woman must spend all her salary on toys! No wonder she always looked so shabby.

That evening, about ten minutes after I'd heard Mrs. Bland come home, I took the parcel and boldly rang her bell. She came immediately.

"Another parcel for you, Mrs. Bland," I said cheerfully. "Let me carry it in for you. You look tired."

I'd planned to say that, anyway, but the truth was that she *did* look tired. She was ghost white, and her eyes were darkly circled, as if she didn't sleep. I'd expected that she might try to stop me, but she didn't. I walked straight down the passage into her living-room, so like ours, yet so unlike. It was cold and poorly furnished, and the only signs of expenditure were the many toys lying around, nearly as many as in the child's room.

There was no sign of the child.

Daringly I asked: "Are you going to show the little boy his toys straight away?"

She said nothing, but stood staring at me.

"Where is he, Mrs. Bland?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said, and her voice was strained. "I must go and look for him."

Walking as if she were in a dream,



she went out of the flat, leaving the door open. I took a quick, guilty look at the other rooms—kitchen, bath-room, the boy's room, but the flat was empty. Then I hurried after her.

So the child had escaped.

I found her wandering about the formal front garden of the flats, calling: "Bobbie! Where are you, Bobbie? Come to Mummie. Bobbie! Bobbie!"

No one at any distance could have heard her. Her cry was very different from the sharp yells of other mothers calling in their children.

I took her arm firmly and said: "Let me help you look for him. We'll search round the building, then ask people in the other flats if they've seen him. What does he look like?"

She looked at me intently, but didn't seem able to answer my questions.

"Is he fair or dark?" I persisted.

"Fair, like my husband."

"How old is he?"

"Three years and five months."

"So little! And what a quiet little boy he is. My husband and I have never heard him make a sound."

"He is very quiet," she said. "He loves me."

"Of course he does. Now we must set about finding him."

"I must go to him. He'll be waiting for me. Why did I come out here? I must hurry back."

Suddenly she ran away from me. I couldn't keep up with her, and as I puffed up the stairs again I heard her front door slam. Then I heard her voice, with a sob in it: "Darling, you're safe! I'm here! Oh, Bobbie, Bobbie! Now, let's look at the parcel that's just arrived for you."

I hesitated outside her door. Jack's voice startled me:

"Eavesdropping in your old age? Really, love!"

"Shut up," I said. "I've got something to tell you."

I told him of the events of the day. At last he took me seriously.

"She certainly has no right to keep a three-year-old shut up in the place all day," she said. "Kid should get out into the air sometimes. She sounds like one of those psychiatric cases, mothers who won't let their children take even the normal risks of everyday life. It's a pretty bloody thing, I admit, but what can we do?"

"We can go and talk to her now. Come on, Jack. She's in the flat. It's cruelty to keep a child imprisoned like that."

"Yet the kid must know how to get in and out or he wouldn't have escaped her for a while today."

"He must have crept in and out like a little shadow," I said, shivering. "We must do something."

So together we went to see Mrs. Bland.

When she opened the door, Jack said:

"Good evening, Mrs. Bland. My wife and I would like a word with you. May we come in?"

She said nothing, but opened the door wider, and we followed her into the living-room. There was a litter of toys, a soiled cup and saucer, a plate with a few crumbs on it. She didn't ask us to sit down, but I sat on a hard chair, she sat in the easy one and Jack remained standing. There was no sign of her son.

"Is your little boy in bed?" I asked.

"He's asleep," she said. "He played with his new toys, and now he's asleep."

"Mrs. Bland," Jack said, "at the risk of seeming like interfering busybodies, we've come to say that we don't think you're giving the kid a fair chance. Ever since you've lived here, the boy hasn't left the flat as far as we know, except for a short time this evening. You must see how bad that is for him."

"No," she murmured. "No—no—"

"I don't know what your circumstances are," Jack went on determinedly, "but honestly I think you'd do better to put him in a nursery in the daytime, where he could meet other children. You shouldn't leave him alone here all day. I know a nursery would cost money, but not much more than all these toys you buy. Company matters more than toys to a little boy. We've got a son of our own, and we know."

"Bobbie belongs here with me," she said.

"Of course he does," I agreed, "but you aren't here all day, and he's alone and so unnaturally quiet."

"Unnaturally quiet," she repeated. "I don't want to leave him alone, but I have to."

"That's why we think someone else should look after him while you're out," Jack said.

"No one else could. He's mine."

"Don't you see how cruel you're being to him?" I said.

"Cruel? I'd sooner die than hurt him. I'd sooner die." Then: "I wish I

were dead! I wish I were dead!" The words came out in a sudden scream.

"Steady, steady," said Jack, putting a firm, friendly hand on her shoulder. "You don't want to wake the little 'un, do you?"

"Nothing wakes him," she said slowly.

"I'll go and see if he's all right," I said and, before she could stop me, I went into her son's room.

The toys lay on the floor, just as I had seen them through the window. The bed was neatly made. And empty.

It was then that I guessed the truth.

I went back to the living-room and said:

"We'll go now, Jack, and leave Mrs. Bland in peace." Then I turned to her and said: "Good night, my dear. Try to get some sleep tonight. Don't worry any more."

The sympathy in my voice moved her, as sympathy so often does move us. She began to cry, softly. Jack gave me a look of alarm—men are so afraid of a woman in tears.

"I say, Mrs. Bland," he began.

"Please go," she whispered. "Why won't people leave me alone? I shall have to move again now. Yet we were so happy here, Bobbie and I. Please leave me now. Please."

We left her crying, alone.

Back in our own flat, Jack said to me: "What did you see in that room? You looked like a ghost when you came out. Is the kid deformed or something?"

"Darling—there is no child."

"You mean he's still outside, somewhere?"

"No. I don't think he exists, except

in her imagination. I'm remembering little things she's said. It explains everything."

"You mean the poor woman's insane?"

"Not exactly. Perhaps she had a child who died. Or perhaps it's just that she wants one so much. It's Saturday tomorrow, and she won't be going to work, so I shall go and see her in the morning and try to get her to tell me about it. Then I shall take her along to our doctor, if she'll agree to come. Jack, I'm glad we went. She needs help more than anyone I've ever known."

But we never had the chance to help Mrs. Bland. That night a fire broke out in her flat. She must have drugged herself to find sleep, for it wasn't she who gave the alarm, but a passing policeman who saw flames blazing behind the window-glass. The fire made her passage to the front door impassable, and all her windows were locked. In any case, she was in too dazed a state to help herself, for by the time firemen reached her, it was too late. She was dead.

The cause of the fire was never discovered. It might have been so many things—a careless cigarette, a paper left too near the gas-fire, a gas left on in the kitchen. It all made quite a story in the local papers. Details of Mrs. Bland's past appeared in print. She had been married to a Robert Bland, merchant seaman, who was drowned three years and five months before. On the same day, Mrs. Bland was expecting her first baby. She re-

ceived the telegram about her husband just as she set out for the hospital. Her baby was born dead. A little boy. Then she disappeared from the neighbourhood where she was known, changed her job and no one knew what had happened to her.

She must have gone from flat to flat, eternally moving on as people began to watch her, always hiding from prying eyes and voices, hiding her child, the child imprisoned in her mind, the child who was always "unnaturally quiet."

Immediately after the fire, when many people from the flats were milling about outside and the ambulance had only just driven away, I talked to one of the firemen who, grimed and tired, was sitting on the ground with a mug of tea in his hands.

"Tough job for you," I said sympathetically.

He looked at me, dazed.

"We were just too late to save them," he said.

"Them?"

"Her, I mean," he amended quickly.

"Why did you say 'them'?"

He shrugged. "My eyes played a trick on me tonight," he admitted. "I was the first to break into the room. I was half blind with smoke, of course. I saw the young woman lying on the floor, and I could have sworn—I could have sworn——"

"Sworn what?" I asked, shivering uncontrollably.

"That she had a child in her arms," he said.



# DINNER FOR THREE

PETER SMITH

*The search for pleasure can lead to some peculiar places*

**I**N WHAT WAS CONSIDERED to be the interests of his country—and the family business—Humphrey Tree-Bole, director of Tree-Bole, Howlingale & Company, had made it his duty personally to attend to overseas buyers, preferably in their own lands. He was quite successful in this, particularly as many of the buyers were flattered to be attended by a Tree-Bole in person, and Humphrey spoke two languages, besides his own, very well.

Now after an exacting day with a client in Paris, he was perched upon a bar stool at the Hôtel Grand Volupté, biting his nails. It was five o'clock on a May afternoon, and he had come down from his suite to escape the still, warm air and the silence.

Humphrey was in his middle thirties and suffered from baldness and obesity (and a tendency to high blood pressure), in partial retribution for his persistent indulgence in the fleshpots of great cities. The arrogance he had long assumed concealed his unnamed fears, and also deprived him of the affection he inwardly craved; and he bought the substitute, knowing it to be such. His interests centred on food, women and drink, and the command of much money caused him, usually, to be well served.

In this bar he was the only customer

and he sipped gin and soda sparingly lest this early tipping should spoil his evening. The barman, who disliked Humphrey, offered sympathy for his client's boredom, and passed him an old guide to Paris—possibly of interest, even to Monsieur, who knew the city so well.

Humphrey flicked through the pages, observing that the ladies who were clothed (and some who were not) wore *clôche* hats. The guide-book, he also noted, had an inherent disposition always to open at the same page. This mildly annoyed Humphrey because he sometimes sought knowledge of the future by opening a book at random; nevertheless, he paused and read:

"No account of these many restaurants, bars and cabarets can ever be complete and the visitor must enjoy also searching for himself; whatever his tastes, it is probable that these can be satisfied. It has even been said that there exist certain restaurants where ghouls may indulge their taste for human flesh. . . ."

Humphrey grinned and returned the book to the barman, indicating the paragraph. "If Monsieur is in search of strange atmosphere," said the barman, permitting himself a smile, "they do say that a glass of brandy at the Bar — in the Rue — can be taken in company with a very odd clientele." Humphrey made a brief note on the

back of an envelope and ordered another gin and soda. Presently, feeling inclined to sleep, he finished the drink and, regretting a lack of change, retired from the bar, and as he did so the barman reached for the telephone. . . .

It was after ten o'clock when Humphrey, who had slept for several hours, emerged, bathed and shaved, into the cool, fine night. He visited the usual bars and talked to a number of acquaintances, but he dined alone, and well, at Fouquet's. At three o'clock in the morning, in a cabaret, finding himself unsteady and not too popular, he signed the bill and departed. Then he remembered the address he had noted earlier and saw that the district was not far away.

He had some difficulty in walking; but red of eye and white of face, Humphrey was by no means finished. He blundered ruthlessly on, through alleyway after alleyway until, alone in a dingy cul-de-sac, he perceived a light burning foolishly in the wishy-washy dawn, and the sign bore the name he had written upon the envelope. It was 5 a.m.

The bar-restaurant was small, dimly lit but luxurious. Humphrey climbed a bar-stool with the precision of long practice but, once seated, he clung to the brass rail. The barman was suave and attentive, and seemed to be the only person present apart from a couple sitting at a near-by table. Humphrey ordered coffee and brandy, and revolved his stool the better to examine the two other patrons.

He had a blurred impression that the man was dark and good-looking

and very pale, but not so pale as his companion, a red-haired girl with large protruding eyes. The man returned Humphrey's stare, and then, with surprising agility, flung himself at the bar just in time to prevent Humphrey from falling off his stool. Humphrey renewed his grip of the brass rail and scowled. "I don't want any help from bloody cannibals," he said thickly.

There was a long silence, broken by the barman, who suggested that Monsieur was possibly a little unwell. Perhaps to telephone for a taxi?

But Humphrey had grown to enjoy his own drunken arrogance; he'd be as rude as he — well pleased. "I don't want any help from bloody cannibals," he repeated, staring with alcoholic fixedness, first at the barman and then at the man who had rescued him. "Come, sir," said the dark man, "sit with us and take more coffee; it is late for you to be alone, and you are not well. Presently we will see you home."

Humphrey also knew this development of a situation and loved to shatter the sustained politeness he had never himself acquired. "I don't want any help from bloody cannibals," he said for the third time, firmly and very loudly.

The dark man's pallor had been replaced by a red flush, but he shrugged his shoulders, looked at the barman and assumed command of the situation. "Be so good as to ask the chef to come here," he said. After some delay, during which a proffered cigarette was brushed away by Humphrey, the barman-cum-waiter returned with a tired

and greasy chef who bowed to the small assembly. "This gentleman," said the dark man, indicating Humphrey, "has curious notions about the nature of the cuisine here—please be kind enough to show him your kitchens and endeavour to satisfy him of your high standards."

Humphrey tried to think of a suitably crushing comment, and couldn't, but he summoned a bored man-of-the-world smile as, leaning heavily upon the chef, he passed through the

swing doors which led to the kitchens. . . .

The dark man ordered more coffee and, for a long time sat silently with the red-haired girl. Presently, he asked for his bill and, paying it, said to the waiter, "We shall be dining in the private room on Thursday . . . Roasted please, *à l'anglaise*; and a bottle of Château Mouton Rothschild."

"No potatoes," said the red-haired girl, "I'm slimming."



Something will come of this. I hope it mayn't be human gore.

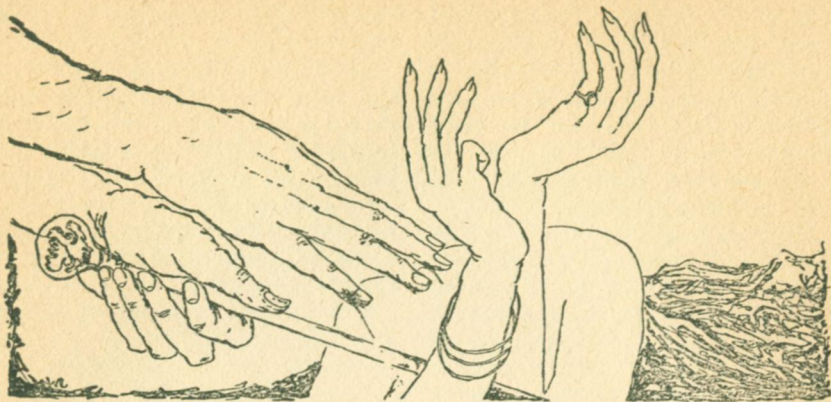
CHARLES DICKENS (1812–1870).

It is better to be a fool than to be dead.

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON (1850–1894).

In his last binn Sir Peter lies,  
Who knew not what it was to frown:  
Death took him mellow by surprise,  
And in his cellar stopped him down.

THOMAS LOVE PEACOCK (1785–1866).



## THE FAILURE

F. L. PUGH

*Illustrated by John Wood*

*In the end even a weakling can find the strength to be his own executioner.*

**F**EAR AND REMORSE burned within him. Sitting hunched on the railway embankment he stared with unseeing eyes, facing the hopeless mess into which his life had toppled. A joke and a laugh with a waitress in a tea-shop, and this is where it had led him! With what photographic accuracy it all came back. The walks, the pictures, the fumbling intimacies, and then the first week-end in Brighton. How gay and man-about-town it had seemed at the time, yet now—how sordid and dirty.

Heremembered the smell of the little back-street hotel—stale cabbage, food, drains and ill-washed bed-clothes. The stain on the bedroom wallpaper just

over the looking-glass, as though someone had thrown something and missed. The pink-white heap of her clothes on the chair by the bed, the warm feel of her body beside him. How many week-ends had they had together? Eight? Ten?

He remembered the feeling of helpless inevitability as his money began to run out; the queer feeling as of watching someone else when he falsified his entries in the cash-book. What a coward he'd been not to cut her adrift and start again fresh and clean! He had always taken the easy way out, all his life through, and this was the result.

The events of the preceding night—the night that seemed centuries back—burned in his brain. It had been her

idea to take a bungalow. So much better than an hotel she had said. Just you and me with no suspicious waitress looking. Funny how she hated waitresses although she herself had been one. He remembered the journey down; the meal they had with the food they brought, the usual horseplay afterwards (this time much more free—they could make as much noise as they liked).

Then the damnfool idea of bringing a bottle of gin. Before, he had thought her more lively and much better fun when slightly drunk. This time, with a place to themselves, he had intended to make her really drunk, and have such a time as they'd never had before.

Instead, she got maudlin and sloppy, and twice called him Harry instead of Jim. The second time he taxed her with it, and that started the row. What a row it was! He remembered her flushed face with its smeared make-up looking silly and yet, even while his anger raged against her, somehow pathetic. The gin broke down her inhibitions and her real self came pouring out. The meaningless, obscene language coming from those lips he had so often kissed, the dishevelled hair, the scraps of finery on her almost naked body—it had all suddenly seemed so small and pitiful. Some remnant of decency in him came to the surface, and he had petted and cajoled her back to bed.

For what seemed hours he had lain awake by her side, listening to her drunken snores, resolving over and over again that this was the end. Tomorrow he would tell her they were finished. Tomorrow he would take her

back to London and be done once and for all with her. Then he'd settle down to his job, get his books right again and start afresh. But then, how many times already had he started afresh! Every time he had slipped back. God! what a rotten failure he was! Now there would be no tomorrow. There would never be any more tomorrows for either of them. All his fine resolutions, all his resolves, had slithered and smashed into this ghastly mess.

Later in the night she wakened and demanded more gin. He had refused. God! why had he refused? Why hadn't he given her the cursed bottle and let her drink herself off into a stupor again? No, some twist of hellish fate had made him for the moment strong-willed, and he had refused. That had started the whole thing off again. The shouting, the recriminations, came drooling from the tense almost square mouth, the mouth that he had kissed. It made him feel physically sick. Her voice rose to an hysterical shriek. Lord God, why hadn't he given her the rest of the accursed gin?

Once more the horror re-enacted itself. He could see again her writhing body through the torn nightdress as he struggled to hold her down on the bed; he felt again the agonizing stab of pain as she kicked him, the stab of pain that had exploded his whole being into ungovernable ferocity. The sudden terrible urge to finish it all . . . His hand came into contact with the fireside companion-set, and he felt for the handle of the poker. Almost unconsciously, he raised it and struck her again and again with uncontrollable fury.





Coward! Coward! The word tossed and tumbled. From behind the whirling turmoil of his thoughts it pointed, accusing, deriding. Coward! You want to do it; you know you've got to do it and you can't. You haven't the guts. Brave enough you were when you hit her. Even when she clawed and screamed and you hit her again; even when the screams died away in throaty bubblings, you felt a great brave and masculine strength. And now you'll hang—unless you kill yourself first, and you can't do it, you can't do it! Coward!

The early morning sun rose; misty blue the distance, and the long shadows of tree and hedgerow lay grey on the dewy grass.

In front of him the railway-line ran away to left and right—he and it the centre and axis of his universe. To the left it disappeared into the mouth of a tunnel; to the right it stretched away across the fields, straight as an arrow-flight.

Coward! Coward! You're up against it now all right! You're hedged, you're cornered. Lies and evasions won't help you now. Easy excuses won't hide this till it's forgotten. To feel the hangman's hand fumbling under your left ear, to feel the trap drop away under you and the knot tear your neck apart—or kill yourself, which? It all seemed so easy last night. She'd done it for herself at last, the bitch! Right, finish her and then finish yourself, and there's the whole mess cleared up in one go. Killing her was easy when once she was hidden in the red mist. The bouncing resonance of the poker like a boundary stroke at cricket. Her eyes wide—so wide you could see right down into the rotten little soul of her. The spittle drooling from her square-stretched mouth as she screamed; the red mist swirling, the smell of blood, the mad racing of heart and lungs. Again and again and again, each time the poker bouncing back as if ready and eager of itself for another blow.

Overhead a rook flapped lazily, homeward bound to the rookery down in the wood. Head outflung and trailing legs, a graceful silhouette against

the bronze sky. From a hole in the bank across the railway two bright eyes looked out over twitching nose at the suspiciously human and therefore dangerous shape opposite. It did not move. Nothing moved except those things that ought to be moving, so the rabbit came forth, sat up and balanced himself on a scut of a tail and bent hind legs and surveyed the morning. Finding it good, he dropped on to four legs and lolloped off. In all the hollows of silence the bird-song lay, glittering like jewels.

Coward! How easy it all seemed before you actually had the razor in your hand; just a slash and a gasp and then—finish. But when you felt its bright keenness and thought of the cold shearing edge slicing through flesh and muscle, grating against bone, how your craven soul shuddered! Twice raised and twice lowered. Would you have to saw it back and forth, you wondered, or would one quick slash do it? No, coward, you couldn't do it! You haven't the guts. All your life you've dodged and hedged, and now you hedge at death.

A grasshopper on the doorstep of his grass world home sat up and surveyed his knees, one towering up on either side of his head, and was pleased. Krrrk-krrrk, krrrk-krrrk. Yes, it's a fine world, and I'm a fine fellow to have such lovely legs, such stupendous legs. Observe, I rub them together so, and listen, krrrk-krrrk, krrrk-krrrk. With short front legs he burnished his already shining back and polished the grotesque mask of his face. Krrrk-krrrk, krrrk-krrrk;

must be bright and shining on such a fine morning as this.

Coward! Back to the bedroom you had to go, where It lay sprawled across the bed, one arm dragging limply to the floor, the other thrown up as if to protect the smashed and bleeding head. Beautiful arms she had; round and firm to beckon a man to his destruction. Smashed and dead, and now you for the police, the pointing finger, the blackcapped judge and the fumble of the hangman's hand under your ear. How the procession tramped round and round in your brain. Police, sentence, cell, drop! Police, sentence, cell, drop! How you shuddered! How your thoughts flew back to the razor again! How you bit your hand till you tasted your own salt blood!

A cuckoo in a near-by tree cleared his throat and tried his pitch for another day of song. Cuk-cukk. No! Nothing like it. Cuk-cuk. That's nearer, but a trifle higher, say. Cuk-cuk. Ah! That's better, now we're away. Cuckoo. Cuckoo.

The river. That seemed the easiest way. No pain, no torn flesh, no blood—above all, no more blood! Just a plunge, a gasp and then peace. But how wickedly the water swirled, making slow, rhythmic patterns on its slow dancing surface. Whorls and twists forming, breaking and forming again. Leering up at you, daring you to do it. And you can't! No, coward, you can't! The thought of cold green death closing in on bursting lungs fighting for breath sets your soul shuddering, and you can't do it.

A beetle, reserved and cautious in his polished black coat, lurched slowly

along. Weary from his nocturnal revels, satiated with food and love, he shouldered his way through the grass stems, seeking some kindly tree in a crevice of whose bark he would pass the hours of daylight. A gentleman of leisure, returning portly and unself-conscious from his carouse, he sought his couch, antennæ and eyes alert for the dangers that beset a sleepy beetle on a sunny morning.

A train approached, sending before it a distant stuttering woven on a pattern of rhythmic murmur. Black against green, it trailed high and wide its billowing plume.

At the sound the man rose . . . Childhood, boyhood, school, manhood, all the searchings and questings of a lifetime came upon him. The golden

promises that were never honoured; the distant fairyland always in sight but never reached. The hundreds of days of dawns of promise; the hundreds of nights of remorse. Now, as he stepped down the embankment to meet the coming train, he was loaded, bowed down with the weight of his memories; but the way was clear, utterly remote and pitiless in its clarity. He had failed. It was finished. The only moment in life when a man stands really face to face with himself, the moment of death, had come, and in that fragment of eternity between the crashing impact of the locomotive and the splintering, tearing of the wheels through flesh and bone, he knew at last, and his way was bright before him.



Action is transitory,—a step, a blow,  
The motion of a muscle, this way or that—  
'Tis done, and in the after-vacancy  
We wonder at ourselves like men betrayed:  
Suffering is permanent, obscure and dark,  
And shares the nature of infinity.

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH (1770–1850).

Cur'd last night of my disease,  
I died last night of my physician.

MATTHEW PRIOR (1664–1721).

# A GREY BEARD

C. J. RIEHLE

*His eyes were blue sword points of hatred and unhappiness*

**I** WAS STANDING IN the small express office of our town, Waterville, when a small man with a grey vandyke beard walked slowly towards me. I remember looking anxiously at the clerk behind the grilled window. I wanted him to hurry and get me my parcel so I could leave. I was not really in a hurry, but this fellow with the vandyke had made me uncomfortable. When I saw that he was going to speak to me, I wanted to run. Some people have that effect on me.

"My name is Henry Hartley."

"That's very nice."

"What is?" he asked.

"Hmm. I suppose it's very nice that your name is Henry Hartley."

I could think of no other way of explaining my asinine reply.

He was small. When I took time to examine him, I realized what a tiny person he was. Nonetheless, there is a quality of height which a beard lends—even to a mite of a man of sixty, for such I supposed him to be. His eyes were a sort of powdery blue—a *blue* powdery blue. They smouldered. Sparks of dislike almost scorched my cheek when he agreed emphatically that it was nice that his name was Henry Hartley.

He wore a shabby tweed overcoat, and shabbier clothes under it, to judge

by the legs of his trousers. Quite by accident I looked down at his feet. They were the tiniest I ever saw on a man. His feet gave me a queer turn—I looked away from them as quickly as I could. For one of the few times in my life, my head did not want to move. I looked at his eyes again. They overcame me.

I was going to tell him to go to hell, but I lost my nerve. The light in his eyes forbade you to use language loosely with him. I turned to the window, received my package and banged the door behind me. I walked away rapidly, not slackening my pace until I was across the street. Then I stopped to look back at the express office.

He stood in the window, looking at me. The distance was a good three hundred feet. In their bluish fashion, his eyes were still smouldering. They were blue sword-points of hatred and unhappiness.

As I walked quickly from the spot and from the bounds of his stare (I could feel it in my back), I wondered why he accosted me; what did he know about me? What *was* there to know? I'm quite an ordinary sort of person. I have no amours; I keep no woman. I haven't embezzled and I'm probably very much like you. I try to get through the day as best I can—enjoying it a trifle by the way.

As I sped to my house I thought of

the skeletons gracing my closet. I believe we all support a few. I remembered that when I was a lad I stole a few coins when the opportunity offered—to buy sweets and that sort of thing. Yes, I recalled some lies that I would rather not have told—in the light of later experience.

What I mean is that the old chap with the beard knew too much about me. He had the effect of making me confess my long-dead sins to myself as I hurried down the street to home. When I was sure I was beyond his vision, I turned around again.

Our town is a small place. I don't think it contains more than two thousand souls. I've lived here for twenty years, and in my rambles I've come across a lot of faces—old and young; idiotic and wise. I don't remember ever seeing this Henry Hartley chap.

I can tell you that after my first encounter with him, I got to my house in a breathless condition. I sat down to smoke half a packet of cigarettes before I'd established my *status quo* as a reasonable being—I thought. My native horse sense told me—a man of forty-five—that it was idiotic to allow myself to be so upset by this shabby person.

The grounds of my little house are nearly an acre in extent. Most of it is lower than the street by a good three yards. The front of the property is fenced; the house stands fifty feet behind the fence. From the back of the house to the limits is a distance of about three hundred feet. I am surrounded on three sides by lilac hedges. You can see that I enjoy privacy. Be-

yond the lilacs is a steep bank which falls sheer for nearly half a mile, terminating on the river. I recommend my place in the summer.

With time the image of Hartley lessened. Until one evening, about two months after I saw him for the first time. I was sitting in my comfortable cloth chair, soaking up the delightful breeze, looking from time to time at my book with half a mind. It grew too dark to read, and I let the book slip to the grass. I raised my head heavenward to discover the first star. Venus soon rewarded me with her beauty. Soon after her advent, the stars—Procyon, Arcturus, the Pleiades—assumed their position in the evening indigo.

It is pleasant to watch for the stars at their stations. It got quite dark, and the panoply of heaven was there for me alone to see. Those impossible worlds blazed forth from their incalculable distances. Presently, my eyes satisfied that the universe was behaving traditionally, I lowered them. They were riveted on the centre of the hedge.

What I saw was an ungrinning Cheshire Cat. It was Hartley. I never knew that one might identify a face in the gloom. I would not have done so were it not for those blazing eyes. He was pressing the shrubs apart. It would be wrong to say that I froze to my chair—rather, I melted in it; at least, all muscles were gone. My bugbear had come back. Oh, there are no two ways about it—think of something unpleasant, or let it haunt you for a few weeks and bank upon it, it shall reveal itself—himself—to you.

All I could do was stare, my spirit in suspended animation (I know of no other expression). There was that creature, with the same shabby overcoat pulled up around his ears. His eyes were alive. I had the impression that one glittered more than the other. It shone like a cat's eye caught in the glare of headlights.

At last I jumped up. I thought if I ran to the house and picked up a stick he would leave. I ran to the hedge with a weapon in my hand. When I was well under way, the man seemed to back out into the air and vanish. My eyes went to the roots of the hedge; I saw beard and head go down, as if they were sinking into the earth. It was a momentary illusion; he could go nowhere but down. What an unpleasant thought. I was forced to the conclusion that he must have climbed that hill from the bottom, starting at the river.

I didn't realize before how impenetrable a lilac hedge could be until I tried to go through it. It must have taken me five minutes to work my way through the dense bush. The hill below was a study in grey. As far as I could see, its expanse was smooth from top to bottom.

No two ways about it—his business, whatever it was, was becoming mine, or the other way round. Not wishing to appear too stupid in my own eyes, I at last stood in the place where I saw him. It was not an apparition. The earth was disturbed by his tiny feet.

What the deuce did he want with me? Why this spying and sneaking? Evidently our meeting in the express office was not accidental. If you think

I went into the house in a shaky state, you are right. I locked all the doors. I pulled the blinds, being at the same time ashamed for letting an old codger give me the creeps.

When away from Waterville it struck me how absurd it was to be upset by Hartley—his speech and appearances. I was old enough to know that the world is host to a countless number of queer fish who manifest their eccentricities under many guises. What if the fellow's eyes were a hot blue. Did they harm me, even if they chose to peer at me from behind my own hedge? I wondered whether it were possible that he admired some quality in me. If that were the case, he was one of the scant few who did.

Did you know that up till the time of Hartley's advent, I considered myself to be as courageous as the next man? I went through the war without being too frightened. In relations with my fellows, I'm usually bluff, taking chaff as well as paying it out.

I cannot get him out of my mind. The other night I dreamed that the point of his beard was sticking down my throat. I awoke with a coughing spell. My finger was in my throat, trying to remove the tickling sensation.

I told them at the office that I was going to take a few weeks off. I wanted to know whether I could rid myself of this bearded nemesis. My common sense told me that he was nothing but an elderly nuisance. A voice in my belly told me that he was more than that.

Consider for a minute: I, a normal enough person, allow myself to be

upset like the very devil. My appetite is beginning to go. There was a time when I looked forward to my breakfast with enthusiasm. It came to pass that I didn't go to the trouble to prepare any.

I am nearly caught up with the present, so I ask you, what shall I do?

I ask the question because I saw Hartley again last night. Of late I no longer sit in my comfortable chair on my pretty lawn, watching the twilight descend. I go into the house early and lock the door after me. I hope that I'll come to my senses soon and have done with this nonsense. I've lost twenty pounds in weight. I don't think I'll go back to work for a good long time.

I saw him while I was pulling the blinds in my living-room—peering through the lilacs again. I peeped through a crevice for some few minutes, my curiosity besting my nausea—for that is what it is in part. Can you fancy I was looking through a hole about three inches square? He caught my glance. I was like the bird of legend caught in the spell of a serpent. I became dizzy. This is another matter—am I in his power? Does he know that?

What shall I do? I know that it isn't fright purely. He has me in his power—I feel his will, malevolent and far-reaching. I shouldn't wonder but that he's chuckling at my fears. He can't help but know that I no longer go to work or even venture out of doors. There is nothing I can do until this cloud passes. I know that he'll come in the house one of these nights. I shall feel all kinds of a fool, that if he does

come, he turns out to be a harmless old nuisance—with the nastiest eyes this side of hell.

If you should ask me at this very minute, I would not be able to tell you whether Hartley is a nasty old man with a pointed beard and horrid blue eyes—I do harp on his eyes, don't I?—or whether he is a projection of an unhappy imagination. The antithesis of happiness? A part of the saurian world below all ken. My mind is so stirred that I consider him to be an emissary of some slimy hell. The constant irony of the whole business is that I considered myself a person of modern thought, one who had consigned the devil and witches to their medieval grave. How sure we are of our logic and modernism until an experience such as Hartley comes along.

Well . . . it has happened. I'm completely shut up in my house from morning till night. All the doors are locked, the blinds drawn. I play an absurd game of hide and seek. He no longer stops at the lilac hedge, but comes into the grounds near the house. In a way he potters with his eyes. Through a tiny peep-hole I spy on my spy! Good heavens! He's so tiny. It is mid-July, warm and humid. He walks very slowly about the place with an almost hesitant step, looking straight in front of him. He's wrapped up in that absurd tweed overcoat. I must say that he seems as puzzled as I. Picture, if you can, an aged scarecrow, thin as a skeleton with a vandyke beard—the ends grown up, hiding his ears.

He is down below my window now, walking back and forth. I see his pro-

file, his two eyes bulging. His eyes, seen side-face, present two hemispheres! His eyes, seen close, resemble the glass marbles I played with as a boy. An impression runs through my brain that he's horribly disfigured, but I don't know how. I can't pin down the actual blight in his face. I suppose that his head is smaller than ordinary. His nose governs his face—it is large. How can I be afraid of that little creature who stalks below. I don't think it is fear but a form of creeping horror. I *taste* the nastiness that emanates from his person. Sometimes a feeling of pity overcomes me. The little man treading my grass is, I am sure, a most unhappy little man.

One cannot watch all day; one must eat and take a smoke. Last evening he sat down, his eyes turned towards the river. That was better, but not for long—he turned on the seat to face me. I rummaged in a drawer to bring out a forgotten pair of field-glasses. The glasses brought his face a few feet from me. If possible, his eyes are a more furious shade of blue—that kind of blue that obtains in a desert when the red-hot sun sears down to bleach and burn. They are the most extraordinary eyes I've ever seen. Their three-dimensional effect was startlingly sharp. He was staring at everything and nothing. His nose, like the beak of an enormous bird, poked through the bushiness of his beard. It was an eagle's nest of a beard. When it was nearly dark, he went easily through the hedge and down, out of my sight.

It is seven o'clock in the evening.

The dénouement shall come soon. He was restless most of the day. I feel stronger—more firm of purpose. However, my curiosity is coloured by a creepiness. I am getting tired of peeping through a little hole at he who called himself Henry Hartley.

As all days must, this one has passed. I sat in a chair pushed into the corner of the room. I turned on no lights. I was waiting for him to disappear through the hedge. I honestly think I dozed. It was the sort of sleep you are aware of and which you hope may pass with speed. From that little slough of light sleep was only half a step to wakefulness. I was fully awake; my hands gripped the chair. I heard a knock on the side door. I knew it was him—after all, I was waiting for that knock. I turned on the light and unlocked the door. He stood there, looking full at me without blinking. I motioned for him to come in. He didn't notice; I asked him then. He walked slowly past me into the room. He walked slowly until he touched the chair where I'd been sitting. He let himself into it slowly.

With a suddenness, I knew I was no longer afraid. He did not take his unblinking gaze from me.

My voice sounded as if it came from a deep cavern. I asked what he wanted.

It was a full ten minutes before he answered.

"I want nothing—only to sit in this chair—if you don't mind."

His voice had lost that truculence which I first noticed in the express office.

"I am now doing something I've



never done for thirty years—I'm sitting in a room—in a house."

"What?"

"Below your hedge—considerably below—a quarter mile, are two stones. They cover a hole. The hole leads into a chamber about six feet square. I have lived there for thirty years."

I thought about that statement. How was it possible?

"How did you live?"

He chuckled. It was a sad, sad sound.

"You fed me. Your garbage can. You throw a lot of food away. For twenty years you have fed me."

"Why have you stalked me?"

"I wanted someone to talk to. It is wearisome to walk about only at night. In that way, no one would notice me. Only rarely did I venture forth in the day. . . ."

His head inclined slowly forward. I thought what a fool I'd been to be afraid of this waif—this unfortunate casualty. It wasn't clear to me at all why it was necessary for him to live in the way he said. As I looked at the top of his head, I heard a slight thump on the carpet. I stared at the floor beneath him.

*In the pile of the carpet lay a bright blue marble!*

It came to me that that marble was an improvised glass-eye. His empty socket was staring at what stared at me for the past couple of months. Then like the sound of a light garment fluttering to the floor, Hartley sank into a heap in front of the chair. Instead of terror in my heart tears welled into my eyes. I think my face went white. It took me a little time to get

that pitiful heap into focus.

I stepped very slowly to where he was crumpled. For some reason I felt guilty of his death. (I knew it was death—one always knows.) I took hold of one shoulder to lay him out straight. Seemingly he was no heavier than a large rag doll.

The hole of the marble was a gaping socket. I stepped over him to call the police. As I did, my foot caught in his beard. I raised it gently to disengage it. I was horrified when the beard hung on to my foot. It was secured round his ears by two wire hooks. It was a peculiar beard—a burlesqued piece of stage property—high on the sides, as if to obscure a face. His face? I looked at it.

After I did, I put my hands to my eyes.

With the false beard removed, Hartley had no nose. That was assumed too. From under the plane of the eyes a wedge was cut in his face—the wide edge extending from under the eyes to the tip of where his nose should have been. The sharp edge of the wedge ended on a line with the jaw-bones. At least he retained the roof of his mouth. . . .

I covered him and the police have taken him away. The inspector and the doctor shook their heads.

"Here's his identity," the inspector informed us. "A military card. He got the wound in the war, no doubt."

After they'd gone, which was about an hour ago, I prayed in the direction of the stars that Henry Hartley should be made the most beautiful in the hosts of heaven.

# THE APPARITION OF MR. PETER METCALFE, 1757

G. C. STANRAY

*The mark of the unquiet spirit was a bloody hand*



YES, I *do* BELIEVE in ghosts. I believe them to be disembodied spirits or the souls of those once numbered a m o n g mankind. Yet, thirty years ago when I first encountered one I couldn't have cared less. I was both uninterested and uninformed.

I had been told the evening of my arrival at the house that the room allotted to me was "supposed to be haunted," but I took little notice and went quietly to bed. Having put the light out, I turned towards the door and settled down. Suddenly it opened. I sat up. Nobody was there so I flung out an arm and banged the door shut. Twice during the night it swung open again. I was quite unmoved, though I did say to myself, "I wish they'd see to the locks for the sake of people's rest."

Next day my hostess inquired quite casually if I had slept well. I replied that I had but that the bedroom lock needed adjustment because the door had opened by itself three times in the night. She looked scared. "Put the chair against it tonight and I'll have it seen to tomorrow," she said.

Later, when I told my colleagues what had happened their general interchange of glances assured me

that the ghost had not yet been laid. The spirit, it seemed, came in and out of that room several times each night.

Some considerable time afterwards, when I was living abroad, I heard that my hostess arranged for a Mass to be said for the repose of the soul of the ghostly visitant to that room, and that subsequently no one witnessed any nocturnal door openings.

It doesn't occur to me even now that I was strange not to have minded it or to have been not in the least nervous. I just wasn't interested then. I was extremely busy teaching all day, and was far too tired at night to stay awake even for a team of ghosts.

Even as recently as two years ago I still had only a passing interest in the subject of ghosts, and when a document entitled "The Apparition of Mr. Peter Metcalfe" and dated 1757, came into my hands, I had not the time to read it.

However, in the meantime I have become a keen freelance writer and—a few weeks ago—while turning out some rubbish at home to make room for more I came across this document again. This time it held me enthralled.

I believe it to be authentic. No one who is well-balanced could, I think, fail to see in it the true course of purposeful and sanctioned visitation from the realm of disembodied souls.

ACCOUNT OF THE APPARITION OF MR.  
PETER METCALFE OF BRIGG IN  
LINCOLNSHIRE AFTER DEATH

It is first to be observed that Mr. Metcalfe died when his wife was on a visit to her friends at York; whilst she was absent he could not be prevailed upon to make a will: she was therefore sent for by express, but did not arrive in time. He died therefore without making his will, and this, it is supposed, was the cause of his appearance after death. He died August 24, 1757, and the following happened in November 1757.

Mr. Gifford (to whose servant Mr. Metcalfe appeared) was Mrs. Metcalfe's uncle, she being daughter to Mrs. Moore of York, his own sister. He was at Brigg with his niece when the affair happened. His man had never seen Mr. Metcalfe, being taken into Mr. Gifford's service since his death.

Mr. Metcalfe had made a kind of verbal will, in the presence of three witnesses, of some particulars, mentioned in the following relation, viz. a legacy to his youngest brother, and an annuity to a Mrs. Dorothy Beeston, who had been housekeeper in the same family in his father's time, and by which it is judged he might be under some obligation to her, from the remarkable insistence which ensued.

Copy of a letter from Jane Cliff of Brigg, daughter of the above Mr. Metcalfe's brother, to Eliza Shuttleworth, of Hodgsock-Woods House, near Blythe, in the County of Nottinghamshire, daughter of the above Mr. Metcalfe's sister.

My Dear Cousin,

Your kind favour I received, and hope your next will be longer, as you will have more subjects to write upon. I am in no want this time having a very odd affair to relate, which I think you will be all much surprised at.

It is in regard of disturbances that have lately been at Mr. Metcalfe's. The first was taken notice of by Mrs. Metcalfe and the maid, who slept with her—who heard doors unlock and lock again, and as they thought, someone came up stairs, and seemed to rush past her room door.

The next night Mr. Gifford's man heard a noise like that of a horse come up the passage into the yard and someone alight from it. The back-parlour sash was thrown up, and as he thought, someone got in and seemed to go out at a passage-window on the same floor, which is two pair of stairs; and he judged by the sound the window must be broken in pieces, but in the morning was found quite safe.

The same night the cook heard a great noise in the kitchen, as though chairs, etc., were thrown about in a confused manner; a large dog, that lay in the house, ran up the best stairs, and in the morning appeared much frightened, ran out and would not be tempted to come near the house for some time after.

A day or two after this, the same man was in the stable, taking care of the horses, which seemed unquiet, and there came terrible flashes of lightning, into every standing, at which the horses were so affrighted that they were with difficulty kept in the stable.

About a week after the first noise was heard, Mr. Gifford's man saw Uncle Metcalfe standing by his bedside with two white wands in his hands; the man had not courage to speak, on which he gave three great shrieks and went away.

They were still terrified every night for near a fortnight. A priest was sent for, viz. Mr. Anderson, who examined the man and directed him how to proceed should my uncle appear to him again, which he very soon did.

The room-door opened and his curtains undrew. There are two beds in that room, and the curtains of the other undrew at the same time, and there came in a man and a woman. The man was in a shroud and face-cloth, the woman in a dark gown, checked apron, a white cloak and a clean chip-hat on.

They walked about the room, and seemed to talk a great deal but in a language the man could not understand. The room was as light as if many candles had been in it. They both sat down on the other bed, and the man said there must be many things settled before his soul could be at rest. She got up and said, "We must go, the Messenger is come for us." She then went out first, and he followed her; then all the lights disappeared.

It was Thursday night the man and woman appeared, and the Sunday night after the door opened and my uncle came in, in his own clothes, and stood by the bed with his hands held up. The young man then spoke, as instructed, asked him who he was and what he wanted. "I am Peter Met-

calfe," he replied, "and I am come to desire that my Brother Nicholas's money be paid as soon as possible, and that Dorothy Beeston's may be paid also, and tell Bridget Metcalfe to get three Masses said for her at three public chapels. I also desire that she and my brother Marmaduke would agree about their affairs, and that she will not disturb Mr. Knight, but be merciful."

He said he wished his brother Nicholas to be taken into the Church again if possible, and that Bridget Metcalfe and he must do their endeavour for it. That he had been in Purgatory till then on his own account, but was now on his brother Nicholas's account; that he should come once again before he went to heaven, which he hoped would not be long: it might be the Thursday after, or the Tuesday after that at the farthest. He then told him many more things which I cannot now remember; I have told you the heads.

Well, according to promise, he came again on the Thursday night, told the young man he was going to heaven and appeared in the same dress as before. Mrs. Metcalfe would not believe a word of anything the young man had heard or seen; so he then desired him to leave a mark, to which at first he did not seem agreeable, said it was very hard he could not be believed, but clapped his hand across the man's breast, who flinched. Uncle bid him not to be afraid, he would not hurt him; he then clapped his hand again and said that would be a sufficient mark.

I have seen it, it very much re-

sembles blood, and it is the plain form of a hand on his shirt; they have tried to wash it out, but it don't stir in the least, Mrs. Metcalfe now believes the whole.

He was in the room half an hour this last time. Mr. Gifford heard him come, looked at his watch, was not in bed, heard him talk all the while, knew his voice, and saw a light when he went away. He said a great deal more, spoke of the glory of heaven, that it would ravish all the eyes of the world to see it, and how sharp the pains of Purgatory are, that all the pains of the world that could be suffered were nothing to compare to it.

He seemed to smile all the time, had a glory around him, which dazzled the man's eyes to look at, and the longer he stayed the more brilliant it appeared. He then also told him the woman who came into the room was Dorothy Beeston, that he should trouble him no more nor anyone else, that he had been three weeks about the house and nobody would speak to him; returned the man many thanks for what he had done for him; that was he in the world and had it all to give him, it would not be a recompense; commended charity very much, desired Bridget Metcalfe would never turn a poor person from her door without relief, and said that pride was a sad thing.

He made the sign of the Cross upon the young man, told him he would do all in his power for him, both in this world and the next; and when he went away repeated these words: "I will take the wings of the golden dove and fly to my beloved Lord"; since which

there has been no more seen or heard.

I forgot to mention, the young man was directed to ask why he appeared to him, being an entire stranger; was answered, because he was the most innocent in the house. The man is a convert.

Let me hear next week what you all think of this relation. My Aunt never believed such things I know, but she will now. My Father never did before, but has no doubt of its being true. Mrs. Cliff joins me in duty to Uncle and Aunt, and with love to you all—

Your ever affectionate,

Jane Cliff.

That is a simple and guileless account of Peter Metcalfe's apparition—his coming, with the sanction of the Court of Heaven, to put things right for himself and others in this world before obtaining the final reward of a good life on earth.

The Catholics—in their Catechism of Christian Doctrine—have the question: What is Purgatory? The answer: Purgatory is a place where souls suffer for a time on account of their sins.

Next comes the question: What souls go to Purgatory? The answer: Those souls go to Purgatory who depart this life in venial sin; or have not fully paid the debt of temporal punishment due to those sins of which the guilt has been forgiven.

Then comes the "proof" of the existence of Purgatory. References are given which show logical reasons for it—from Scripture: Matthew xvi. 27; Apocalypse xxi. 27; St. Paul, First Letter to the Corinthians iii. 15.

But this doctrine is an enigma to

those people who have never considered the reasonableness of it. For Scripture says: "Nothing defiled can enter Heaven." Now since no one among us is perfect we must suppose that all of us however "good" still bear some stains of imperfection at our death. What happens at death? Can these stained souls enter Heaven at once? Clearly not. Then where can they become perfected for the Court of Heaven? Surely in some antechamber where stains may be washed away. In that abode of which Dante speaks with such exquisite assurance there is peace, patient suffering and certain *hope* of final reward.

The ghosts' habit of visiting those to whom they are unknown is to my

mind a wise tactic—and a point most favourable to their authenticity. Those who do not know them are less likely to take fright, and will more readily do what is asked of them.

In this matter of ghosts and of the occult in general, many people are reticent about expressing their opinions, and avoid questioning on the subject for fear of being ridiculed or of being stigmatized as "unbalanced." This is because so much spurious matter has somehow been accepted as truth.

If only true stories were related of ghostly visitations—and there are plenty abroad—very soon a wide knowledge of the "unknown" would be established.



Parting is all we know of heaven,  
And all we need of hell.

EMILY DICKINSON (1830-1886).

His golden locks time hath to silver turn'd;  
O time too swift, O swiftness never ceasing!  
His youth 'gainst time and age hath ever spurn'd  
But spurn'd in vain; youth waneth by increasing:  
Beauty, strength, youth, are flowers but fading seen;  
Duty, faith, love, are roots, and ever green.

GEORGE PEELE (1558?-1597).

Were women never so fair, men would be false.  
Were women never so false, men would be fond.

JOHN LYLY (1554?-1606).

# WATERTIGHT ALIBI

TOM GIRTIN

**I**WARN YOU IT'S not a very respectable class of club," said Detective - Inspector Gallowglass as he led the way down the side-street.

The Guv'nor of the Black Horse said nothing. It was three o'clock in the afternoon, an hour at which, in his respectable Victorian pub, he was forbidden to sell alcoholic refreshment.

"Half the customers, Fred the barman, June herself—they're all on the crook. But I like to keep in touch with my clients."

There was a neon sign, "JUNE'S," over a doorway between two flashy shops. The Inspector led the way up a narrow, dingy staircase, and they were in the club-room. It wasn't very clean. June, blonde hair darkening at the roots, hard lines round her mouth and thin bony fingers, looked as if she had been left behind by the ebbing tide of the Gay 'Twenties. She greeted Inspector Gallowglass brightly and without embarrassment.

"Now then, Guv.," said the Inspector hospitably. "What's it going to be? Drop of short?"

"I'll have a little drop of gin," said June, not waiting to be asked.

The barman moved forward with the bottles. He was a short, fat man, with a moustache and an air that was just a shade too deferential. The bottles had globe-shaped chromium pourers on them, from which a single measure of spirits gurgled into their

glasses. The Guv'nor, watching points as usual, decided it was the smallest measure obtainable.

"Better make them doubles," said the Inspector, reading his thoughts. "And what about you, Fred?"

"That's very kind of you, sir; never say 'No' to a good offer," said the barman, helping himself to a double.

"Your very good health, sir," he said.

"Cheeri-o! First today!" said June.

"Cheers!" said the Inspector, and led the way over to the sofa. "Don't say it!" he begged as he and the Guv'nor sat down. "Lucky the public gives me an expense account."

The Guv'nor was looking round at the few other customers in the club-room. There were a few faded blondes dotted around at plastic-topped tables, anxiously watching the doorway and making their tiny drinks last as long as possible. At the bar a big, burly man was sitting, overflowing his stool and half slumped across the counter.

"That," said the Inspector in an undertone, following the Guv'nor's glance, "that's Big Jim Henderson. A very smart operator. We've been trying to hang one on him for a long time."

Reflected in the rose-pink looking-glass behind the bar, the big man's gaze suddenly met that of Inspector Gallowglass. He raised his glass to the reflection, unsteadily and ironically.

"Here's to crime!" he said, cheerfully slurred.

"I'll drink to that," said the Inspector grimly. "It keeps me off the unemployed list."

"Giss 'nother gin." The big man pushed his glass clumsily across the counter.

The barman hesitated for a moment.

"Wossermarrer? Anythin' the marrer wimme? *I'm* all right! My money's all right! Wodya waitin' for? An' not sumuch pink this time." The barman tilted the bottle and the liquid poured in a long continuous stream into the glass. Comparing it with the miniscule of spirits in his own glass, the Guv'nor's eyes narrowed.

"What's his line?" he asked.

"What used to be known in the Press as cat-burglary."

"Well, he doesn't look as if he'll worry you much tonight," said the Guv'nor. "If I was to serve a man in that condition——"

"I'd see that you lost your licence," agreed the Inspector readily. "Unfair, isn't it?"

"It's the law, I suppose," said the Guv'nor doubtfully.

"One for the road?" suggested the Inspector.

There was a sudden commotion at the bar, the sound of a glass falling over and breaking. With a thud that shook the club-room Jim Henderson fell from his stool, knocking it over and overturning a table that stood near the bar. He lay where he fell, grinning vacantly into space.

"Out like a light!" said the Inspector.

The barman was wiping the big

man's face with a wet swab. The reek of gin was overpowering.

"I should think he'll be out for about twenty-four hours," said the barman critically.

"I wouldn't care to have his hang-over when he does come round," said the Inspector. "Especially with the hooch they sell here! How are you going to dispose of the body?"

"He can have Katherine's room," said the proprietress. "She's away this week."

It took three of them—the Guv'nor, Inspector Gallowglass and fat Fred the barman—to get him upstairs. Jim Henderson, breathing noisily, lay where they dumped him.

Fred loosened his collar for him and took off his tie.

"That's his lot until about midday tomorrow," he prophesied.

The next morning, leaning over his own polished mahogany bar counter reading the morning paper the Guv'nor suddenly drew in his breath sharply as he saw:

£20,000 MAYFAIR RAID

Window-ledge

Thief Escapes

There was a photograph of a block of flats with an arrow pointing to a window and a dotted line indicating ninety feet from window-sill to ground.

He found Inspector Gallowglass sitting at his desk.

"Didn't they tell you I was busy?" he said with mock anger.

"They did. And I told them you'd be even busier when you'd seen me—



that is, if you're dealing with this £20,000 job."

"Don't talk to me about that," said the Inspector with less than his usual urbanity. "The chap who pulled that one off was actually seen by the owner of the flat when she got back from the theatre. Had her up here; went through the Rogues' Gallery. Picked out a man right away—no hesitation at all—the one man I'd like it to be, and the one man I know it can't possibly be because he's got a watertight alibi."

The Guv'nor suddenly burst out laughing.

"I rather care for that," he said. "Yes, it's good, that is—still quite the humorist, I see, Inspector."

"I don't know what you're getting at" said the Inspector shortly. "And I really haven't the time——"

"Have you given any thought to your fellow West End clubman?" said the Guv'nor innocently. "D'you see him in this at all?"

"Jim Henderson? That was the man she identified," said the Inspector bitterly. "No go! Mistaken identity! Had a man go round to check up on him right away. He hasn't stirred."

"Well now! Would you Adam 'n Eve that?" said the Guv'nor.

"Seeing's believing," said the Inspector.

"Then I'll tell you what I saw," said the Guv'nor.

They found Big Jim Henderson lying where they had left him. He was not a pretty sight. The room smelt horribly of stale gin. Unshaven and collarless, the big man was groaning and

giving every indication of being about to be sick.

"Outside, Guv'nor!" said the Inspector, not unkindly. "You've no right to be here, and you'll only get in the Doc's way." The Police-Surgeon was bending over Jim Henderson as the Guv'nor closed the door quietly.

After it was all over, after Big Jim and June, and finally fat Fred the barman, had been taken away to assist, as the humorous phrase has it, the police in their inquiries, Inspector Gallowglass rejoined the Guv'nor in the club-room.

"You were quite right," he said. "Practically no trace of alcohol in the blood-stream at all! But what about the stench of gin?"

"That was on the rag Fred wiped his face with." The Guv'nor went behind the bar counter. "Dröp o' gin?" he said, picking up a bottle with a globe-shaped chromium pourer and inverting it. There was a gurgle and a minute measure fell into the glass. "Make it a double, shall I?" He continued to hold the bottle upside down and, after a slight pause, there was another gurgle and another tiny measure emerged. "Clever idea, isn't it?" said the Guv'nor. "Though I've no idea how it works—only thing I know is that it won't work with water. Put one of these measures on a water-bottle and it just pours out in one continuous stream. Like the one I saw Fred helping our friend from; I thought he was getting an unduly generous measure! Ah, this looks like the one!"

He inverted another bottle of gin and the contents flowed continuously into the glass. "See what I mean?"



## THE SLAVE DETECTIVE

WALLACE NICHOLS

*Illustrated by J. Ramsey Wherrett*

*The Case of the Wasted Lesson shows that a rich man  
can also be a slave—to the vanity of women.*

**T**HE RICHEST MAN in Rome was Marcus Didius Severus Julianus, and he had for wife Mallia Scantilla, the haughtiest woman in Rome, and for daughter the vainest girl in Rome, Didia Clara. He lived in the most splendid of the patrician mansions on the Esquiline, and had the most opulent of opulent villas about twelve miles out of the city.

It was the delight of Julianus to spoil the lovely Didia Clara and to deck her with jewels. For these she was avid, and no amount of gems already possessed satiated her appetite for beautiful rings, bracelets and necklaces, so that when she heard that there was for private sale in Rome a necklace of specially fine emeralds, she was on fire for her father to purchase it for her.

This necklace, of Persian origin, was exquisitely fashioned and priced

exorbitantly; only the very rich could hope to buy it, and its owner, an elderly woman named Corvina, the widow of a well-known proconsul who had inherited it from a famous military ancestor, whose loot it had been, was determined to live the rest of her life in as much luxury as possible. From the beginning she had had both Mallia Scantilla and Didia Clara in mind as buyers, and had baited the hook, at a fashionable party, by an apparent slip of the tongue.

"It is heavy, and really it does not suit my complexion," Corvina had informed the most notorious gossip in Roman society.

Didia Clara, being neither sallow nor old, knew temptation and covetousness, and plotted with her mother to persuade her father to give it her.

"The poor child is sick for it," Mallia Scantilla said in her usual rasping voice.

Julianus bent to the domestic storm; compliance for the sake of peace was the general rule of his life.

"I will give it to her on her birthday," he promised.

"That is three months away, and the wife of that rich Greek, Archidamas, our country neighbour, is giving a party on the day after the Ides of next month," persisted his wife. "Didia should wear it then."

"She shall have it in time," he capitulated.

He bought the necklace immediately, but retained it in his own hands, ostensibly to be cleaned, when his wife and daughter departed for their country villa.

"I will send it to you well before the Ides," he said.

Archidamas, originally a jeweller from Corinth, was a simple, elderly man, but his wife and Mallia Scantilla were old rivals in ostentation. Mother and daughter were alike looking forward to the effect upon her of the emerald necklace.

Having to visit Neapolis on business, Julianus was unable to take the necklace to his country villa himself, but he packed it with his own hands in a special bronze cylinder, sealed at one end with lead which bore the impress of his large personal ring. He then handed it to his most trusted servant, a freedman named Albinus, with instructions to take it to the villa; after which he himself left for Neapolis.

The man drove in a small two-mule chariot, and arrived at the time expected. He handed over the cylinder to his two mistresses, and Didia Clara could hardly wait to break open the seal, extract the necklace, and try it on before a mirror of polished silver; and when the day after the Ides came mother and daughter, each resplendently dressed and bejewelled, duly made their sensation at the villa of Archidamas. Didia Clara outshone every other girl present with her new necklace, and her vanity had never received such entrancing sustenance before.

"I am so happy, Mother!" she cried on her return home.

Next morning, very unexpectedly, the old jeweller from Corinth paid them a visit.

"That was a very striking necklace

you wore last night, Didia," he said with a smile.

"It is Persian," answered Didia.

"I know enough about jewellery," laughed Archidamas, "to recognize Persian work when I see it! May I examine it, my dear?"

She brought it to him, and he took it into his hands, fingering each stone, one by one, and scratching with his nail at various parts of the gold setting. Then he looked up at her with a calm, but shrewd, glance.

"Your father has been cheated," he announced. "This is not Persian work: it is a very recent copy; and the stones are imitation. You see, I know the original, a very fine bit of craftsmanship—Corvina's, wasn't it?—but this is a substitute."

Their world toppled! The experience of old Archidamas could not be gainsaid. In a rage Mallia Scantilla accused Corvina of fraud and, alternatively, Albinus of theft. Both denied it, Corvina contemptuously, Albinus hotly. Her husband inaccessible quickly, Mallia Scantilla felt the need to act at once, and called in Sollius, the Slave Detective.

## II

Sollius began by questioning Albinus.

"How was the necklace carried?"

"In a bronze cylinder, sealed by my master himself. I had it chained to my waist."

"Were you alone in the chariot?"

"I was alone."

"Did you halt for food at any inn?"

"I had food with me, and ate in a

small patch of woodland while the mules rested."

"Did you meet anyone whom you knew?"

"Only my friend Quadratus, a centurion of the Prætorians, who rode part of the way with me."

"How far?"

"To the village of Aquæ Dulces, where his father lives."

"Did you and he halt anywhere together?"

"To let my mules and his horse drink at a stream—the Aquæ Dulces of the village's name."

"Did you dismount from your chariot?"

"To tighten the attachment to the pole."

"Did Quadratus help you?"

"No."

"Did he touch you?"

"We wrestled for a moment or two. He'll wrestle with anyone, will Quadratus; it is his favourite pastime."

"Have you—speak the truth—the least suspicion in your mind of Quadratus?"

"None at all."

"You do not think that he made a substitution while you were wrestling together?"

"I should have felt it," said Albinus, and his tone was definite.

"Did you meet anyone else on your way?"

"Nobody."

"Did you know what you carried?"

"I did," was the sullen answer. "My Master trusts me."

"I should like to question your friend Quadratus."

"He will probably be back in Rome

at the Prætorian barracks," replied Albinus stiffly.

### III

Before, however, Sollius could interview the centurion, he was summoned to his master's library. Titius Sabinus was in a serious mood.

"I hear you have a case in hand, and that the wife of Julianus has lost some jewels."

"His daughter, lord."

"It doesn't matter which," testily snapped Sabinus. "They are rich enough to lose half the jewels in the world—and buy the other half. If I may advise you, Sollius, do not give too much time to it, but keep yourself free for . . . other work."

"Lord?" inquired the Slave Detective.

"I had an audience of the Emperor last night. Pertinax is anxious and uneasy. As the nominee of the Prætorian Guards, he owes his position entirely to *them*, and to keep it has to satisfy their demands. He gave a heavy donation on his election as Emperor; but they keep on claiming donations, and he is at his wits' end to find the money. If he cannot satisfy their greed, he will be in great insecurity, losing their support and having no other. His affairs are ripe for conspiracy. He may have a use for you, Sollius, to nose out his special enemies."

"I am not a spy, lord, nor an informer," said Sollius, flushing.

"If any man," rebuked Sabinus, "can retrieve the crimes of Commodus and cleanse the Roman state, it is Pertinax, and he needs the help of every honest man."

"Should I hear anything, lord, I will follow it up," the Slave Detective promised.

### IV

The first act of Quadratus, a man of thews and laughter, when greeting Sollius on the Prætorian parade ground, was to gather him up in his arms, shake him, and lower him safely to the ground with all the jollity in the world.

"Why do you come to *me*, lame pot-belly?" he demanded. "Albinus told me to treat you well, or I'd —" A guffaw completed his sentence, and then his small eyes shrewdly twinkled.

The Slave Detective curtly, for he was a little ruffled, explained, and his eyes were as shrewdly assessing as the other's.

"As for your cylinder," said Quadratus, "I never saw it."

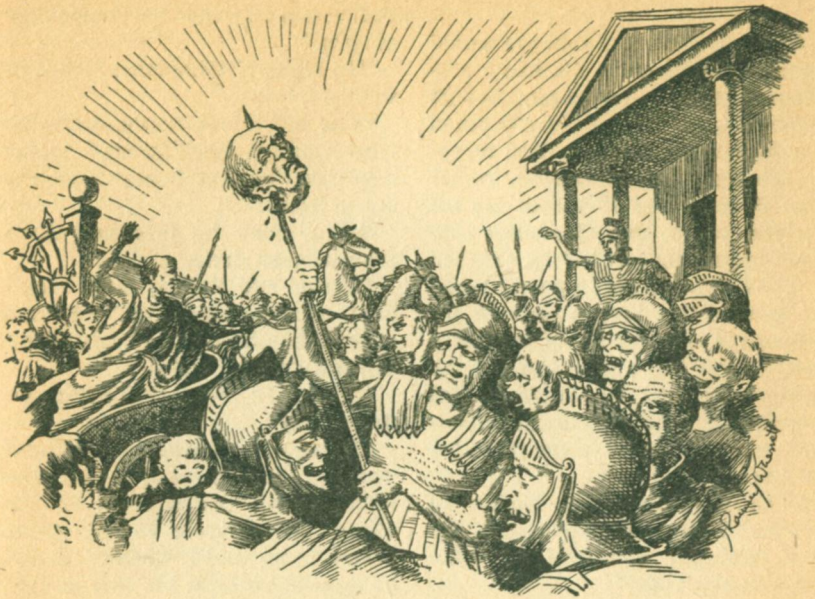
"It was chained to his waist."

"I felt a chain, but I took it as part of his driving equipment."

"From it hung a bronze cylinder in which was a priceless necklace—which is missing."

Quadratus whistled.

"That Julianus is the richest man, I think, Rome has ever had. He could buy anything—almost the Empire itself. Why doesn't he hire a cohort of us Prætorians for a bodyguard? We'd serve him well—we'll serve anyone well who'll pay properly. Money, pot-belly, is the true measure of life. I've tried anything that makes money. I've been a pump-man in the Baths; a wrestler in the Arena—where I had the honour of having my leg broken by the Emperor Commodus, but got a



donation for it!—and I've been an auctioneer's crier in the Forum, for I have, as you can hear, a ringing voice, good for crying commodities—and orders on the parade-ground. I got my step because of my auctioneer's voice."

Sollius brought him back to the matter in hand by asking how long he had known Albinus.

"Years and years," was the reply. "He has done better than I have: special servant to the richest man in Rome. What pickings! He was even given his freedom, so Julianus can never have found him out," he laughed.

"Was there anything to find out?" sharply asked Sollius.

"Oh no, no, Slave Detective; my jest. Albinus was always only too respectable. I assure you, as a man and

a Prætorian, that he couldn't steal even an obol from the pouch of Charon!"

Discovering nothing to his purpose, Sollius broke off the interview and returned home. Nevertheless, he asked the City Prefect to put a watch upon Quadratus and to find out all there was to know about him.

"The great question," he said to Lucius, "is—who made the substitute? Or did Corvina herself ever possess a duplicate?"

"Wouldn't it need, too, a duplicate cylinder?" asked Lucius.

"Think you so?" smiled Sollius. "Come, let us visit Corvina."

But neither Corvina nor her late husband had ever had a duplicate of the necklace made. The substitute, therefore, was of recent origin.

Sollius wished that Julianus would return from Neapolis. He had a pertinent question to put to him, and he felt frustrated, for nobody else could give him the answer. He had to approach the solution obliquely rather than directly, and so waited for the Prefect's report upon Quadratus with some impatience. At last he received it. The Centurion bore a good character as a soldier, but, as were all the Prætorians, he was a ruffler and a gambler. He had a girl, who was the daughter—Jupiter be honoured!—of a working jeweller, a man named Servius, much esteemed in the trade for both skill and honesty.

"The skill," muttered Sollius to Lucius, "is to the purpose, but the honesty a disappointment! Nevertheless, let us visit him."

The Slave Detective and his assistant found the workshop of Servius in a narrow side street near the Porta Capena; and with him was Quadratus himself, laughing and flirting with a dark, pretty girl of obvious sophistication.

"Ho! Lame pot-belly," Quadratus greeted him. "Still after your stolen necklace? I am before you. I suspect the same man! But he won't tell me anything."

Servius, a gnarled, bow-legged old fellow, grinned sardonically.

"Stolen necklaces don't come to me," he said.

"I did not suppose so," replied Sollius. "My question is this: have you recently been employed to copy an emerald necklace of Persian design?"

"No," denied Servius. "But I sup-

plied certain materials for the making of such."

"To whom?" demanded Sollius instantly.

"The old Greek master-craftsman from Corinth, Archidamas," Servius answered, "and as honest a man as any in Rome."

Sollius smote his forehead; Quadratus laughed aloud.

"Castor and Pollux, Slave Detective," cried the latter, "you've a puzzle on your hands! But the lord Julianus can afford to be cheated."

"(Cheated?" murmured Sollius underbreath.)

"Julianus," pursued Quadratus, warming to his theme as he developed it, "is the only man in Rome who can afford the pinnacle in everything, jewels, food, drink, women—though he must ha' bought his wife in early days o' poverty. Now he could buy a Helen—if his wife let him. But he is a slave for all his riches—a slave to his wife and daughter. Everybody knows that. Oh, he'd be the boy for the Prætorians! What donations! Not like Pertinax, that poor man; so mean, too. We don't thrive under *him*. But to thrive is our password, pot-belly, and we're going to make history."

Sollius, uncertain whether the Centurion was a little drunk, looked at him, and decided that he was deadly sober.

"Make history?" he echoed. "How Quadratus?"

"Ah, this is where my training as an auctioneer's crier will be of service," chuckled Quadratus. "You see, pot-belly, we are going to auction the Empire. We Prætorians have the power:

we serve whom we elevate. I am chosen to auction it—and may Julianus be there to hear my voice! We shall do it outside his mansion, anyway. It is all arranged. I was in conference with our Prefect this morning, and Julianus, we hear, is already nearing the city.”

“Is . . . is he in this—plot?” asked Sollius.

“Oh no. He is an honest man. We’ll tickle the palates of his wife and daughter—and that’s all that’ll be needed. What a jest for the world! I must be going. He is nearer Rome with every word I say. Kiss me, Corinna. When the Emperor Julianus pays us our donation I’ll buy *you* an emerald necklace, Bacchus never bless me again if I don’t!”

He swaggered away, and after asking a few more questions—which produced no further knowledge—Sollius and Lucius also left. As the Slave Detective limped back towards his master’s house, he was preoccupied less with the now simplified case of the emerald necklace than with the urgent danger which he foresaw for the Emperor—for how could the Imperial power be auctioned unless the Imperial seat was empty?

“Let us make haste, Lucius, and see our master,” he urged as they set off.

It was a day in late March, calm and clear. The ways were unusually thronged with both citizens and a sprinkling of rabble. Rumour of events seemed already blowing an uneasy trumpet. It took the two some time to reach the outskirts of the Esquiline Hill, where both Sabinus and Julianus had their Roman mansions.

They would approach the latter’s first, and were actually within sight of it when behind them came the hoarse, insistent cries of litter-bearers: “Make way! Make way there!” They hugged the nearest wall to let the litter of some important man go by. As it passed, the curtain was drawn hastily aside, and a voice called out: “Slave Detective! The very man I wish to see. Follow me to my house!”

It was Julianus.

Sollius was troubled. He desired above all to see Julianus, yet he was so perturbed over what Quadratus had said that he felt that his first duty was to warn the Emperor. But Julianus was no man to be withstood, and his slaves were all about him now, welcoming their lord home.

“Lucius,” hoarsely whispered Sollius, “go to our master; repeat what you heard Quadratus say, and tell him to see the Emperor at once. Be off!”

Lucius sped away, squirming like an eel through the ever-gathering crowd.

Descending from his great travelling-litter, Julianus caught Sollius firmly by the arm and led him into the atrium of his house. His wife and daughter, returned from the country days since, were there to greet him.

“It is time you were here, Marcus,” burst out Mallia Scantilla. “Such a disaster! Such a shame for our daughter! And you, Sollius, have been of less use than an ibis on one leg. You have learnt nothing!”

Julianus turned to the Slave Detective. He was a tall, sturdy man, with a bull-like neck and a face somewhat reminiscent, thought Sollius, of busts of



Scipio Africanus, long-nosed and thin-lipped.

"Nothing, Sollius?" he asked, and his eye was quizzical. "You haven't caught the criminal?"

Sollius looked him in the face.

"There is no criminal," he answered.

Julianus burst out into laughter.

"Not even my old friend Archidamas?"

"Friendship," said Sollius, "gives always the helping hand."

"You have it, I see!" cried Julianus, and clapped him on the back. "Why look so puzzled, my dear eyes?" he asked turning to his wife. "It is all very simple. By the great goddess of Fortune, what is that clamour in the streets? It is all very simple," he repeated, raising his voice above the gathering sea of shouting and uproar outside.

"Simple, husband—to be cheated over a most valuable necklace?" rasped Mallia Scantilla.

"I never felt so ashamed in my life, Father, when Archidamas told me it was an imitation!"

"Yet, my dear," said Julianus quietly, "it still made you the most conspicuous girl there! You must not give a false value to trappings. Tell them the truth, Slave Detective, for I think you know it."

"The lord Julianus asked his friend Archidamas," slowly answered Sollius, choosing his words carefully, "to make him a duplicate of the necklace, and this he sent to you, lady, by Albinus, keeping the real one in his own hands."

"Your ostentation needed a lesson," said Julianus. "Archidamas helped me

willingly. His own wife is of the same feather."

The outraged Mallia Scantilla, with flashing eyes, let forth a flood of wifely acrimony, under which Julianus visibly winced and paled.

"And, Father, the shame of it!" whimpered his daughter.

A roar suddenly seemed as though catapulted into the sky from the street.

"In Jupiter's name, what happens?" irritably muttered Julianus. "Is there a riot?"

Sollius involuntarily beat his breast and groaned aloud.

"Hades and Earth, what is the matter, slave?"

Before Sollius could reply, in came Lucius, pursued by the door-keeper.

"Who is this?" angrily demanded Julianus.

"Sollius, Sollius . . ." cried Lucius breathlessly. "I was too late. The Emperor has been murdered by the Prætorians. They broke into the palace. I saw his head carried on a lance through the crowd. They are coming this way."

"What are you telling us?" asked Julianus, grasping Lucius by the arm.

"Poor, noble Pertinax!" sighed the horrified Sollius.

"A mass of people and whole cohorts of Prætorians, master," put in the doorkeeper, "threaten to burst in the gates. They are calling for *you*."

"For *me*?" cried Julianus aghast. "Am I to be murdered, too, and have my head carried about Rome on a lance? Is this a revolution?"

A great cry from outside, so great that it almost echoed round the vast atrium of Julianus's house, rang out

clearly: "Julianus! Julianus!" Then a crash was heard.

"The gates are burst asunder!" cried out a slave, running in. "Master, master, nothing will content them but you!"

"I do not understand this," Julianus muttered, and, brave at least, he strode out into the columned vestibule open to the sky. The others followed.

In the street and thronging the vestibule itself, a mass of shouting and delirious people, the majority of them in the bright steel and bronze of the Prætorians, hurtled and swayed, their arms uplifted and pointing to Julianus as soon as he appeared; and in the same moment a small chariot, drawn by two horses, scattered the crowd and drew up outside the broken gates. It was driven by Sulpicianus, the dead Emperor's father-in-law.

"How much? How much?" cried a stentorian voice, which Sollius recognized as that of Quadratus, and almost upon the recognition Quadratus himself thrust himself through the gates and leapt between two of the marble columns of the peristyle, so that he was visible to those without as well as to those within.

"Going! Going!" he roared laughingly. "The Empire! Going! Going! Going! To the highest bidder! The greatest chance of fortune that the world has ever known! Who'll buy the Empire? I am already bid three thousand drachmas each Prætorian by the lord Sulpicianus. Any rise on that?"

He spoke directly to Julianus, and the crowd roared at his words. In the

midst of his speech a Prætorian had pushed forward to the middle of the burst-in gates, carrying a lance upon which was fixed the head of the murdered Pertinax, so that Julianus should not doubt but that the Imperial throne was truly vacant.

"Any rise on three thousand drachmas"

"Marcus . . ." said his wife, eagerly plucking at his arm. "This is the gods working! You can be Emperor—and I Empress! Make an offer, make an offer, Marcus!"

Julianus turned, and gazed at her sadly, without a word.

"Father, oh Father," said his daughter, catching at his other arm, "you must, oh, you must! The peak of life to be ours! Offer, Father! It is too wonderful!"

"For three thousand drachmas a man, going . . . going . . ." cried out Quadratus.

Julianus glanced over his wife's shoulder to Sollius, standing behind.

"My lesson was in vain!" he said.

"Marcus," cried Mallia Scantilla sharply. "Don't delay too long—or it will be too late, too late! Offer, man!" she rasped, all the dominant passion of her shrewishness working in her face. "Offer!—or you are no man, and no husband of mine!"

Julianus turned and raised his arm.

"Three thousand five hundred!" he called.

"For each Prætorian?" asked Quadratus.

"For each single man!"

"Four thousand drachmas!" cried Sulpicianus.

"Go on!" almost shrieked Mallia Scantilla. "You can bid more than that!"

"Four thousand five hundred!" called Julianus.

"Five thousand!" at once countered Sulpicianus.

"I can't go beyond that," Julianus muttered, but one look at his almost hysterical wife and daughter steadied his purpose. With a sigh and a set face he bid a sum which he knew was beyond the capacity of any man in Rome but himself to pay: six thousand two hundred and fifty drachmas to each man of the Prætorian Guards.

"Any advance on that?" shouted the triumphant Quadratus.

Sulpicianus gathered up his reins, clicked angrily to his horses, and the crowd scattered in front of him. One man fell. Sulpicianus drove straight over him.

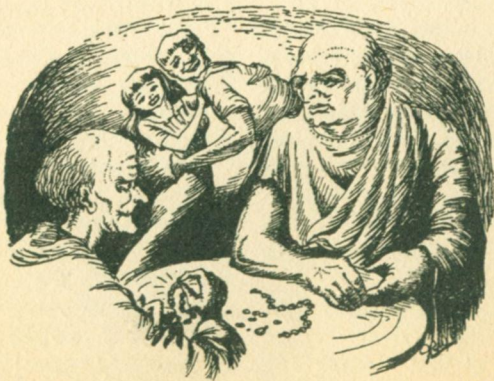
"Hail, Julianus!" cried Quadratus. "Hail, Julianus Augustus!"

Prætorians and throng together took up his cry:

"Hail, Julianus Augustus!"

Mallia Scantilla made joyously as though to kiss the new Emperor's hand, but he snatched it away as if her lips had been a snake's, and strode forward to meet his guards and masters.

"So the lesson was quite lost on them," said Sollius in the ear of Lucius. "How like us mortals!"



# A FACE IN THE CROWD

ROBERT McDONALD

*Why should one man at the carnival be contorted with terror and pain?*

**S**TEVE BROOKS STRETCHED luxuriously in the arm-chair, and moved his feet a little nearer to the log fire that blazed in the wide, open fireplace. He considered himself to have been lucky, for less than half an hour before he had been hunched up over the steering-wheel of his car, staring dejectedly into the dripping, winter darkness. His car had broken down, stranding him, as he thought, miles from anywhere, and then a gleam of light somewhere over to his left had lifted a corner of his depression and allowed a few drops of optimism to seep in. Without further ado, he had grabbed a torch, and within ten minutes had located the cottage in the living-room of which he now sat.

The cottage was owned by an elderly bachelor, named Latter, and did not possess a telephone, as Steve had hoped, but it did possess a spare bedroom, and the invitation to use it had been gratefully accepted. Latter's initial wariness of a stranger on his doorstep late at night had been understandable, and Steve had been at pains to allay his suspicions. He had apparently succeeded, for the old man had made the offer of a bed for the night, and was even now preparing a meal for his unexpected guest. Steve drained the glass of whisky that

Latter had given him, and leaned back comfortably, glancing idly round the room at its low-beamed ceiling and tasteful furnishings. In an attempt to overcome the drowsiness that was stealing over him, he levered himself out of his chair and strolled over to look at the pictures that hung on the walls. His eyebrows arched appreciatively as he examined them; they were good ones and worth a packet, he thought. He moved from one to another slowly, and then at the far end of the room he came upon one that drew a half-whistle of appreciation from him.

It was smaller than the others and depicted a carnival procession in, what Steve imagined, was the market-square of a small town. A column of gaily-costumed dancers stretched across the foreground of the picture, and the whole scene was illuminated by torches. Around the edges of the square, crowds of people watched the procession, and Steve moved closer, drawn by the vivid colours and wealth of detail that made the picture so vibrant and so extraordinarily realistic. At close range he noted with delight that even the faces of the crowd had distinct features, and were not, as he had at first supposed, mere daubs of paint forming an effective background. This aspect of the picture intrigued him, and he marvelled at the exquisite detail that endowed each

face with an expression of its own. Absorbed, he ran his eye along the excited, laughing faces of the watching crowd until he came upon one that caused him to peer even closer. *It was not laughter that transfigured the minute features, but fear and pain.* The mouth was twisted open, and the eyes were wide and staring in an expression of sudden awful understanding, as if the owner of the face had, at that very second, perceived something that had shocked him into sudden, comprehensive terror. Steve blinked and looked away. He was sure that he was not imagining it, for on his second inspection he noticed the same thing about that one face. Fear and pain written clearly on one face, among so many other gay and laughing ones. It puzzled and, for some unaccountable reason, disturbed him the longer he looked at it, and mentally cursing himself for being an over-imaginative fool, he looked for the name of the artist. There was no title as far as he could see, but from the tiny letters in one corner of the canvas, he deciphered a name, Valquarez. The name meant nothing to him, and he was still studying the picture when Latter came into the room, carrying a loaded tray, which he set down on a coffee-table.

"Ah, I see you're interested in my pictures," he said, as Steve turned to greet him. He was a thin, angular man with finely veined hands and snowy hair. He indicated the picture of the carnival.

"I'm rather proud of that one. Have you examined it closely?"

Steve nodded. "I've never seen de-

tail like it," he replied enthusiastically. "Where did you get it, and who's this chap, Valquarez? I've never heard of him!"

The old man rubbed his chin reflectively.

"No, he's new to me, too. As a matter of fact, I found the picture during my last visit to London; discovered it stuck away in a little antique shop, and bought it quite cheaply."

He rubbed his hands together briskly. "But come and have some supper, Mr. Brooks; you must be hungry."

They settled themselves by the fire, the small table between them, and while the old man busied himself with the coffee, Steve pondered over the picture. He was rather glad that he had not mentioned anything about it to Latter. He presumed that tiredness after his long drive and the effects of the whisky had played tricks with his imagination. He had looked at the picture, and from the expression on a tiny, painted face had interpreted fear and pain; while Latter, who must have examined it a great many times, had noticed nothing odd about it. Different people different interpretation, thought Steve, it was as simple as that; and he contrived to push it from his mind and concentrate on the meal that Latter had prepared. Nevertheless, he did have one more look at the picture before retiring to bed. The two men finished their meal, and sat talking for over an hour before Latter suggested turning in for the night. While he was out of the room for a moment, Steve walked over and stood

before the picture, viewing it objectively, until his eyes were drawn irresistibly to that one particular face in the crowd.

On further inspection, he was not at all sure about it, and yet even as he stared at it he seemed to experience a strange chilling of the blood, almost as if he could feel the pain and terror that was stamped on the minute features. He straightened up and turned away, almost guiltily. What he needed was a good night's sleep. He lit a cigarette and waited, gazing into the fire until Latter returned and showed him up to his room.

Next morning he was up early, and after breakfast he scouted around for ways and means of getting his car fixed. He was fortunate in getting a lift into the nearest village, and in a little under two hours his car, in the capable hands of the garage mechanic, was serviceable once again. Before leaving, he called at the cottage to thank Latter for his hospitality; then he was off, heading towards London. The following months were lucrative ones for Steve, and long hours of work left him little time for leisure. His brief sojourn at Latter's cottage had receded into the mists of past memory, and his mind was completely occupied with the thousand and one details of the business in which he was engaged. It was natural, therefore, when the South American trip was offered him that he should accept it gratefully. He decided to make it a combined business and pleasure trip, and it was with a light heart that he packed his bags and boarded the plane for Rio de Janeiro. By careful

arrangement of his schedule, he was able to complete the business side of the trip in a week, which left him eight or nine days free for sightseeing.

It was several days later that Andrews, the manager of the Rio branch office, suggested travelling up-river to a small town that he knew. Steve was delighted at the prospect, and it came as a disappointment to him when, owing to pressure of work, Andrews regretfully considered calling it off. Steve had been set on the trip, and eventually, despite Andrews's withdrawal, he decided to go ahead on his own.

A day and a half later, after an interesting and, to him, exciting journey up-river, he booked in at the best of the few small hotels in Santa Veira, and armed with his camera set out to explore the town.

After a time it became evident to him that something special was afoot. The narrow streets were hung with banners, while an atmosphere of excitement seemed to pervade the air, and he soon discovered that his arrival had coincided with the annual fair and carnival, which was to be held the following day. That evening, back in the hotel, the waiter's graphic description of the form the celebrations would take filled Steve with pleasurable anticipation, and he was still thinking about it when, inexplicably, the face of Latter resolved itself in his mind's eye. A memory stirred, and then he remembered the picture. Remembrance brought with it a strange trickle of apprehension along his spine, and he closed his eyes in frowning concentration as he strove to

assimilate the exact details of the picture. It was an odd thing, but as far as he could remember the market-square portrayed in the picture bore a striking resemblance to the one in Santa Veira. The sheer impossibility of it caused him to reject the thought. But was it so impossible? Stranger things had been known to happen. What had been the artist's name? He concentrated hard, but the name that he was trying to remember eluded him; and then his train of thought was interrupted by an invitation from several of the residents to sit in on a game of poker. Nevertheless, thoughts of the picture persisted, and he resolved to have a good look at the market-square the following morning. As it was, he slept very late so that he did not get out of the hotel until after lunch, and by that time the celebrations had begun.

It seemed to him that every inhabitant of the town had turned out for the occasion as he strolled around the crowded square watching the gambling tables, the dancing and the bull-riding.

The infectious gaiety of the people communicated itself to him, and he pushed his way among the crowds, grinning amiably as he was jostled to and fro. Later he returned to the hotel for dinner; dusk was beginning to fall and the crowds, if anything, seemed to be thicker. During the afternoon thoughts of the picture had been swept from his mind by the activities in the market-square, but over his meal he suddenly remembered the name of the artist, Valquarez, and he

repeated it several times to himself lest he forget it again. On his way out, he stopped at the desk where the receptionist sat, reading a newspaper.

"Excuse me," he said, "perhaps you can help me?"

The man leaned forward attentively. Steve went on, "Tell me, have you ever heard of an artist called Valquarez?"

The man, without hesitation, nodded assent. "Why, yes, Señor, he is one of our most famous citizens."

Steve leaned forward eagerly. "You mean he lives here?"

The man's teeth flashed in a proud smile. "Yes, Señor, right here in Santa Veira." He went on to describe the artist's house on the side of the square. Steve thanked him and went out into the street. This discovery had somehow unsettled him, and he fumbled for a cigarette. The whole business seemed fantastic, but he was certain now that the market-square in the painting and this one in Santa Veira were one and the same. He decided to go and tell Valquarez about the strange coincidence, and hurried down one of the streets leading to the square.

It was dark, but torches had been lit in preparation for the carnival procession. The crowds had drawn back to the edges of the square, leaving the centre empty. Fireworks illuminated the buildings with lurid colours as he pushed his way forward into the crowd, and he stood along one side of the square just as the head of the procession approached. It was flanked on either side by dancers in gay costumes,

waving fiery torches as they leapt and sprang in the air. For a moment Steve allowed his eyes to wander along the dwellings on the far side of the square. After a moment's scrutiny he identified Valquarez's house from the hotel receptionist's description. Then he narrowed his eyes and stared harder at the house, half-lit in the flickering torch-light.

It lay directly opposite him and bore a wide balcony on which Steve could see the figure of a man seated at an easel, painting the scene before him. He felt an electric tremor run through him. For the past few minutes he had become increasingly aware of the familiarity of the scene, and now came the shock of seeing Valquarez at his easel almost as if . . .

His mind was still grappling confusedly with the strange thoughts that filled his head when he felt a stealthy movement inside his jacket, and he glanced down sharply to see a hand

withdraw holding his wallet. Acting quickly, he turned on the swarthy man at his side and succeeded in getting a grip on his wrist.

The man twisted savagely in his grasp, and for a second Steve hung on grimly. Then in the flickering light he saw the flash of steel, felt a succession of sharp blows in the stomach, and the man was gone, leaving Steve half-bent with searing agony in his bowels. The swift struggle had gone unnoticed amid the shouts and laughter of the crowd. Steve clutched his stomach, his face twisted with pain, his eyes misting as they stared glassily at the scene before him. Then they widened in terror as the truth burst inside his head like a bomb. The procession, the dancers, the vivid colours were all familiar to him, and now he had added the last grotesque detail—one fear-distorted face among so many gay and laughing ones.

The picture was complete.



Lo! Death has reared himself a throne  
In a strange city lying alone  
Far down within the dim West,  
Where the good and the bad and the worst and the best  
Have gone to their eternal rest.  
There shrines and palaces and towers  
(Time-eaten towers that tremble not!)  
Resemble nothing that is ours.  
Around, by lifting winds forgot,  
Resignedly beneath the sky  
The melancholy waters lie.

EDGAR ALLAN POE (1809-1849).



# THE WEATHERVANE

P. L. HOWARD



HERE WAS A comfortable sameness about the week-ends Masterman spent with his sister at Burmouth. He arrived by train from Liverpool Street at four o'clock every Saturday afternoon, tea was not till five and he could walk from the station to her cottage on the North Shore in half an hour. But on this particular Saturday there were one or two trifling variations from the normal routine.

To begin with, he brought Sally down with him—Sally being a young pedigree Alsatian—as a present for his sister. The idea of keeping a dog was hers, and he had applauded it, holding that some form of protection was desirable for an attractive widow who lived alone. Then he missed the usual policeman at the junction of High Street and Regent Road. Instead of the placid middle-aged officer he was accustomed to see there directing the traffic with leisurely efficiency and who was never too busy to salute him, there was a sharp-faced, red-haired man whose style he did not like at all. He was carrying out his duties capably enough, but his signals were arrogantly given and seemed curt and peremptory. "Enough to put anybody's back up," thought Masterman.

Two parallel roads led off Park Crescent towards the North Shore. Hitherto Masterman had always

chosen the first, though the distance to the cottage was the same either way. He had done this ever since he began coming to Burmouth, and it had never occurred to him to try the other. But Sally seemed to prefer the second road, and Masterman followed her. On turning the corner, he caught sight of an object moving in a gap between the trees and looking black against the sky.

Masterman thought at first it was a child's kite caught in an overhead wire, or perhaps a crow flapping about with a broken wing; but its movements seemed too regular for either. When he got closer he saw it was a weathervane, in the form of a wooden doll, turning on a pivot at the top of a flagstaff. It had a pair of long arms that were revolving in slow sweeps like mill-sails. As he drew opposite, he saw the pole was fixed in the front garden of a cottage. He stopped to watch. Immediately the little doll, which he could now see was intended to represent a sailor, turned slowly towards him and in a very deliberate manner raised one arm as if to beckon him closer. Then there came a puff of wind, and the figure's arms began to spin faster, as though in urgent summons.

Having plenty of time, Masterman filled and lit his pipe, the better to enjoy this odd entertainment. As he did so it struck him he had not seen Sally for some minutes. He looked round and caught sight of her dodging into a

front garden a few doors back. In answer to his whistle she came trotting up, and sat down on her haunches with her tongue lolling out. Then she, too, saw the weathervane. She regarded it uneasily with her head on one side, looked at her master for reassurance and, getting none, threw her head back and howled dismally.

Masterman spoke to her sharply—telling her to be quiet. She stopped howling and shrank back against his knees, growling in a manner so threatening that Masterman bent down and snapped the lead on to her collar. When he stood up, he noticed a man leaning over the gate watching them.

Masterman could discover nothing in the man's appearance to account for the dog's alarm. He was an ordinary sort of man—shortish, square, brown faced—and he looked like a retired seaman. He just went on leaning over the gate, his arms resting on the top bar, watching Masterman and Sally and waiting to be spoken to. There was no suggestion of impertinence or familiarity in his attitude.

At last: "She's only a puppy," Masterman said; "nervous, you know. Doesn't take to your weathercock. It has frightened her more than a little, I imagine."

"She should keep her nose down, same as a spaniel dog. Then she wouldn't see more than is good for her," the man replied.

"It certainly has upset her, poor girl," said Masterman; "though it seems to have no ill-effect upon me. I like it very much. Do you make these

things for sale? I shouldn't mind buying one to take home with me."

"I wouldn't expect it to bother a man of education like you," answered the sailor. "Children and puppy dogs are different. *They* don't know any better. Yes, I do make them for sale. Forty shillings apiece, and fix them up for five; and I dare say I could find you a bit of mast. But step inside and take a look round. You may see one as takes your fancy. Or I could turn you out something special. That would cost extra, but would be worth it. Say, the teacher that beat you at school. Or your old sergeant-major. There's been a run on sergeant-majors lately."

Masterman followed the man down the garden path, past the back door and into a wooden and corrugated-iron workshop at the rear of the cottage. Sally followed, keeping close to him. She was quieter now, though she whined uneasily from time to time.

There was a work-bench in the shed, with a vice and lathe, a small forge and a stove. Fixed to the wall facing the door was a shelf, on which were wood- and metal-workers' tools. Beneath it was a rack that ran the length of the room. On this were laid out some thirty to forty dolls in different stages of completion. The whole place looked exceedingly clean and tidy, as though the sawdust and shavings had just been swept up.

Masterman stepped over to the rack to examine the wooden figures. The sailor watched him but did not speak.

At one end of the rack there were dolls in the rough—little more than cylindrical chunks of wood. These gradually took shape as the eye

travelled along the line—necks, shoulders, waists and rudimentary feet appeared—until by two-thirds of the way along each had taken on a distinctive character. At the far end the little effigies were plainly identifiable as sailors, schoolmasters in mortar-boards, policemen, soldiers and lawyers in wigs and gowns. Generally, persons in authority and officers of the law seemed to predominate. There was but one female figure—a flashy, predatory type. It lay on its back apart from the rest and appeared to be completed. The features were painted with such careful attention to detail that it might have been a portrait. Masterman felt he would have no difficulty in recognizing the original. Tied to the neck was a ticket marked £20.

In a corner of the shed was a table at which the dolls had the finishing touches given them; here each was painted and fitted with a spindle. One, half painted in black, lay face downwards where the craftsman had dropped it. He must have been at work on it when he had been interrupted by Sally's howling, thought Masterman. He was about to inspect this specimen more particularly when there was a single loud knock at the door. The red-haired policeman stalked into the room without waiting for an invitation.

"Caught you at home—have I?" said the new-comer unpleasantly, addressing the sailor. "There's a little matter——" He checked himself abruptly on seeing Masterman. He looked him up and down, and, seeming satisfied with his appearance, pro-

ceeded to engage him in a conversation from which he pointedly excluded the wood-carver. There was no doubt that this was an experienced officer. He talked with an easy affability, asked no direct questions, but in the course of a few minutes had learned Masterman's name and occupation—he was an assistant house physician at a London hospital—the reason for his being in Burmouth, his sister's name and address and how he came to be in the workshop.

Masterman began to think of tea with muffins, plum cake and apricot jam. He looked at his watch and said he must go. He bade good day to the constable and the sailor, and left them together. The latter looked uncomfortable, he thought, and he wondered what he had been up to. Probably nothing more serious than helping himself to a few bits of wood from a timber-yard. A pity he hadn't given him an order, as he had intended. One of those things would give distinction to his sister's little garden.

Masterman always had supper with his sister at nine o'clock. At eight it was his habit to stroll down to the Anchor and spend half an hour in the bar parlour. He rose as the clock began to strike, asked what there was for supper, and on being told there were kidneys, said that he should certainly be back on time. He walked down the passage, and had just got his hand to the latch of the front door when there came a single knock. Masterman opened the door. The red-headed policeman confronted him.

"Caught you at home, have I?" announced the caller pleasantly.

"I am just going down to the Anchor," explained Masterman.

"A very respectable and well-kept house," said the policeman. "If you have no objection, I will walk that way with you. My business with your sister can wait. It's of no great consequence, and I can call any time." Masterman must have looked concerned, for he went on, "She gives us something every year for our orphanage."

"Oh!" said Masterman.

"Yes," said the officer. There was a pause. Then he continued:

"I hope I didn't give offence, the way I butted in on you and Saul at his workshop this afternoon. I came off-duty just after I saw you coming from the train, went to the station, got my bicycle and rode down to Saul's. I had to give him a talking to in the way of business, you understand."

"He hasn't done anything wrong?"

"He may have and he mayn't have. Or you might say 'not so far as is known at present.' But he might do. He isn't so particular. Not the sort I should associate with, if I was you," he added.

"A most interesting man, I found him, and really clever at making those wooden weathercocks. And he keeps his place so clean and tidy."

"Old seafaring men are mostly like that. More especially if they've served in the Navy, as this one has. He found the discipline didn't suit him and worked his discharge. Then he joined the Merchant Service. Foreign boats mostly. Finished up as a cabin steward on the *Marken*, Royal Dutch Line, passengers and freight, from Continental ports via Dover to the West

Indies. Married a coloured woman and settled in Jamaica. Got into some sort of trouble with the authorities, and had to come home in a hurry, leaving his wife behind him. But I've a notion he didn't come home empty handed. Brought a certain *something* back with him that he'd best have left out there where they understand such things. Oh yes—I know quite a lot about him. He'd be surprised to know how much."

Masterman said nothing. They walked on in silence for a while.

"Likes his little drop, too," the constable continued. "Any evening you can find him in the Fishermen's Rest, sitting by himself, with a glass of rum in front of him. Not the class of house you'd use, sir. Stick to the Anchor, I should—if I was you. Well—I turn off here. Good night."

At midnight Masterman was drowsing over the gas-fire in the sitting-room. His sister had gone to bed and Sally lay in a wicker basket in the hall. The dog was restless and whimpered fretfully in her sleep.

There came a tap at the french window. Masterman rose, crossed the room and looked out. The red-haired policeman stood outside on the gravel, making signs that he wanted to come in.

"Rather a late hour to call," said the visitor as soon as he had been admitted, "but I saw the light on and thought you might be up. About that dog. If over six months, your sister has to take out a licence. The Inspector's very particular. Thought I would remind you."

"I will make a point of asking her

to get one on Monday," Masterman assured him.

"The offence," observed the policeman, "of keeping a dog without a licence is not a serious one; but it may mean a summons and a fine. The law is quite clear on the matter."

"You can generally find some statute or regulation when you wish to prosecute, I suppose?" asked Masterman.

"Generally—but not always," the policeman replied. "There's things which are worse than keeping dogs over six months old without licences, and you can't touch them. You might dig up an old Act of Parliament, passed in the reign of James the First, say—part of which has been repealed and part of which has not, and owing to some error in the wording which can't be put right now, you can't say which part is still the law and which part isn't any longer. So you can't proceed. And the sin goes unpunished."

"You refer to the sin of witchcraft, I presume?" The outrage to Masterman's taste had made him forget his manners.

The red-haired man looked at him curiously.

"I can see you're tired," he remarked with dignity. "I'd better be getting along. Shouldn't have troubled you at this time of night. Don't let your sister forget that licence. Inspector's very particular. Good night."

The fine, still October weather continued over Sunday. Monday morning brought a change. There were little squally gusts of wind that came, died and came again. Dead leaves whirled

in spirals in the park. Smoke from chimneys blew anyhow.

Masterman was hurrying to the station to catch the nine-thirty to Town. Passing Saul's cottage, he noticed the flag-pole was down. He presumed the ex-steward of the *Marken* had got tired of the sailor and was putting up another figure by way of a change. Perhaps the one he had been engaged in painting on Saturday afternoon. It had looked rather like a policeman. With a touch of red paint at the back and sides of the head just below the helmet, it might have passed for his persistent acquaintance of the night but one before.

Masterman reached Regent Road. The wind had dropped suddenly, and for a minute or two there was a dead calm. He looked along the road that was busy with cars carrying week-enders back to their offices in the City, and in the distance he could see the policeman on point-duty at the junction. He was standing motionless, with his back to the line of traffic going out of the town, his left arm horizontal, his right hand raised, while in front of him the cross-bound traffic streamed past. Masterman had come to within fifty yards of him when there was a sudden puff of wind. Bits of paper danced along the pavement and the gilded cock on the church steeple began to turn. But Masterman noticed nothing of this. He was gazing in astonishment at his red-haired friend. For he had begun to turn, too, now this way, now that; and he was jerking his arms up and down in meaningless extravagant gestures.

Suddenly he became rigid. Then he

collapsed, falling over in the road on his back. He did not buckle at the knees, he neither sagged nor wilted, but fell all of a piece like a thing of wood.

Two more policemen, a sergeant and a constable, appeared. They lifted their comrade and carried him over to the pavement. Masterman strode through the crowd that had gathered. "Doctor!" he said as he dropped on his knee beside the stricken man and began a rapid examination. Then he rose and said, "Ambulance!"

The Sergeant crossed the road to an emergency call-box. By the time he returned the constable had got the traffic moving in a steady flow towards London.

A motor ambulance drew up at the kerb. In a matter of seconds the red-haired man, minus his helmet and with tunic, shirt and collar open, was

placed on a stretcher and put inside. Masterman spoke briefly to the stretcher-bearers. Then he turned to the Sergeant and handed him his card.

"A fit, I suppose—Doctor?" the Sergeant suggested. Then as Masterman did not reply at once, "Though that's the business of the doctor at the hospital to find out, I suppose."

"Of the coroner at the inquest, I'm afraid," Masterman answered.

The next train to Town was not due to leave for another half-hour. Masterman stood at the counter in the station refreshment-room drinking coffee. A hand touched his elbow. Somebody was whispering close to his ear.

*"... or I could turn you out something special. Say, the teacher that beat you at school. Or your old sergeant-major. There's been a run on sergeant-majors lately."*



It is with our passions as it is with fire and water, they are good servants, but bad masters.

ROGER L'ESTRANGE (1616–1704).

O! it is excellent  
To have a giant's strength, but it is tyrannous  
To use it like a giant.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (1564–1616).



## EXCEPT FOR MURDER

F. E. EVANS

*Illustrated by Arthur Wragg*

*How was the modern highwayman to know what dangled from the ancient gibbet?*

**I**TS BLACK SURFACE glistening under the headlights, the road slithered towards the swiftly moving car like a snake . . . seeming to poise itself immediately in front and then stab suddenly forward beneath the wheels.

The man in the car was driving fast—in a way which suggested that he wanted to remove himself from his surroundings as rapidly as care for his neck would permit. That was true. Even in normal circumstances Harry Chastleton was sensitive to his environment; conscious of its power to convey peace of mind or to instil fear, to soothe or to thrust out little tongues of evil apprehension. Tonight he was

terrifyingly affected by the nearness of Flexton Gibbet, and he wanted to put as great a distance as possible between himself and that eerie object.

Standing almost beside the road, which had once been a route for stage-coaches, but tucked away on a tiny green beside the mouth of a country lane, the gibbet was grim enough in day-time. Its gaunt framework crouched into the brambles, and the cross-arm from which the noose had dangled seemed like a fore-finger crooked out to beckon another victim towards it.

It had beckoned very successfully throughout its existence. The road had been well-patronized by travellers with fat purses and valuables well

worth taking . . . and with throats that needed cutting when resistance became too stubborn. All of which crimes meant short shrift for highwaymen, and a public hanging-place was useful to justice, for sometimes light-fingered Jack received a sharp reminder that crime did not pay when his nag shied suddenly at the sight of silently swinging Ned.

Even after those days, the gibbet had exercised a morbid fascination for people who had felt an urge to end their own lives or had got into some desperate position.

Harry Chastleton had seen it late at night, with sombre shadows and patches of sickly moonlight creeping after each other in a slow and horribly silent game of follow-my-leader, and it was little wonder that he wished to escape from it. To cap all, there had been that heart-stopping moment when the darkness of the lane had taken a denser blackness that seemed to lumber towards him, and there had been a sound like hoarse, half-muted voices. . . .

Chastleton sat tensed over the wheel, watching the hedges curve towards him as the road wound along. It straightened, and he had a period of speed with the night air flowing past with a smooth, swishing sound. Then he braked hard into an S-bend, and saw a figure standing by the roadside, urgently signalling him to stop. There was little time to think and the man was by now beside the car; he wore a trilby hat and a tweed overcoat, suitable for journeying in all sorts of weather, yet looking vaguely professional.

He jogged alongside and spoke through the lowered window. . . .

"I'm a doctor. I've been called out urgently and I've had a puncture . . . will you give me a lift?"

Chastleton swung open the door.

"Good," said the other. "Very good. And now get out."

He held his hand out, pointed at Chastleton. It had a revolver in it. Chastleton looked at it, then he spoke.

"A modern highwayman," he said. "Do you know—a few miles back along this road there's a gibbet. An eerie thing . . . rather horrible. But it's been very useful at times. They used to hang highwaymen on it."

He got out.

The other laughed flatly. He said, "You're two hundred years late. Your gibbet's dead—dead as anything that's ever hung on it. The past is dead, my friend . . . and they don't hang highwaymen nowadays—except for murder."

Chastleton backed away as the man waved his gun and then, straightening himself in the driving-seat, accelerated away.

There was a tree-stump by the road and Chastleton sat down. He had no doubt as to his assailant's purpose; there were jewellery and fur thefts and even such ambitious schemes as mail-bag robberies happening quite regularly. A stolen car was the ideal vehicle, and he had just happened to come along . . . just as Barton had come along those three years ago. . . .

His mind went back to the thoughts that had occupied it for the earlier part of the night; memories of the girl he had thought he was going to marry



—until the day when she told him she was going to marry somebody else.

They had been in love—or so he had thought; he had been sure of his own feeling and its enduring strength. He had felt conscious of it one day when he walked beside the sea and the waves had rolled in majestic procession towards him.

“Mary,” he thought. He looked at the sea and the eternal power of it. “That’s how I feel about Mary.” He had stood another day by Wells



Cathedral, awed by the immensity of it; the massive stones had seemed to press on to the ground as though they would remain there for ever.

“That’s like me,” he had whispered to himself. “Me—and the way I feel about Mary.”

Then she had met Barton. He had charm, but he had defects of character obvious to another man—but apparently not to Mary, to whom he had paid court.

She had been attracted . . . perhaps

not more at first, but Harry Chastleton had been sore, hurt that she should like someone of that type—particularly in preference to himself. Then one day she told him she was going to marry Barton. That was the end of their association, but not the end of the matter for Chastleton, for he had learned of what eventually happened.

Mary had had money and Barton had spent it; then the superficial nature of his affection became obvious, and finally he extended to his wife only polite indifference. But all that was some while ago.

Now, half-raising himself on the tree-stump, Harry Chastleton felt in his pockets for cigarettes. He flicked the spent match into the roadway; the action made him conscious of the emptiness of the road, and that sent his mind back to the past again . . . quite logically. For Mary had withdrawn into herself, and the affair might have remained just one of those marriage situations which seem rarely to be changed by anything as definite as divorce proceedings. Then Mary had gone shopping, had stepped casually off the pavement, and had been brushed aside by a passing car to become just one more of those fatalities described as the Toll of the Road.

Sitting on the tree-stump Chastleton drew at his cigarette; only a few minutes had elapsed since he had been left alone there. The moon gleamed out from behind a cloud, and he glanced at it but as hastily looked away. It was oval in shape; it lay tilted to one side like a head, and for all that some light came from it there

was a blank, unseeing look about it. . . . A branch of a tree jutted into the sky above it, and Chastleton's thoughts went terribly back along the road to the gibbet. . . .

He controlled them and they returned to the more distant past. He had never trusted Barton, and his professional judgment as an accountant strengthened his opinion as a man. Mary's marriage had stoked up fires of animosity in him against Barton, and the man's subsequent indifference to the possession of something Chastleton would have given his soul to have had fanned those fires into a blaze of hatred. He cultivated Barton; they had met only occasionally, and the other had no hint of his feelings. He offered Barton scraps of professional advice, made his knowledge useful to him. It was easy for a clever man, and Harry Chastleton was a very clever man.

Finally he took over Barton's accountancy, and then for a long time he hunted with the persistence of a bloodhound for even the faintest crooked trail to follow.

He found one at last. Then he uncovered it, bit by damning bit. And then came the day when he told Barton. He told him over the phone, for certain very definite reasons, and he dropped only the vaguest of hints, just sufficient to set up the reaction he hoped for . . . and got.

"We'd better have a chat," Barton said, shaken but studiously casual for the benefit of anyone who might overhear.

"Yes, somewhere . . . er, quiet. And I don't think it should be known that

we're having a, well, secret session, either. It might start rumours . . . people talk, you know."

"They do." Barton grasped at the remark, hoping it implied that things could be covered up. "Come to my house, on Tuesday, after dinner. There's only my housekeeper; I'll give her some theatre tickets, and tell her to take her sister and stay the night with her—she does that sometimes."

"Good idea."

"I'll do that. Tuesday night, then."

Chastleton's thoughts as he sat there by the dark roadside now finished with the past. For today was Tuesday, the day of his appointment with Barton, and he had seen him only a short time ago.

Everything had gone smoothly; nicely according to plan. He had told Barton what he had found. He had told him also other things; and for the first and last time had uttered Mary's name in Barton's hearing.

Then he had strangled him.

He had done it neatly from behind, with a thin rope, and the rope was still round Barton's neck when he carried him through the side door to the car—Barton's car—and drove a mile or so to Flexton Gibbet.

For what better place for a suicide? And who more likely to commit suicide than a man with crooked business affairs, as would become obvious almost immediately . . . a man with a long prison sentence ahead and penury when he came out. To people it would seem little wonder that the crooked finger of Flexton Gibbet had irresistibly beckoned him towards it.

Yes, everything had gone smoothly,

until just after the gibbet had received its grim burden. Then that black mass had loomed through the shadows of the lane; only gamekeepers with a cart, but they had nearly caught far bigger game than any normally found on their land. They had glimpsed the laden gibbet and his own shadowy figure—they could only have seen him vaguely, but nevertheless sufficiently to realize the deadly significance of his movements.

He had dashed towards the car parked with its lights out, but even as he accelerated a torch shone out and he knew that they would have got his number. There was a police-station only a mile or so away. It would have taken only a very short time for the hunt to be on. . . .

The night wind sighed through the leaves above him. A curlew cried sadly across a field, and in the distance an owl haunted the night with its eldritch screech.

Then down the dark road pencils of light appeared and the night throbbled with the sound of engines. They grew louder. As Chastleton sat on his tree-stump a motor-cycle, ridden like the

wind by a crash-helmeted policeman, swept past, and behind it a police squad car swayed and rocketed. In a second they were gone.

And somewhere in front of them, but not very far in front, was a car belonging to a dead man; a car with its number known and last seen standing by the gibbet on which a dead man hung . . . no longer thought of as a suicide after what the gamekeepers had seen. And this car was being driven by a man who had no alibi; who was already engaged in some lawless escapade and had a damning motive for violence—for intending to half-throttle the owner of a car who resisted his attempt to steal it—and who had then apparently found that he had done the job all too thoroughly.

Rising to his feet, Chastleton started to walk along the road. From somewhere out of the void of the night he seemed to hear a voice speaking to him . . . or was it just a trick of memory?

"The past is dead, my friend. And they don't hang highwaymen nowadays—except for murder."



# THE YELLOW SPIDER

A. DONOVAN YOUNG

*Illustrated by Pat Moody*

*To the old man a huge tarantula was the most beautiful thing in the world.*



ANY A STRANGE story has been told of the Malayan jungle, but none, I venture to think, stranger than that of old

James Cargill and his Chinese henchman Ah Sing.

When I met him, Cargill was living in a tiny village in Johore, a few miles from Kota Tinggi. The village was a motley collection of wooden huts perched rather precariously some fifteen feet above the ground, and in one of these Cargill had his abode.

I stumbled across the village—and Cargill—in the course of my business, which was the terrorists. For some unfathomable reason, they had left Cargill's village severely alone, and I had been wondering why. Had they friends there? If they had, I never found evidence of it any way.

Cargill had "gone native." But don't misunderstand me. In India, you can see in the bazaars human dregs of white men; dirty, unkempt, shuffling creatures who have seen the depths of degradation. But Cargill was not one of this miserable breed. Some, like Cargill, go native and keep their self-respect.

Somebody must have told him that I was there, for he came down the rickety ladder to greet me—a tall,

loosely built, very sunburnt old man, dressed in a pair of khaki slacks and a white singlet. His two blue eyes twinkled humorously.

"Looking for Communists?" he asked. "Well, you won't find any here."

At that moment I was not sure he was speaking the truth.

"But I will tell you all I know about them," he added, "though it's not very much."

He waved me up the ladder ahead of him, and into the one and only room at the top. It was furnished with a *charpoy*, a table and a couple of chairs, and that was all. *But*—and I could hardly believe my eyes—occupying the whole of one of the four walls were hundreds of spiders.

I thought at first they were alive, and I instinctively recoiled in horror. But when I took a closer look, I saw they were assembled in little groups, and were pinned to the wall.

They were all shapes and sizes, and in the centre, dominating the entire collection, was a venomous-looking tarantula. It was a monstrous beast, and the grey, obscene body, and the two protruding dark eyes, gave me the shudders. Those malevolent eyes! They seemed the incarnation of evil.

I looked at Cargill. He was gazing upon those spiders as if they were the most beautiful things on earth.



"Look at that one in the middle," he said rather unnecessarily, for I could hardly take my eyes off it. "I

found it climbing up my bathroom wall.

"But you will have a drink with me," he went on and opened the door at the back of the hut. "Ah Sing," he called. "Now, where has that heathen got to?"

A funny, piping little voice came from the back. "Coming, Master," and a grubby little Chinaman, with a grin on his face that stretched from ear to ear, came through the door, bearing a bottle of whisky and two glasses.

He must have been as old as his master—well over seventy—for his face was creased and wizened. But what was remarkable was his round little stomach, from which two thin, spindly legs tapered outwards, just like a spider's.

The little Chinaman, exposing one solitary stump of a tooth, continued to grin at the pair of us, and then said something to Cargill which was quite unintelligible to me.

"Oh, go to hell and breed a new generation of yellow-faced spiders," replied Cargill, and Ah Sing went off, still with that puckish grin on his face.

I went to see Cargill again a day or so later to thank him for some information he had given me about a gang of terrorists in the locality and which had proved extremely useful. But he seemed to have forgotten that such evils as Communist thugs existed. "Tell me," said he, "did you ever hear of a yellow spider?"

"Heaven forbid!" I replied.

"Well, you'll be seeing one soon."

I gathered that someone had told

him of one and that he and Ah Sing were out all day looking for it. Cargill was clearly impatient that I should go on my way so that he could carry on the search.

Cargill was looking tired and worn out when I saw him next, and I was horrified when Ah Sing appeared, for his grin had vanished and the joy of life seemed to have gone out of him. The old Chinaman looked ghastly. The skin on his face was drawn tightly over the cheek-bones, and I could see he was a sick man.

"What's the matter with Ah Sing?" I asked Cargill.

But Cargill did not seem very worried. "He'll be all right when we find that damned spider."

So he still believed in the yellow spider!

"Can't you forget the damned thing?" I burst out impatiently. "Don't you see Ah Sing is just about finished, looking for it? And you don't look much better yourself."

"We'll find that spider if it kills us," replied the old man.

I had a sense of foreboding when I reached Cargill's village two days later. A Malay woman was cleaning out the hut, and I learnt with a feeling of loss that Ah Sing was dead. That morning, when Cargill had called for him he failed to answer.

I believe it was the loss of Ah Sing that sent Cargill over the border-line. He sat with his elbows on the table staring dazedly at the spiders on the wall, not noticing my arrival.

I tried to comfort him, but it was no

use. He muttered something. It sounded like, "He'll be back soon."

I noticed that the tarantula which had lorded it over the family on the wall had gone and that the space was bare. I felt curiously disturbed at its disappearance, and found myself almost shouting into the ear of the old man. "What have you done with it?" I demanded, rousing him and pointing to the bare space on the wall.

"He'll be back," was the only reply I could extract from him.

I never saw Cargill alive again. The next day the son of the Malay headman came to me. "*Tuan* Cargill is dead," he said.

They had found him lying across his bed, grasping in his hand a large tarantula. He must have seen it on the wall as he lay half asleep, and have grasped it tightly in his hand, receiving the full measure of poison as the spider bit into the palm.

The oddest part of this story happened when we were burying the old man. A Malay headman came over to me. He held out a match-box. "*Tuan*," said he, "bury this with him."

He saw my bewilderment.

"The spider," he said. "It is Ah Sing."

Mechanically I opened the match-box, and saw inside the corpse of an evil-looking tarantula. Its eight long hairy legs were crushed against its body, which had been squashed almost flat. *It was yellow.*

I closed the box, stooped and laid it on the coffin. "Good-bye, old friends," I muttered.

# EASY MONEY

S. W. BARTRUM

*Illustrated by John Wood*

*If you want to be a successful crook, then leave your conscience at home.*

**C**HECK IT," SAID Smokey, pushing a large, neat bundle of £1 notes, complete with accounts slip, towards me.

I knew from experience that I would find everything in order; there was nothing petty-minded about this firm. Nevertheless, I checked it.

Smokey chuckled. "Here, have a cigar, they were on that last job you did. In the meantime, the Old Man thinks it's time you had advancement, and I agree with him."

I stowed the money away in my various pockets and helped myself to one of my cigars. "I've never met the Old Man," I said. "He might be you, for all I know."

"He is, as far as you're concerned," said Smokey evenly. "And may you never learn any different." He looked at me closely. "Now, about this advancement. We want somebody we can trust to bring in high-grade Swiss watches."

I laughed. "I doubt if I could even wangle a pair of silk stockings through the Customs," I said.

"So do I," said Smokey. "But that side of it's all taken care of. All you have to do is to meet the boat—our boat—at various secluded places and various times, on the south-east coast

and ferry the stuff up to London by car."

"You're a big firm," I said admiringly.

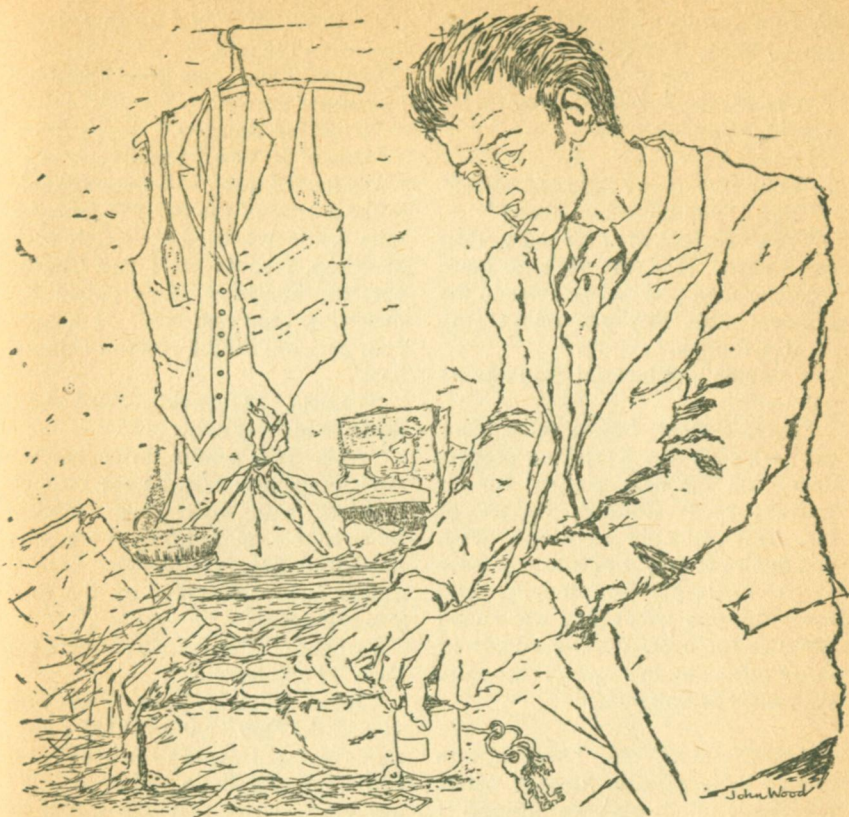
"We are," said Smokey. "And very sound. You've got a great future here with us, if you behave yourself. Well?"

He paused. "Your cut will be fifty quid a run—about twice a week—and all expenses. Well?"

I nodded. "Money for jam," I said. Smuggling—like car hustling, with the rich insurance companies taking the rap—was good, clean lucrative fun—according to my lights.

I don't know where the *Mary Anne* came from, but I had ten different meeting-places with this little craft up various waterways on the south-east coast. The meetings were planned to a strict schedule, designed so that our boat would not have to put in twice in the same place in one month. Smokey took me over the course for three days until I was "place perfect." And then I was on my own.

The method of collection was simple. I used to board the *Mary Anne* with an empty suitcase, and exchange it for a full, locked one, which I placed under the back seat of my car. I then drove up to the East End, parked the car in a side street, and made my way to our headquarters in Mayfair by public transport, making



three or four changes *en route* to shake off anybody who may have tailed me from the coast.

The first six trips I made went off smoothly. But on the seventh trip, as I was walking from the car to the bus-stop with the full suitcase, a polite gentleman appeared from nowhere and blocked my path. He had CID trainee written all over him.

"Excuse me," he said, "but do you mind telling me what you have in that

case? I'm a police officer, and——"

"Why, certainly," I smiled. "An empty vacuum flask, the remains of some sandwiches, a few files—office files, a couple of magazines—but no stolen property, I'm afraid."

"Let's have a look, shall we?" he said pleasantly.

I placed the suitcase flat on the pavement and stepped back. "Help yourself," I said.

He bent down, and I put the flat of



my foot against his hindquarters and shoved hard. I then fled.

"Clever boy," said Smokey. He paused. "Youngish, eh?"

I nodded.

"Long face, dark? Cultured voice?"

"Yes. D'you know him, then?"

"Yes." He looked at me sadly. That was Charlie, that was. He's no more a copper than you are. Belongs to the Blinders mob. Pity you didn't grab the bag, though."

"I couldn't—I mean, I didn't know—I——"

"Have a cigar, boy. Change your car-park each trip. Keep your peepers open. Ask the next 'copper' for his warrant card—although copper or not, he'll probably have one. Well, just don't get caught or lose any more cargo. Costs the firm money. And cheer up, you won't stay wet round the ears for ever. Why, a couple of years with us and you won't recognize yourself, I promise you."

About a week later I walked into one of those pubs in Stepney where everybody minds his own business. I was standing at the bar waiting to be served, when the fellow standing on my left suddenly started to choke over a whisky and soda.

"Hallo, *Charlie*," I whispered when he had quite recovered. "Why don't you run me in?"

"Hallo, old boy," smiled Charlie. "What's yours?"

"Light ale," I said evenly.

"Sensible drink for a man in your profession." He coughed. "I suppose Smokey tore you off quite a strip the

other day? Sorry and all that, but I does what I'm told."

"Smokey was quite good about it," I informed him coldly.

"Good lad, Smokey."

"One of the best," I said.

We moved away to an empty table in the corner of the bar. We fenced a little while we tried to weigh each other up. I could see I had Charlie puzzled. Suddenly he dropped his bantering tone and said: "I admire your guts, but I think you're a damned fool."

"Thanks," I said coldly. "But where does the bravery come in?"

"Well, you hump a fifteen-year stretch regularly twice a week through London, with only your innocent looks to rely on. If I'd been a copper the other day, you'd have been a middle-aged old buffer by the time you came out."

I laughed. "You seem to forget I got away," I pointed out.

Charlie shook his head. "I was with you all the time," he said. "I saw your foot coming. I could have grabbed it and spun you like a prop. So could any copper—not that one would be fool enough to bend down with his whatsit towards you."

"All right," I said wryly, "but since when do you get fifteen years for trolling a few smuggled tick-tocks?"

He looked puzzled. "*Tick-tocks!* Do you mean——"

"Watches. Swiss watches," I said.

"Watches, my foot!" He leaned forward and whispered in my ear: "*You're shifting 'snow,' old boy.*"

My head reeled.

"*Cocaine, old boy.*"

I was silent for a long time.

I clutched at a straw. "You're lying," I hissed. "My lot wouldn't touch that stuff with a barge pole."

Charlie laughed quietly. "Your lot would handle—he used a gruesome example—if there was any money in them. And so would my lot, for that matter." He leant forward. "I'm not taking the mickey, and I've no axes to grind," he said grimly. "*You're shifting 'snow.'* You don't have to believe me, just take a peek at your next load."

"I will," I said slowly.

A dull, hopeless anger was smouldering inside me. *Dope trafficker*. Clever boy, fill your pockets but keep yourself clean. *Dope trafficker*. "What — does — 'snow' — look — like?" I rasped through the pebbles in my mouth.

"My God, you are green," said Charlie softly. "It comes in many forms, but yours is the usual—a fine white powder, 'snow,' see?"

"Same again?" I muttered.

Charlie nodded.

I made it Scotch for two. I like whisky sometimes.

"Thanks for tipping me off," I said as I set the glasses down, "but I won't believe it until I see the stuff."

"That's the ticket," said Charlie quietly. He gave me a queer look. "How did you get into this joy-ride? Me, I got three years Borstal for seducing my landlady's daughter—only they called it something else. It gave me a flying start."

"I was doing a crummy sharp-shooting act in variety," I told him. "The shooting was genuine, but I'm no

showman. Smokey came from out of the blue and offered me ten times what I was getting—and *regular*—as an armed escort able to wound without killing. I told him I wouldn't even threaten flesh and blood with a gun, human or animal. So he fixed me up as a car-hustler with his lot, operating on a strict 'no violence' rule. Money for jam. And here I am. My God!"

Charlie drained his glass. "Only two things you can do now," he said. "Play ball with your lot or get out of the country for good. Anything else and you've 'had it.'"

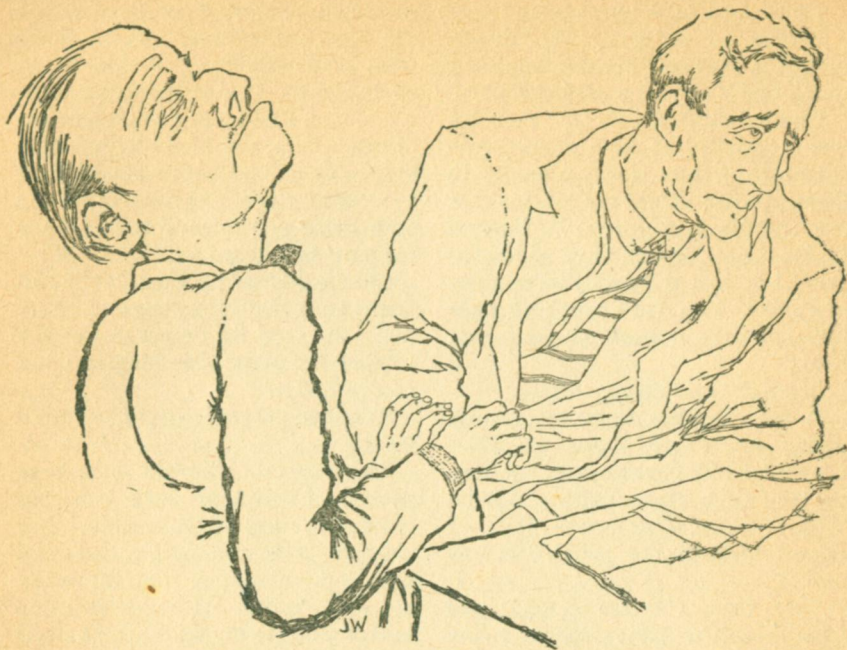
"You're probably right," I said quietly.

The next day I bought three large packets of cornflour and a bunch of old suitcase keys from a stall. I also cleaned my revolver, and sorted out a convex thumb-mirror from the rest of my stage props. With this reducing mirror glued to my thumbnail I could face a target, about turn, and rip the bull out of it by firing over my shoulder from "memory."

I took the next load of contraband back to my place. It was "snow" all right. I tipped it down the pan and pulled the chain. I then filled the empty jars with cornflour and delivered them in the locked suitcase to headquarters.

Two days later I received an urgent message to report in. I stuck the mirror to my thumb and strapped the gun to my left shoulder, so that it hung beneath my armpit and underneath my jacket.

When I arrived Smokey was not alone. Seated with him behind the desk was a huge figure of a man, with



saint-like features. I hadn't seen him before, but I didn't need to be psychic. It was the Old Man. Smokey said nothing. He just looked at me with expressionless eyes.

The Old Man leant forward. His lips smiled. "How much did the corn-flour cost you?" he asked quietly.

"Six shillings," I said.

"What made you think you could fool us with that stuff?" His voice was a soft purr.

"I didn't," I said. "I gambled on smoking you out with it."

He looked puzzled for a moment, and then shrugged his shoulders slowly. "How much do you expect to

get for the £5,000-worth of medicinal drugs you stole from me?"

"Nothing," I said. "It's floating down the sewage system."

"You have moral objections to handling it?"

"Yes."

"You should have thought of that before you came to us for easy money," he said quietly.

I let that one pass.

"But you will stay with us now," he continued, "and you will do what you are told, always. And you will be well paid for it. Your next delivery is for tomorrow. You will make it and bring it here untouched, because there is a

great future for you here. And now you will obey orders, and not let moral considerations upset your judgment.

"I have already forgiven you your last escapade, because I know what it is to be young and stupid, and to have idiotic ideals, and to wrestle with a conscience that is rooted in tradition and mawkish sentimentality. But now you have overcome these things, as I overcame them. Now you are fully grown up. Now you are completely and wholly *man* in all your parts; a *sensible* man; a *clever* man; a man who sees through all stupidity and refuses any longer to be his brother's keeper."

Of course he was right. I could see that now, even while he was still speaking. I wanted to laugh at that poor, maudlin, sentimental fool who had walked into this room believing he was me! Am I my brother's keeper? What did it matter to me if fools chose to destroy themselves with dope? Who will keep me if I keep my brother? *Keep yourself clean. Clever boy, fill your pockets and . . .* who is my brother? A conscience rooted in everything that is wrong. There's nothing wrong in handling dope. It's as simple as this—let those who want to take dope take dope. *Dope trafficker. There are all kinds of dope. Dope trafficker—what-does-snow—dope trafficker. Whose a dope traf-*

ficker! My God, I was being hypnotized!

I shook my head savagely, and then shouted at the top of my voice, "You filthy, pot - bellied, slime - eating swine!" I felt the layer of filth he had wrapped round my mind crumble and begin to slide away. "Educated *gutter-snipe! Guttersnipe!*" I spat the word out again and again, and watched him wilt.

"*Get out of here!*" he snarled.

I wheeled, and walked slowly towards the door, with my left thumb stuck out at a grotesque angle. My right hand slid inside my jacket. My mind was fully my own now. In the mirror I watched his right hand drop below the level of the desk and then come up with a revolver in it. The muzzle moved up towards the middle of my back.

Smokey's hand flashed out towards the Old Man's gun as I fired, and the two shots crashed out almost simultaneously. The Old Man pitched forward, with a bullet through his heart; and so did Smokey, with a bullet from the Old Man's gun as near his heart as made no difference.

I was sorry about Smokey. I closed his eyes for him, and I don't care who knows it.

I'm up at the Old Bailey next month. The charge is murder, and I gave myself up. You can wish me luck if you like. But you don't have to . . . brother.



# THE LETTER

FREDA L. COOKSON

**I**T'S ALL SO STRANGE, so frightening, that I don't think I could mention it to anyone but you, my dear," Great - aunt Catherine's letter began.

And as the stiff ivory sheets crackled beneath my fingers, I was filled with a strange sense of foreboding. For a moment I hesitated, reluctant to continue reading. But soon my curiosity got the better of me.

"You see, Mary," she went on, "when you are as old as I am, most people are so quick to accuse you of being fanciful. And if I were to tell them of my experience, I know just what their reactions would be. They would simply look at me sympathetically or calculatingly—according to whether or not they expected to be remembered in my will. But they would not believe me.

"However, you know my brain is as clear as it has always been, and I feel I must tell someone—just in case anything else happens.

"But to begin at the beginning—you remember that little musical-box I bought for my collection? I think I told you, at the time, that I could not understand why it was so cheap. Well, now I believe I know the reason.

"Yet at first it fascinated me so much that I used to sit, just looking at it and tracing its intricate carvings with my finger-tips. That was how I came to touch its hidden spring.

"I shall never forget my excitement

when a tiny drawer slid open. My hand trembled so I could hardly take out the letter which was inside. And even when I did pick it up, I sat there, looking at it for a while before I could bring myself to read the words which I knew must have been written so very long ago.

"You never see such beautiful writing these days, Mary—every letter formed as clearly and delicately as a Japanese painting. No one has the time or patience now, not even I.

"But although the paper was yellow and the ink faded, each word stood out distinctly. Far too distinctly, alas, for now I would give a great deal never to have read them. You see, they told me that the writer was a murderer: A woman who had killed her husband, and who was even then preparing to run away with his oldest friend.

"When I had finished reading it, it seemed as though the room had grown very cold, and I began to shiver. But although I pulled my chair nearer to the fire, it made no difference. And on a sudden impulse, I thrust the letter into the flames. I didn't want to see it again—ever.

"Then I put the musical-box back in the cabinet with my others; for it, too, had lost its charm for the time being.

"It seemed as though my little experience had tired me, for one does tire so very easily at my age. So I closed my eyes for a while. But I did

not sleep, you must believe that, my dear. I just sat there, growing colder and colder until at last I roused myself, intending to stir the fire.

"And then, when I opened my eyes, I saw her—the lady in green. She was standing beside the cabinet, smiling at me.

"When you speak of a smile, you think of something lovely, don't you? Something like sunlight on a lake. But if you had seen her smile, you would have thought of Hell.

"I would not have believed that there could have been so much evil and beauty combined in one face. And as I looked I knew that it was her letter I had found and that she hated me for having read it.

"I don't know how long we gazed at each other in silence, but at last I heard the rattle of china. It was Mrs. Wilson bringing my afternoon tea. And before she could open the door, the lady in green had gone.

"I was not really afraid—then. Fear is an emotion you feel less easily as you grow older. But the next time she came it was different.

"The ringing of the telephone in the hall had suddenly awakened me, for I had been sleeping in my chair by the fire. Startled, I opened my eyes quickly, and for a moment I thought I must still be asleep, lost in some horrible nightmare, for the room was full of smoke. The hearth-rug was smouldering and flames were curling up the settee.

"Then I began to cough, and realized this was no dream. So, choking and dizzy, I somehow managed to

stagger to the door. Then, as I turned to slam it behind me, I saw her standing there.

"Her green dress looked oddly cold against the glow of the fire, and her face was all evil. But this time she was not smiling.

"Well, Mrs. Wilson summoned the fire brigade, and they arrived in time to stop the fire spreading to the rest of the house. But it will be a long time before my little sitting-room is fit for use again, and, in a way, I am not sorry.

"When I found that my display cabinet was almost destroyed, and with it my collection of musical-boxes, I thought that perhaps it was just as well, as *hers* would have gone, too. But it had not gone—that one alone was undamaged. It was lying some distance away on the floor, as though it had rolled off its shelf—or else been snatched away to safety!

"Well, I hope she is satisfied now, for I am certain the fire was her doing. Yet did she intend me to escape, I wonder?

"However, all that happened three days ago, and I have not seen her since. And now I am using the lounge, but it is nothing like as cosy as my little sitting-room was, it is so cold here. I have put more coal on the fire, but it makes no difference. In fact, it is growing colder even as I write.

"I think I know why, Mary, and in a moment I shall look up and see. . . ."

And there Aunt Catherine's letter ended. There was no signature, only a small blot of ink as though perhaps she had dropped her pen. I think I

knew in that moment, that if she had she would never pick it up again.

Then I tried to shake myself free from the terror which gripped me. I told myself not to be a stupid, imaginative fool. Probably she had just forgotten to sign her name. After all, she was eighty-six.

And with renewed hope I thought of course she must be all right—how else could she have addressed and posted the envelope?

So I snatched it up from the floor where it had fallen and quickly turned it over. And then I saw that she had not addressed it. Neither had her housekeeper, whose untidy hand I knew quite well.

This writing was beautiful. You would never think anyone had the time or the patience to write like that these days—every letter formed as clearly and delicately as a Japanese painting.



Come lovely and soothing death,  
Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving,  
In the day, in the night, to all, to each,  
Sooner or later, delicate death,  
Prais'd be the fathomless universe,  
For life and joy, and for objects and knowledge curious,  
And for love, sweet love—but praise! praise! praise!  
For the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death.

WALT WHITMAN (1819?–1892).

One short sleep past, we wake eternally,  
And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.

JOHN DONNE (1571?–1631).

# THE RAT AND I

DENYS VAL BAKER



WHEN I WENT to live in the cottage I did so formally and openly. I paid three months' rent

in advance. I had every right to expect peace and quiet to get on with the book I wanted to write.

Indeed, looking round the white-washed walls and the snug parlour, I felt well satisfied. Here I would work well, I thought; and I went happily up to the loft bedroom, snuffed out the candle and settled down to sleep.

It was an hour later, I suppose, when the noise began. It was a weird, rather bold noise: *Crrrrrrnch*. And then again, *Crrrrrrnch*.

I sat up in fright, fumbling for matches to light the candle. When I held the flickering flame high, it did little to ease my mind—for giant shadows were thrown on the walls, and their grotesque movements were almost as alarming as the grinding, sawing sound.

*Crrrrrrnch. . . Crrrrrrnch. . .*

At each separate sound I imagined sharp, evil teeth biting into soft wood, gnawing at some hole that grew bigger and bigger. There was something quite ferocious about the sound, coupled with the image that grew in my mind. I imagined a rat, a huge, whiskered, bulging thing, dominated entirely by teeth that were fanged and wolfish. . . . A sleek grey monarch of a kingdom,

fat and comfortable, probably unaware of my presence as yet, working away assiduously at his own mysterious purposes.

In the grey light of morning I was cross and irritable, and very tired. The whole thing seemed rather ridiculous. I examined the floorboards, and saw that there were cavities. Ah, well, I told myself, it was probably no more than some tiny, inoffensive, quite meek little field-mouse.

I managed to cling to this thought all day; but I hadn't been in long that night before there came that relentless sound again . . . and I knew, from its sheer ferocity, that I was just deceiving myself. This was a rat, a real monster of a rat.

In the miserable hours of the night, haunted by the *crrrrrrnches*, I became more and more aware of the rat, even of its personality. It seemed to take no notice of me, not even if I banged my shoes on the floor. For some reason it had decided to gnaw a hole in this particular spot, and nothing was going to stop the process. What the ultimate objective was I didn't care to think. At first perhaps food, and then . . . ? I shuddered at some half-forgotten memory of newspaper reports about people being bitten by rats even as they lay in bed. I felt terribly alone and unprotected. Who, in the dark night, was the more powerful—the rat or I?

It took several nights to reduce me to the nervous wreck I became. By



then I was jittery by day as well. My work was at a standstill. I couldn't seem to concentrate, but was for ever pacing up and down.

It was while pacing that I came up against the old cupboard in the corner, and idly, without thinking, opened the bottom drawer. Inside was a metal tin with a crimson label. The lettering leaped at me. RAT POISON.

The tin had obviously been left by some previous occupant. Why had it never been used? I began to wonder. Perhaps there had not been time. Perhaps. . . . I shook myself and picked up the tin to read the instructions.

They were cold and precise; quite horrifying rather, I felt, as the orders given to an execution squad. Everything was explained so lucidly and patiently that the rat, one felt, hadn't a chance. There was even a description of the effect: "The poison acts quickly. After ten minutes the rodent loses control of its limbs. As the poison creeps through the system every nerve becomes paralysed. Death takes place soon afterwards."

In the end I felt so revolted by the whole thing that I put the tin back in the drawer and went out for a walk. But that night the rat came as usual and gnawed away. I couldn't sleep. I awoke bad tempered and white faced, and I knew I couldn't go on like this. The rat must die.

I often wonder if the rat had some intimation of what was to come. Did it sense that awful guilt and shame with which I mixed the poison, disguised it in some cheese, lay it cunningly around two favourite cavities? If so, then who can measure the extra

mental suffering caused by my action? Oh, how shameful my part in the affair!

How can I forget that last night? I lay in bed—but how could I sleep? I was the executioner, I had set the guillotine—when would it fall?

I listened, hardly daring to breathe. *Crrrrrrnch . . . crrrrrrnch*. Then, I suppose, it must have sniffed the cheese bait, for the grinding ceased. In the darkness I imagined the small paws creeping over the cheese, the sharp teeth fixing on the deadly contents. With what relish he would nibble into the delectable, deceitful cheese! How he would enjoy his unexpected supper. Perhaps—perhaps, in his strange rodent way, he would think kindly of me who had provided for him. . . . Oh, it was too horrible. I writhed in my bed, I turned on my side, trying in vain to escape into sleep. The minutes ticked by endlessly.

I suppose, in fact, it was after the customary ten minutes that I heard the first *un-familiar* sound. A curious, tiny thudding noise. Not the usual *crrrrrrnch* — not that at all. But several very strange thuds and bumps.

I sat up, petrified. This was the moment then? This was the hour—this was my rat's Waterloo! Inside that tiny, furry, warm body—"as the poison creeps through the system, every nerve becomes paralysed. . . ."

I lit the candle and stared over towards the cavity. There was no sign of the rat—or of the cheese. But there *were* sounds. Those same stealthy, unhappy thumps. They came from within the wall. They were, no doubt, the pathetic pawing and clawing of the

rat in its death agonies. And I—I was the brutal executioner!

I put my hands to my ears to shut out the sounds. But it seemed they grew louder, beating into my hands, imposing themselves upon me. And it seemed to me that they went on and on; there was no end to them. Why didn't the rat die. Why was it struggling so long?

In the end, desperate, I went down and got the tin. A faint flicker of hope had risen in me that perhaps it wouldn't die, perhaps its constitution was so tough that it would affect him no more than a severe stomachache. Then, as I reread the instructions, my eyes caught a line in small type that I had missed: "The poison will have the effect of causing thirst. If a saucer of water is placed near by for the rat to drink, this will considerably hasten death."

I was horrified. By omitting to follow this instruction, had I just deliberately tortured the rat? Even now at this moment, was his agony unnecessarily prolonged?

I raced downstairs and brought up a saucer of water, and placed it close to the hole. I was by now almost hysterical. I called out wildly to the rat: "Come on, drink this . . . it will be quicker. Please drink. . ."

But of course there was no response. Only those dull, awful thuds. And then, gradually, these became weaker. Until, after what seemed hours—at long last, as grey light of dawn was approaching—there was silence. But oh, what a silence! More poignant than any *crrrrrnch*. More sorrowful than any wailing. More ac-

cusing than any words. For me—the light of another day. For the rat—death in the night, without a chance, without a friend.

All the next morning I found myself thinking about the rat. I imagined his life before I came, how he lived comfortably, possibly a good rat, industrious, no doubt a good father, loved by his family. Perhaps even now they were awaiting the familiar patter of his returning footsteps.

It was no good. No matter what I thought, what I did, there was no escape. I could not possibly live at the cottage any more; I could not face another night lying in bed and hearing some awful, pregnant silence. Or perhaps worse—the slow, vengeful *crrrrrnch* of some rodent successor.

I packed my things and went away that afternoon. Some years have elapsed since then, but I have never been able to forget. People to whom I tell my story look at me curiously, and I can see them thinking what an hysterical man he must be, what a coward. I can only suppose that they suffer from some strange lack of something which, unfortunately, I possess in abundance—imagination.

For put yourself in my place! It is night, the room is dark, and I lie alone in my bed. Everywhere there is silence, heavy and ominous. And then my straining ears catch a sound, the faintest stir—or perhaps they don't.

I hear again that old, familiar, terrifying sound: *Crrrrrnch . . . crrrrrnchhhh! . . .*

Ah yes, in the darkness of each night we are for ever shadowy companions—the rat and I.



## THE TIP

ALAN L. ONIONS

*Illustrated by Derrick Sayer*

*The place was alive with a heaving, mangy mass of ravenous rodents.*

**T**HE TIP is a long, deep, natural depression in the ground; a receiver of household muck and waste. The Tip is a stink and an ugliness.

At night the ridge burns bright where the last of the waste is emptied; and rats squeal and fight and search for food in the muck; and play and mate.

Stebbing was an old man, bent with the insidious creep of rheumatism and a natural curvature of the spine. He would walk every night the narrow winding path by the cliff-edge that dropped sheer to the grey-black sand

of the beach, that leads to the Tip. There, by the bright orange reflection of the burning waste, amongst the heap of tins and rubbish, he would find the marked traps.

P.A.T. Biological paid him three-pence for each live rat, and the local zoo took a small number. Some said the Council paid him so much a tail. Stebbing lived by rat-catching.

The winter of 1947 was bad. The sea froze in great ridges, and at high-water mark built a sculptural beauty of ice that claimed gulls and froze them in wind-ruffled feathers on the tide-line.

The snow came. No fish guts from the quayside market fed the rats. No

scraps fed the rats. On the snow at night the tracks left the Tip and reached out in wide ribbons of tiny foot-prints that took unwary gulls asleep on the sand-dunes amongst the tall grass, and the wind blew the feathers to the sea and to the ice.

Young rats, deep in holes beneath the Tip, grew old and shrunken in body; old blind rats were slaughtered by the young and never knew their murderers.

The smell of the fish in Stebbing's traps drove the mass of frenzied starving rats to suicide as they threw themselves into the traps.

At evening the traps would be filled and the air alive with the cries of the brown mass fighting to rend each other at the smell of the fish on mangy coats.

Sometimes he would bring extra bait and throw it to the lights of red that twinkled bright-sharp and clear from beneath the tins and the high ridge of the Tip. He'd watch the heaving mass rend and tear, squeal and cry, until one drew blood and the mass would converge, and the mound of brown would twist and gyrate, until the snow was red, and the lights would go back to their holes and watch. Then, smiling, the cage heavy in his hand, P.A.T. Biological, the zoo and perhaps the Council, as some said, would receive their wants and Stebbing his due.

There comes a time when the flame called youth and vitality dies, and then there is nothing left but an ember and that is old age. Stebbing felt the call of the fireside; he felt the acid crystals in his joints, and the dull ache that

spread and seeped through his legs after the long walk to the Tip.

He wrote three letters in a large, sprawling, untidy hand, saying that Mr. Stebbing, although appreciative of his clients' generosity in buying his rats, would not, after the coming week-end, be able—through circumstances beyond his control—to help them further. He was sorry.

On that Friday Stebbing quarter-filled the saucepan with a mixture of milk and water for the cocoa when he came back, banked the fire high, stood up the steel guard and set off.

Crunching through the thick snow, head down against the wind that threw the sea in a savage frenzy of foam against the beach and rocks, he saw the winking lights of the Tip flare bright in contrast with the snow.

The moon, now bright, suddenly dark behind black clouds, cast long shadows that came, were gone and came again before him. The Tip waited.

The red lights winking in the night watched the figure coming slowly towards them. They never moved.

Stebbing paused for a moment at the Tip ridge and looked down. The snow was marked with the fine tracings of tiny ridges. He clambered down the steep bank and, bending, uncovered the old sheet of rotten tarpaulin that shrouded the traps, and stood them upright.

He set open the long tunnels of wire and pegged them. He threw the entrails of three large cod into the back of the traps and walked a short distance off.

The red lights blinked, moved; a

sudden rush. The night air was sharp with the cries of rats. A large one, fur patchy with mange, skin pale on the patches, brushed his leg as it passed him to the trap. A click and the trap closed. Another and another.

Stebbing poked with the stick, separating, counting; he had enough.

With fingers cramped with cold, he slowly emptied the soft, thin, warm, wriggling bodies into the wire cage, and tossed the traps to the heap. A column of sparks rose high on the night air.

Going across the Tip slowly, the cage heavy in his hand, the moon dark behind a cloud, he never saw the deep crack in the earth. His foot wrenched suddenly, the ankle cracking sharply. He felt a searing flood of pain that engulfed his ankle and spread swiftly up his leg. The cage fell to the ground, and brown bodies fought each other. He lay and felt his leg, and couldn't move. The bone was sharp against his fingers and wet-warm from the bleeding.

The foot, wedged tight, seemed part of something else and unfamiliar at

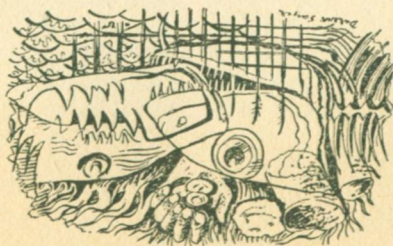
right angles to his leg. The red lights hadn't moved from their holes, but watched, winking in the night.

An hour had passed. The first red light moved. Another. The snow had darkened a little from the bleeding. He lay, face up to the sky and felt the icy wind burn his face; saw the moon play behind the clouds; then the pain hit his leg in a sudden rending that was teeth. A shrill squeal ripped the air. A wave of red lights surged out and over—a brown mass that darkened the snow and tore at the bloody ankle. For a second a terrible cry left his lips; then fur found his face and eyes and mouth and ears. The rats found the openings of the clothes. . . . Then the man lay still.

The rats in the cage cried and tore at the cage wire, and then the snow fell thick from the sky.

The gulls crying high on the morning air saw a deep red patch on the white snow, cried and climbed higher.

The east wind blew in from the sea, and the ice piled higher; a brown rat found a frozen gull and fed.



# IT'S ALL OVER

PETER THORNHILL

“IT'S ALL OVER.”

**I**The sound of the doctor's voice, a touch on his wrist, brought the man in the bed back from some remote place of dreams and shadows to the world of reality. But he was infinitely weary; he had neither the inclination nor the energy to move—even to open his eyes.

Somewhere near he could hear the sound of low sobbing, footsteps and the closing of a door. With a great concentration of effort he at last tried to open his eyes, but his heavy lids would not move. His eyes were not quite closed, and between the lids he could see beyond the bed-end the corner of the dressing-table and the edge of the door. Still his eyes would not open. He tried to move his head—his hand—his foot; at first tentatively, then with increasingly frenzied effort. To his horror he realized that he could not move a single muscle. He wanted to shout, but he could not unclench his teeth or open his lips.

“I must be paralysed,” he thought in a panic. “What has happened to me?”

Fighting down the rising tide of fear that threatened his very reason, he endeavoured to marshal his thoughts, to realize why he was in bed, in this state. . . .

It had been a hot morning—unbearably hot in spite of the electric fan. . . . There had been some trouble

. . . some argument. Someone had slipped up. On the Evans contract? No, that had been cleared up. Something about the Sparkendike Company, that was it.

Young Merridew had made a mess of that business—he'd have to go. Yes, he'd told him he'd have to go—and he'd been so damned impudent. . . . Again the black surge of anger welled up—that was the cause of it all. He'd got angry—then the pain in his side, in his head. . . .

Nervously he thought, “Is the pain still there? If I move, if I breathe, will it come back again?”

Tentatively he endeavoured to take a deep breath—then a terrible realization crashed in his brain. He was not breathing.

“I'm not breathing. I can't draw a breath. Am I already dead?”

In a red mist of frenzy he struggled to draw breath, to move, until a wave of darkness engulfed him.

When consciousness again returned the light was dim. He could see the outline of the end of the bed, of the dressing-table and the edge of the door. “If I just keep calm,” he thought, “I shall be able to open my eyes.”

At first tentatively, then in a fury of impotent agitation, he struggled to open his eyes, to move, to draw breath, until once more cold panic threatened to submerge him. “I must

keep calm," he reiterated. "I can't be dead. I can think. I can remember. I can see. It's just a matter of time and I'll be all right again. It must be some sort of paralysis . . . or perhaps a dream. But I'm wide awake. . . . It must be some sort of hallucination . . . that's it, just hallucination. If I just wait and keep calm it will wear off. . . ."

Then he realized that the door was opening, that someone was coming in; perhaps the doctor; perhaps something could be done to help him. "It may be a dream," he thought. "Now I may wake up."

There was a subdued rattle as the curtains were drawn back to let in the morning light, and two men came into his line of vision at the front of the bed. They stood for a moment in silence, then one remarked, "Well, better get on with it, Joe."

"Good-looking chap," said the other. "We'll make a nice job of him."

"M'm, I like a nice-looking bod. Hate working with fat old women."

"Funny, that. Makes no difference to me. Only kids rather upset me, somehow."

The puzzling conversation lapsed into silence as the bed-clothes were removed and dropped on the floor. Firm hands stripped off his pyjamas, and he heard the splash of water. As he was rolled over on to his side, he could see through his narrowed lids that there was a box beside his bed—a long, narrow, black box.

"My God!" he thought in an agony of fear. "I *am* dead—these are the undertaker's men."

As the two men proceeded relent-

lessly and efficiently with their grim task, he fought furiously to move, even a single muscle.

"I'm not dead!" he screamed inwardly. "It's all wrong. I know all about it, so I can't be dead."

He fumed and raged in an impatient frenzy of fear, hardly hearing the occasional comments of the two men as they went about their kindly but humiliating ministrations. At last he was lying in the coffin.

"Looks awfully natural, doesn't he?" said one of the men. "Hardly think he was dead, would you?"

"I'm not! I'm not!" he screamed silently, but as the lid was closed a new unreasonable panic assailed him. "You mustn't do that!" he implored them silently. "I'll suffocate—I'll die!"

Above his face was a panel of glass. His head was tilted back so that he could see a portion of the ceiling, and occasionally a hand moving past. He felt the coffin lifted. It swayed and rocked, and he felt a sudden lurch as the bearers began to descend the stairs.

"I must be calm! I must be calm!" he reiterated. "Just take it quietly, then it must be all right. It's just a matter of time." But how much time had he? How long was it since he had been laid in his coffin? When was the funeral . . . ? "Merciful heavens!" he screamed silently. "I put it in my will—cremation. . . ."

Frenzied, he again began to struggle to move, to draw breath, to open his eyes, until the agony of impotence seemed to fill his brain with

waves of confusion. At length the paroxysm passed, and gradually he regained control of his frenzied mind. He began to try to take stock of his surroundings. Through the narrow aperture of his lids he was aware of a ceiling high above him, the corner of a wall, and the top of a lancet window with stained glass.

Then, one after another, faces were interposed into his limited field of vision: his wife, her face swollen and red with weeping; his son; his daughter-in-law. In her face he felt he could read a measure of satisfaction. "The little bitch!" he thought. "How disappointed she will be when they realize I'm not dead, after all."

Face after face hovered and vanished: expressions of grief; of avid curiosity; of fear; even of envy—that was his partner.

Then a wreath of flowers was placed over the glass, and the rustling and footsteps gave place to an ominous silence, broken at last by a slow and measured voice.

"I am the Resurrection and the Life. . . ."

At this solemn invocation panic returned. "This is going too far," he thought desperately. "I haven't much time. I must do something." Through the agony of his futile struggles, he was vaguely aware of the service moving relentlessly on.

"We will now sing 'Nearer, my God, to Thee,'" continued the solemn voice. There was a rustle of movement, and in the pause before the organ began to play he heard the fatal words—"as we commit his body to the flames and his soul to Al-

mighty God."

Wildly, furiously he battled, and as the organ softly played the opening lines, he felt his eyelids open; but he could see nothing for the wreath on the glass above his face. With a wild sense of relief and joy, he drew a breath—another breath. He tried to shout, but his voice would not come, his throat refused to respond. The voices had now all taken up the hymn. Someone removed the wreath, and he could see the vaulted ceiling above slowly moving past him. "That's peculiar," he thought, and then realization broke into his mind with cold terror. "I'm moving," he thought; and with the recollection of past cremations that he had attended, the full horror of the situation set him trembling. He could move his head. He tilted it back, and could see the brass gates looming above and behind him. Slowly they were gliding open, and slowly and relentlessly he was moving towards them. Suddenly the sense of power flashed through his body. He raised his hands and battered on the lid. Again and again he tried to shout, but could achieve only a hoarse whisper. "If they would only stop singing," he thought desperately, "they would hear me battering on the lid."

The gates were wide open, and as he moved between them he could hear the roar of the furnace and see the flicker of the flames on the roof above. Wildly he screamed and struggled, but the voices sang on—and on. . . .

Then the gates clanged softly together, but he did not hear them.



# NIGHT-SHIFT

GEORGE SAUNDERS ROBINSON

*Illustrated by Beresford Egan*

*Always knock before entering or you may get a very unpleasant surprise.*

“**F**OURTH FLOOR. Watch your step, Miss.”

The doors of the elevator slid apart, and its lone passenger made a hurried but graceful exit.

Joe, the operator, slumped against the door-frame, folded his arms and followed with half-closed eyes the slim brunette's progress down the carpeted hotel corridor.

Poor kid, he thought, even as he admired the trim turn of her ankles, the unaffected rhythm of the suit-clad hips. Nothing wrong with the girl's face either, he remembered. Tonight wasn't the first time he had seen it. This babe was beautiful. Awful young, though. . . . Poor, starry-eyed, damn-fool kid.

Joe yawned and glanced at the signal-board inside his elevator. Nobody wanted up or down at the moment, although it was past midnight and his was the only car still operating. He would wait. He knew this babe's destination, and was pretty sure she would be back shortly for a return trip to the lobby.

She had stopped at 402 all right, he noted. It was the last door at the end of the hall. He saw her lift a black-gloved hand and knock, so lightly—timidly, he wondered that the sound of it could be heard.

Joe snorted, kicked at an empty cig-

arette package near his feet. 402 and his women! A different dame every time he was in town. Sometimes a different one every night even. The guy was an ex-pro football player and looked it—yard-wide shoulders, all the rest of it. And the years on the grid-iron hadn't marred those lean rugged features the dames all went crazy for. He was a salesman now with a big sporting goods concern, and Joe supposed his gift of the gab came in handy with the dolls, too.

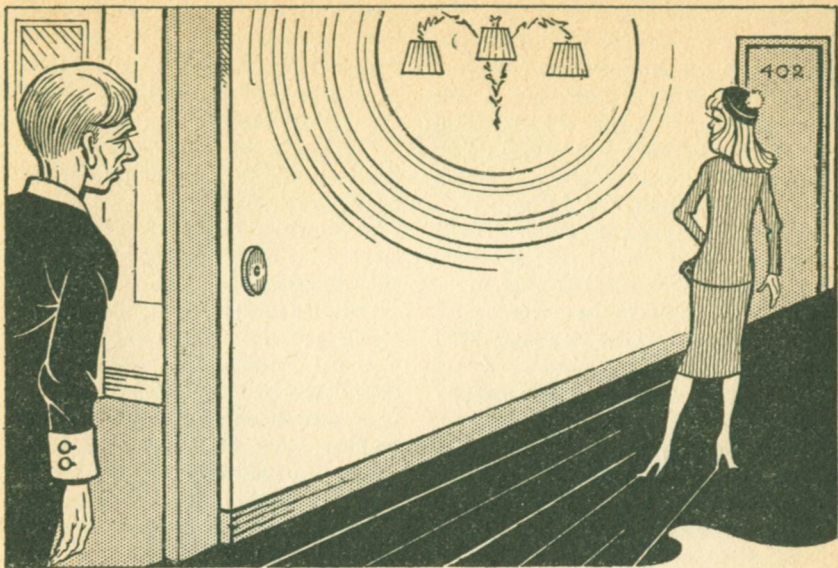
Joe shrugged his own thin shoulders inside the snug-fitting uniform of dark red gaberdine. Not that he envied the guy, he told himself. He had a right pretty wife of his own. But he couldn't help it, it griped him to see all those gals—some of them just kids like the babe at his door now—making fools of themselves over the big blowhard.

The girl had rapped twice more, each time more loudly. Joe stepped back into his car. Sure enough, after one more extra-loud knock, she gave up and returned slowly to the elevator. Faint surprise tinged the disappointment on her face when she found the car waiting.

Suspecting, perhaps, that she had been watched, she remarked with some embarrassment, “Nobody home, I guess.”

“Maybe he's asleep,” Joe said.

She didn't buy that. “Most likely.”



She permitted herself a slight smile. "I knocked hard enough to waken the dead." She stepped inside the elevator. "I'll wait in the lobby."

Joe's hand went automatically to the control, but he was reluctant to start down. He visualized her in the lobby, waiting. For what? For nothing. Getting the come-on from the lobby wolves. And her not even out of high school yet—he would bet on that. Such a little thing, too. Shorter even than Joe himself. He told himself not to get soft-headed about it; he asked himself what he was—a Boy Scout looking for good deeds to do? Hell, it was none of his business.

But aloud he said, "I could let you into the room with a pass-key, if you'd rather wait there."

Lashes fluttered over the kid-blue

eyes; a faint flush crept up her cheeks. Easy to tell she was new at this sort of thing.

With a light, nervous laugh she asked, "Do you always let strangers into guests' rooms around here?"

"He won't mind," Joe said dryly. "I've done it for him lots of times."

Maybe that would be enough to send her on her way? He saw her eyes go dark for just an instant; then they focused with new determination, and Joe thought he could read her mind: Of course there've been others. But now it's different. He said so.

"Besides, you're no stranger, Miss," Joe ventured to add when she remained silent. "I've seen you and"—he jerked his head towards 402—"him together several times lately. In the lobby, in the coffee-shop downstairs."

"Oh?"

"Fact is, my wife was talking about you two just this afternoon." He had forgotten this until now, but it was true enough. "Asked me if I thought it was serious between you two. . . . You know married women," he added with a laugh, "always matchmaking."

The girl looked puzzled. "Your wife?"

Joe pulled back his shoulders.

"She's a waitress in the coffee-shop," he explained. "Maybe you've noticed her. The blonde?"

"Oh yes, I remember. She's awfully pretty."

Joe had expected the surprise in her voice. People were always flabbergasted to learn that he, the runt who ran car number one on the night-shift, had managed to win himself such a doll. But now he found himself wanting to do more than just surprise this youngster; for some reason he wished he could really impress her. He would like to grab her wrist, hard, and say with authority, "Not all dames are taken in by bulging muscles and collar-ad mugs. Little guys like me—with faces nobody looks at twice—sometimes we can be pretty important, too." But who was he to convince her it was so?

The girl was talking again—sparing for time maybe—saying something about how she hadn't realized hotel employees took any interest in the guests. Joe's smile was one-sided. "I know. We're like the fixtures to you. Me, now—I'm just part of this elevator."

He thought: if only the job was a big, important one. Then he could

speak out. And maybe next time she was on the chase for Mr. Right, she would look beneath the surface.

"No, really," the girl protested, "I didn't mean that!"

If he were the hotel manager, now. Or the house dick. Something clicked in his mind. Why not put on an act? The kid would probably fall for it. He cleared his throat, made his tone low and confidential.

"Matter of fact, Miss, there's more to my job than meets the eye." He scanned the corridor briefly, in true conspiratorial style, then lifted his uniform coat to display a gun-butt, protruding from his hip-pocket. "Any trouble around here nights, I'm the boy who takes care of it."

The girl swallowed. Her eyes widened with respect. "You mean, like a— a house detective?"

Joe nodded. "But keep it quiet. Nobody's s'posed to know."

"Oh, I will."

The gun was the house dick's right enough. O'Reilly had slipped it to him a scant half hour before. He was going to pay a little call on the merry widow up on nine, the cop had confided, nudging Joe. "Got her convinced I'm a big business exec. Don't want to scare the little lady," he had explained, "so keep this for me for about an hour, huh?"

The girl stared at her watch now, bit her lip. Finally she made her decision. "About my waiting in the room —" She coloured again, just a little. "I guess it's all right, if *you* say so. . . . It would be fun to surprise him," she finished with a self-conscious grin.

He'll be surprised all right, Joe

agreed silently, as he accompanied her back to 402.

Facing the door, he hesitated only a moment, then plunged the key and twisted it, flinging the door wide.

The girl who had been digging in her purse—probably for a tip for him—had stepped across the threshold before the sordidly intimate scene met her eyes.

Inside the room, a woman gave a strangled cry and spread shaking hands over her face. The man, fire-eyed, exploded into curses.

The girl in the doorway stumbled backward, wheeled and flattened her trembling body against the corridor wall to the right of the open door. Her eyes closed. Joe found himself in a similar position on the opposite side of the doorway. He felt like something slimy had just crawled over him.

For a long moment there was no sound but that of hoarse piteous sobbing from the woman in the room. Then came the thud of a big man's feet, the slamming of the door. Joe and the girl remained motionless.

Finally she said, in a dazed monotone, "You knew. You knew there was—someone—in there with him."

Joe stared at the carpet beneath his feet. "I passed the door before—heard 'em laughing." His words were as flat, as toneless as her own.

"You wanted me to know what kind —" She choked. "I—I suppose I ought to thank you."

Joe said, "I shouldn't have done it."

The girl stepped close to him, touched his arm. "You won't get into trouble, will you? I mean—you being a detective. . . ."

Joe flung her hand aside. "I wish I hadn't done it." But he had. And suddenly he wanted the kid out of this, away from the hotel entirely, home where she belonged. "Come on," he barked, "I'll take you down."

Obediently she matched his swift pace to the elevator. Inside the car, she spoke again. "Please. Don't feel bad about this. He doesn't mean anything to me. Not really. By tomorrow"—she tried hard to laugh—"or next week, anyway, I'll have forgotten I ever knew him."

"Sure," Joe said, wishing she would shut up. "Sure you will."

The light opposite number nine on his signal-board blinked on; there was an urgent accompanying buzz. That would be O'Reilly, wanting down. Wanting his gun. Well, he would just have to wait.

The girl stepped from the car into the nearly empty lobby and turned. The blue eyes were older, much less gullible than they had been fifteen minutes ago.

Joe muttered a hasty, "Night, Miss," closed the doors on her wan smile.

As the car lifted he tried to picture the girl's pretty face when she learned the full truth about the little surprise party he had engineered this night. When she found out he had been as stunned as any of them, finding that the woman in 402 was—his wife.

Because the kid would know all about it when she read tomorrow's papers. Would it make the head-lines, he wondered? They might even run his picture. Sure they would. After all, it wasn't every day an ex-Big Name in the sports world was found murdered.



## FOUNDATION FOR MURDER

MICHAEL JACOT

*Illustrated by Agnese*

*The cunning killer must have one virtue—patience*

**W**HILE THE population of the little town of Wellborough, some thirty miles south of London, dozed in the extravagance of a Saturday afternoon sun, the policeman at the community's main crossroads was eyeing with extreme suspicion a character loitering in the doorway of a clothing store.

The policeman had very good reason to be suspicious. The good-looking young man in the crumpled grey slacks went by the resplendent Christian names of Godfrey Percival and the less resplendent surname of Bragg. Much of his recent life had been spent

in Her Majesty's prisons. His alleged profession was that of butler, his unacknowledged rôle that of common thief.

At the moment of the policeman's arrival at his side, he was combing his hair with studied unconcern.

"Looking for someone?" asked the arm of the law.

Godfrey's grin showed a magnificent set of even teeth.

"Yes. Someone with a nice cushy job for me."

The policeman noticed that there was something repugnant in his neat smile, but because the law cannot damn a man for his smile, he said, "I hear old Mr. Parsons up at the big house on Monument Road wants a gardener, if that's in your line. His

daughter could tell you if the job's filled."

There were three things about this statement which pleased Godfrey Percival Bragg. He liked the fact that Mr. Parsons was old, because it meant he was less likely to cause trouble, the big house meant it might contain valuables, and the mention of a daughter was pleasing because Godfrey could never resist a pretty face. He believed himself irresistible to women. This was unfortunately true.

With a smile of thanks and a question as to the name of the house, he turned his feet up the hill to Monument Road. To give him his due, his thoughts at that time were on nothing more villainous than robbery.

He had been released from Maidstone prison only that day, and was looking for opportunities for his talents. When he had "amassed a packet," it was his intention to sail for Canada where an uncle ran a large business in Toronto.

The sight of old Mr. Parsons's house delighted Godfrey. It was large, ivy-clad and surrounded by a tall yew hedge. He noted, with the uneasiness he usually felt when confronted with work, that they did indeed need a gardener. The grass was knee-high and the once elegant flower-beds overrun.

Marjorie Parsons was one of those tall angular Englishwomen whose more attractive qualities nature has safely entombed behind a healthy complexion, large feet, big bones and an upstanding carriage. Godfrey's ready smile pleased her for, although she was turning forty-three, she had not yet become indifferent to male

attention. Godfrey, whose imagination was rarely at a loss, introduced himself as a fellow temporarily down on his luck and awaiting the arrival of a legacy from Canada.

Marjorie took him to the living-room, where Mr. Parsons, senile, invalided and in his late eighties, sat in his favourite arm-chair.

"Mr. Bragg has kindly offered to help do the garden, Father," she explained. Then to Godfrey, "We have to watch him. He has difficulty remembering things. Sometimes he wanders off into town. Last week he started a fire here in the living-room. He dropped some live coal on the carpet. We had to have the fire brigade out. If you have any trouble with him, just let me know."

Godfrey settled down in his new position very quickly. His plan was to wait for a week or two, then to disappear suddenly with as much of the family possessions as he could carry. In London, he would get rid of them, thus laying the foundations for his trip to Canada.

Two things happened, quite soon, which changed his plans completely. The first concerned the daughter of the landlord at the King's Arms, where Godfrey relaxed like a country gentleman after his day's labours. Kate Hammond was a buxom girl with petulant lips, dark eyes and a taste for the expensive. She took to Godfrey because he obviously came from the city. She liked the way he talked, the way he paid her attention and even more she liked the idea of his proposed emigration to Canada.

"I've always planned to go there, but I've never been able to save the money," she said, expressing at the same time her displeasure with "this dump they call Wellborough."

They kept their relationship inconspicuous, for Kate's father was a massive man with a distrust of strangers, and Godfrey knew from experience that owners of public-houses are even better judges of character than the police.

The second happening was the discovery, one day when Marjorie and her father were in London, that the Parsons had a very large bank balance. Godfrey spent several pleasant minutes going through the stubs of cheque-books in the old man's desk, and eventually filled his head with ambitious plans.

He put them into action as soon as Marjorie returned from London. He inquired over-solicitously about her father and invited himself inside to have tea. Fortified by cucumber sandwiches and two cups of weak tea, he told her how much he admired her for spending her days beside her father. He touched very gently on the loneliness of such a life, on its shortcomings and its frustrations.

"You're embarrassing me, Mr. Bragg," she said.

"The name is Godfrey. Godfrey Percival. And now I must go. Tomorrow you must tell me more about yourself." Casually he put his hand on hers.

Marjorie was a sitting duck. He did not try to sweep her off her feet. Instead, he made himself particularly attentive to the old man. It wasn't a

pleasant task, but he was sure his purgatory would not last too long.

He supplemented this approach to Marjorie's heart with another. He accompanied her shopping, to tea at the Aynsley Tea-rooms, and they were seen together more than once at a cinema show.

During this strange courtship, Godfrey ignored Kate. He found this frustrating, for a beauty parlour could have made a fortune out of Marjorie, and Kate grew more enticing daily.

His first opportunity to see her came when an old school friend of Marjorie's invited her to London for the week-end. Godfrey elected to look after Mr. Parsons, and he met Kate that evening in the private bar of the King's Arms.

"Well, stranger, nice of you to come," said Kate.

"I've been busy," he said.

"I'll say you have! Do you hold her hands at the pictures?"

"You'd be surprised." He grinned to see her jealous.

"Why are you latching on to her?"

"You still want to come to Canada, don't you?"

"More than ever."

"Then leave things to me. Don't interfere. This time next year we'll be driving round the world in a big car, have a house with servants and you'll be in a mink!"

"You wouldn't be fooling me?"

He looked at her squarely. "I wouldn't go without you." He squeezed her hand.

"I hear she's away now."

"Yes, I'm looking after the old man.

"I'll take you to Canterbury tomorrow night."

"All right, I don't care how long you are with her, but come and see me sometimes."

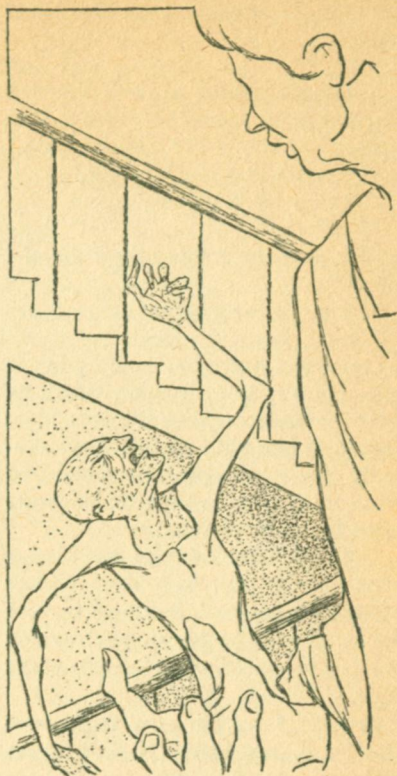
"If you promise to leave me alone until we're ready to go," said Godfrey.

Marjorie and Godfrey were married quietly in London on a bitterly damp day in November. Mr. Parsons was left at home in the care of a gangling youth from a near-by farm, Billy Symes. Billy disliked farm life, and hung around the Parsons's house looking for work. For a few pennies Godfrey got him to do most of the manual labour.

The honeymoon was spent at home. It was Marjorie's wish. Godfrey played the injured husband enough to make her feel romantic, but not enough to make her change her mind and incur unnecessary expenses. He moved his meagre belongings into the main part of the house, and was soon allowing himself a few guardedly jealous remarks aimed at the local young folk who came to congratulate Marjorie.

Godfrey's plan had worked so well to date that he thought it necessary to pause and consolidate before moving into the next phase. There was only one area in which he was not sure of himself. He had never told Kate he was going to marry Marjorie. He had been frightened of her reactions. He hadn't seen her since the news broke in the town.

Accordingly, it was not without some forewarning that he opened the back door of the house one blustering December day when Marjorie was out



shopping. Kate stood on the step, her hair tossed attractively by the wind. "You don't seem very pleased to see me," she said.

"The old man may wake up from his sleep any minute."

"Then I'll come to the point," said Kate.

Godfrey tried to take her in his arms, but she resisted. "I need some money."

"I thought you were going to leave me alone until we were ready to go to Canada?"



"This is urgent. I need twenty pounds."

"Why?"

"Does that matter to you? You're a married man, remember? What I do with my money is my own business."

"I haven't that much on me."

"Then get it from her."

"No."

"I'm sure she would give it me, if I asked."

"I'll get it for you tomorrow."

"Good. But don't forget."

Godfrey's heart was beating in his ears. He was in a situation which he knew he must avoid at all costs. Kate looked at him with a smile; then suddenly threw her arms about him and kissed him. The warmth of her body filled him with delight.

She said, "Don't think I don't know what you're up to." And turned quickly on her heel, leaving him with the same ache in his stomach which she had produced when he opened the door.

Prompted by his own impatience and by Kate's visit, Godfrey chose Christmas Day to talk to Marjorie about the old man's will.

He was not entirely surprised to hear that the entire fortune of some £120,000 went to Marjorie.

"Father made his will before the war, do you suppose we ought to bring it up to date?" Marjorie asked. She was radiantly happy these days, and troubles about her father's will were miles from her mind. She not only appeared more gay and adventurous, but even Godfrey noted that certain features about her had become quite

beautiful. "Father tells me he would like some changes made."

"It might be as well to look it over," said Godfrey nonchalantly.

"That's not what I meant. He wants to include a settlement for you. You've done him a lot of good. I know he appreciates it."

Godfrey in the rôle of the surprised beneficiary gave a brilliant performance. A figure of twelve thousand pounds was suggested, and he felt it hard to conceal his satisfaction. The new will was executed early in the New Year, and a copy deposited with the lawyers.

Godfrey's plan now needed only two things to complete it—a Kate who behaved herself, and a Mr. Parsons who would soon go to meet his Maker. Afterwards it was only a matter of form to transfer his funds to Canada, or as much of them as the Bank of England would allow, and to leave Marjorie to her own devices.

Neither thing happened. Kate appeared more frequently at the door, and the old man's health seemed to improve, although his mind grew weaker than ever.

It was not long before Godfrey was devising plans for helping nature take its course. In the spring he bought a car and taught Billy Symes to drive it. In this way at least he could get rid of his father-in-law for part of the afternoon each day while Billy drove him round the countryside. One day, however, he took over Billy's task and drove the old man to London. Knowing of his complete incompetence in traffic, he let him out on a busy pavement and drove away. He told Mar-

jorie that her father had disappeared from the car while he was in a store. But by some miracle, Mr. Parsons was found by the police, unharmed and feeding pigeons in Trafalgar Square.

Godfrey then took over the job of taking up the old man's meals in the evening. For weeks at one period, Mr. Parsons never received them. In his mounting frustration when this failed, he began to strip the old man's clothes from the bed, but his hardy old bones seemed to be immune to cold.

One May day, Mr. Parsons fell down the back stairs while Godfrey was assisting him.

On June 5, the old man was reported missing again. He remained missing overnight. Marjorie became hysterical. Towards the end of the next day two detectives arrived at the house with a search warrant.

Godfrey, ever his solicitous self, gave them every help. "It is most tragic. Poor old fellow must have slipped out when my wife was resting. He's been lost before, you know. I'm sure he's safe somewhere."

The detectives searched thoroughly. They found nothing. Later that evening, Mr. Parsons was discovered twenty miles away in Godalming. A bus driver reported him when he had tried to pay for his fare with a handful of old pencils. How he managed to get from Wellborough to Godalming was never discovered.

The episode had the exact effect Godfrey wanted. It enabled him to display publicly his concern for the old man, and, more than that, it swept any suspicions from the minds of the police.

Marjorie was quite ill after the disappearance of her father, and Godfrey sent her away for a rest with her old school friend. After seeing her train pull out, Godfrey parked the car, with Mr. Parsons in the back, outside the King's Arms, and whispered to Kate, "Meet me up at the house, to-night. I've important news."

Kate appeared outside the back door at seven o'clock. She was in an excited state. Godfrey didn't waste words. He pulled out a coloured travel folder. "I ordered your ticket from an agency in London last week. It arrived at the post office today."

He watched her eyes grow. She took the envelope, and turned it over in her hands, hardly daring to open it.

"You leave on the 25th of next month," he said, "on the *Empress of Scotland*. All you have to do is get your passport. Go to see my uncle in Toronto. I'll follow as soon as I get things cleared up here."

When Kate left, Godfrey smiled inwardly and relaxed. Now for the final stage. Had he been any other criminal, he might have been satisfied with his position as it stood. Kate, the only evidence against him, would soon be gone. He had a good home, enough money for his needs, and a position of respectability in the neighbourhood. But the size of the Parsons's bank balance had etched itself into his brain, and he was driven by an insatiable desire to get his share.

At almost exactly four o'clock the following afternoon, the town's fire alarm sounded. It brought most people to their doors. A fire was un-

usual. The last had been at the Parsons's house.

Godfrey, taking afternoon tea at the Aynsley Tea-rooms, poured himself another cup. He had travelled from the house on foot, establishing an alibi with several acquaintances on the way. The car remained in the garage a safe distance from the house.

Godfrey gave his best performance when the police arrived. "I knew I should never have left him. Marjorie will never forgive me," he shouted. "Poor old chap may have done himself in."

The police car, with Godfrey in it, arrived at the blazing house within minutes. Godfrey jumped out and stumbled over the hoses to the front door. For a moment he thought the firemen were not going to restrain him. But they eventually did. "Let me in! Let me in!" he shouted. "My father-in-law's in there."

"Take it easy, sir," said the police sergeant. "There's not much we can do for the old fellow now. This time he seems to have razed the place."

A raging inferno roared inside the crumbling walls. It was probably this noise which stopped Godfrey hearing

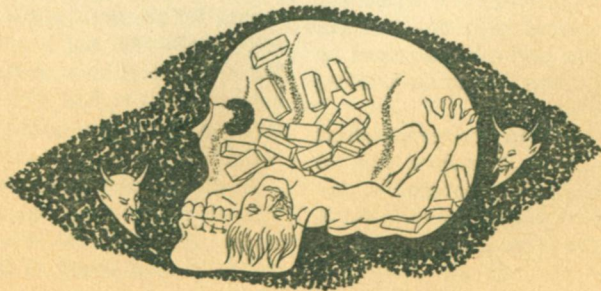
the car drive up. He never saw it until it was only yards away. Billy Symes was driving and the old man was in the back.

A fireman made a gallant attempt to pull him away from the house. But the falling chimney caught him before he could make it. The heavy load of bricks and mortar crushed Godfrey to the ground.

As he lay there dying, the victim of his own trap, his eyelids flickered for the last time, and he saw Kate stand beside him. He raised his hand to hers. She didn't take it. She carried the ticket to Canada in the bright folder that he had given her only the day before.

So died Godfrey Percival Bragg. But that is not the end of the story. At the inquest, a verdict of accidental death was recorded, and the police never started an investigation into the causes of the fire, in spite of their suspicions. There seemed no need for it.

Kate left for Canada, and we hope for a better life, chastened by her experience. Marjorie's father died shortly, and she lived on cherishing the memory of her husband which had come out of the incident unblemished.



# CHESS PUZZLE

ROSWELL B. ROHDE



THE ROOM WAS comfortable and a bit untidy, a typical man's room, and the fire in the fireplace was real. The light of a single lamp shone down on the two men who occupied chairs across a small table, on the close-cropped brown hair of the officer and the white fringed pink skull of the scientist. The scene was set for mellowness and warmth and peace, but when Colonel Jeffrey Norden spoke it was to ask:

"All right, Gray—what's troubling you?"

Dr. Huebner started, then tried to cover up by scowling fiercely and biting on his pipe-stem.

"What makes you think there's trouble?" he countered.

Colonel Norden grinned, a curiously boyish grin for a man of his rank. "A fellow who has played chess for fifty years and even written a history of it isn't likely to get his King in fool's-mate all by himself—unless he's pretty upset!"

Dr. Huebner burned two wooden matches getting his pipe going again.

"All right, Jeff," he said. "I never could fool you. You read my mind, I suspect!"

"Not judging by the way you beat me at this game, I don't!"

"To tell you the truth, Jeff, I *am* worried! You know something of our work here. . . ."

"Little enough," the Colonel said, "but all they want me to know. I've heard cobalt mentioned. . . ."

"It's hell," Dr. Huebner said wearily, "to know and not know. But it's the safest way, I guess."

"That's right," Colonel Norden said. "I'm here to check results—not the methods by which you achieve them. Don't tell me anything you shouldn't, Gray."

"I'm afraid it won't be our secret long. . . ."

"You mean — an information leak?"

"Possibly," the great physicist said. "Look—maybe I'm making too much of it. I'll tell you, and let you judge for yourself."

"O.K. Only—no secrets, please!"

"I'm in charge of co-ordination on this—er—project. I have three men under me—each a top man in his field. This thing has reached a point where even the specialists have to specialize. Each of these three men works separately from the others, has his own lab. and technicians. He may guess at what the others are doing, but he can't know for certain.

"The findings—the results, actually, since this is far past the experimental stage—come to me. From these three sums, you might say, I obtain the total. I alone know what this total means in terms of . . . of—"

"Then how the leak?"

"I do not know that it has reached the point of an actual leak. Someone

—and it must be one of these three men—is interested in knowing more than is good for him. . . .”

Colonel Norden was thinking of other secrets that had been sapped away, and his thoughts were not happy ones. He realized that leaks meant lives. . . .

“Two or three times during the past month I’ve stepped out of my office for a few minutes, and when I came back I’ve had a feeling that someone has looked at what was left on my desk. Nothing conclusive, just an impression. Maybe a paper laid over something I was sure was right on top,” Dr. Huebner said.

“Were these papers vital?”

“No—naturally nothing is left on my desk even for a few minutes when I am not there that is vital. But they would provide clues to what we have done. At night everything goes into the vaults, but at lunch-time whatever I am working on I put in a small safe with a combination lock in my office.”

“And how many persons have access to your room?”

“Three only—my assistants. They are the only persons besides myself allowed on our floor. And of course they’ve been cleared by Security. . . .”

“Yet, where there is temptation there is always the chance of someone weakening. Sometimes the damnedest, most senseless reasons can warp a good man. . . .”

“Fuchs, for instance,” Dr. Huebner nodded assent.

“If you don’t mind,” Colonel Norden said, “tell me a little about these

three men. Just a capsule run-down on them.”

He got up and paced the floor, for he thought better when he was on his feet. His muscular slenderness was a sharp contrast to the Doctor’s bulk.

“Otto Ambel,” said Dr. Huebner, speaking mechanically. “Physicist, German born, degrees from Heidelberg and the University of Paris. Fled Nazis and reached us via London. American citizen now, of course. Brilliant, but tends to be morose—doesn’t speak for days if he’s working hard.

“Stephen Reyburn. American born. Physicist. Drinks a trifle too much when off-duty, but close-mouthed even then. Came to us from the Navy Department.

“Madison Hayes. American born of third-generation stock. Father was Minister to Costa Rica. Engineering background; studied at half a dozen American schools. Likewise brilliant. Only out-and-out extrovert of the three.”

Dr. Huebner poked at the fire and put another piece of wood on it. “Hell,” he said angrily, resuming his seat, “they’re all good men. I would have staked my life on any one of them, or all of them together. Until today. . . .”

“What *did* happen today, my friend?”

“It happened at lunch-time,” Dr. Huebner said. “I worked about fifteen minutes past the hour—had the final test reports on my desk. I can tell you this much, Jeff—we’ve got it!

*Right now!* And it's . . . it's tremendous!

"I put the plans in my safe and spun the dial, locking them in. Then I went into the lavatory just off my office and washed up.

"I didn't close the door, which is directly opposite the one on the corridor, and of course there is a medicine cabinet with a mirror above the wash-basin.

"I had my face pretty well soaped up, in fact some of it had run into my eyes and I was groping for a towel when I heard a noise in the room behind me. It was the sound of the safe dial being turned!

"Well, I still hadn't found the towel, but just then my hand touched it and I called out: 'Who's there?' I got no answer, and as quickly as I could wipe the soap from my face, I glanced in the mirror in front of me. The door on the corridor was just closing. I walked across the room and opened it, but the hall was empty."

"Who knew the combination of the safe—besides you?"

"No one. At least no one was supposed to know it. But I imagine if someone with an exceptional memory had stood behind me when I was unlocking it at some time or other, he might very well have learned it."

"In other words—any one of the three."

"I suppose so. . . ."

"What about the guard at the lift. Did he notice if one of the men left for lunch a little late or came back during the lunch hour?"

"It so happened that all three of these men had lunch earlier. They

had been out on the desert, supervising some installations there, and came in half an hour before their regular lunch-time. They were anxious to make their reports to me, so they ate on their way up, and were all in their offices at the time I was supposed to have gone to lunch."

"Again—it could have been any one of them!"

"That's what makes it so damned puzzling!"

"It's a tough spot, all right. Suppose you let me sleep on it?"

They played chess then, and an hour later Colonel Norden, who had arrived unexpectedly by plane earlier in the evening, yawned and stood up.

"You're one up on me, Gray. I'll try to do better tomorrow!"

As he went to the quarters that had been assigned him, he was more disturbed by what Dr. Huebner had told him than he cared to admit. This thing he was here to witness was big—bigger even than the hydrogen bomb, and it therefore represented the one jump by which the United States was ahead of rivals in the atom race. If one of Dr. Huebner's assistants was gathering information for a foreign power, then that lead wouldn't last long.

The Colonel paced his room, then stopped. Obviously if someone had tried to get into Dr. Huebner's safe this very day, then he still didn't have all of the necessary data. The secret might not yet be out!

Colonel Norden wondered suddenly if Dr. Huebner had informed Security of his suspicions. Probably not. In some ways, Dr. Huebner was

far too trusting. Of course, Security must be informed, and that immediately!

Another thought came to the Colonel with an impact that shook him. Dr. Huebner might be in danger! Why hadn't he seen it at once? Whoever had been in the office at noon couldn't have known that the Doctor had soap in his eyes. He couldn't be sure that the Doctor hadn't seen and recognized him, but he was probably certain that nothing had yet been reported. Colonel Norden lifted the phone, and as he did so it rang. . . .

"This is Inspector Thurmond," the voice at the other end said. "Colonel Norden?"

"Yes, but——"

"You were with Dr. Huebner earlier this evening?"

"That is correct. I was just going to call you, Inspector, when the phone rang. I was worried about Dr. Huebner. I thought——"

"Worried? Why?"

"Perhaps I can explain better in person."

"Meet me at Dr. Huebner's apartment at once, then. I'm sorry to tell you, but Dr. Huebner committed suicide a few minutes ago. . . .!"

Dr. Huebner's apartment looked nearly the same as it had when Colonel Norden left it. Nearly, but differing in the one really vital detail. Dr. Huebner was slumped in the same easy chair—but he was dead!

The fire had gone out and the bright ceiling fixture robbed the room of its cosiness. Colonel Norden looked at his friend's body and cursed himself

for a fool. Why hadn't he realized the danger the Doctor was in? Why had he left him alone for a moment even?

He looked up and saw that the Inspector, a lean, mild-eyed man who seemed too young for his job, was watching him. It bothered the Colonel a little to think that this whole area was under the jurisdiction of civil authorities, but Desert City had spread around the labs., and that was the way it was.

However, any doubts he might have had as to the Inspector's fitness for his job were soon removed. The Coroner was with him, as were a finger-print expert and a photographer. Apparently he was thorough, even with suicides.

"The gun was on the floor beside him," Inspector Thurmond said. "Shot in the right temple."

Colonel Norden cleared his throat and said hoarsely:

"Inspector—this wasn't suicide! No matter what it looks like—Dr. Huebner was murdered!"

Inspector Thurmond never blinked. Not by so much as a raised eyebrow did he disclose surprise or even disbelief.

"I left him not an hour ago," Colonel Norden said. "He was in no mood to end his life, believe me! But I think I can give you a clue to why someone might want him out of the way. . . ."

Quickly he went over the facts as Dr. Huebner had given them to him so short a time before. When he had finished, the Inspector nodded his head and drew deeply on a cigarette.

He sent a man to bring the three assistants of the late Doctor. While the man was gone, the Inspector asked several questions, clarifying facts as the Colonel had given them to him. When the man returned he said: "They are outside. Their rooms are in this same building. Seems when they are working they often stay here—don't go home to Desert City for days."

Colonel Norden and Inspector Thurmond exchanged glances, each letting the other know that he recognized that here was opportunity, if no more.

"You were playing chess, you mentioned," the Inspector said finally, tossing away a cigarette and promptly lighting another.

"Yes—there—by the fire——" Colonel Norden broke off. From where he was standing he could see the chess-board plainly, and the chessmen, most of which had been removed from the board and laid aside during the course of their game, were again sitting on squares.

"Has anything been disturbed?" he asked quickly. "I mean—did your men set up these chessmen?"

The question sounded asinine, and Inspector Thurmond shrugged a little as he said, "My dear fellow—really . . . !"

The Colonel moved closer to the table. It gave him an odd feeling to be looking over the shoulder of his dead friend.

"I think there's something here," he said, studying the board. "If Dr. Huebner was killed by one of the three men I mentioned—as I am con-

vinced he was—then he probably let him in in good faith, and they may have talked for several minutes before the murderer worked around into a position where he could make it look like suicide! Yes—there is certainly something here. . . ."

"I don't play, myself," said the Inspector. "You mean to tell me that Dr. Huebner may have given us some clue—set up this board in such a way as to identify his killer?"

"Double-checkmate!" the Colonel exclaimed. "*Impasse!*"

"What . . . ?"

"Both Kings are in check simultaneously. It is an impossibility. A draw is possible in this game, but not double checkmate. It just couldn't happen!"

"But what does it mean?"

"Frankly, nothing yet. I think the Doctor did it to call my attention to something else—to the real clue. Let's see now—something is missing. A pawn—no—two pawns! White pawns. And . . . the black Castle!"

"Elementary so far," said the Inspector wryly. "Two white pawns—two innocent men. Black Castle—there's your clue, Colonel!"

"But where are they?"

"Here—on this table by the lamp. Dr. Huebner could reach it without moving from his chair. God, he must have been a cool one! Face death like that and still give us a tip-off. . . ." The Inspector drew himself up sharply. "Assuming, of course, that it wasn't suicide!"

"It wasn't!" Colonel Norden said decidedly.

The Inspector pointed to the two



white pawns and the black Castle, which sat on a little black-covered book on the lamp table.

"What do you make of that?"

Colonel Norden rubbed his chin, a bit absently.

"It's there," he said slowly, "I know it's there, if I can only get it. That book now—it's a copy of Dr. Huebner's *History of Chess*. He was a real fan, you know. The answer must be in it."

He was silent, lost in thought for several minutes.

"The pieces," he said at last, half talking to himself, "each has a history of its origin. The game came from India centuries ago. Through Persia and the Middle East to us. Each piece has a meaning, a root word. That's it! The root word for 'Castle.' Can we move those pawns and that piece now?"

"Frank," Inspector Thurmond said, "check these three chessmen for finger-prints. A guy as cool as the Doc might have actually got the murderer's prints on one of them. Take the Castle first—that black one."

The prints were blurred, of course. Not even a good one of Dr. Huebner's. But the Colonel had the book now, and found the cross-reference to "Castle or Rook."

"'The Castle or Rook,'" he read, "'comes from the Sanskrit word *roka*, and it seems reasonable to believe that while the piece may have existed in the earliest games of chess, it is probable that the name as we know it is derived from the name applied to it in the Middle East . . . I believe I know which is our man, Inspector!"

The Inspector was plainly puzzled.

"Are you willing to try something?" the Colonel demanded urgently. "It won't do any harm—at least not to you. Bring in those three men who were Dr. Huebner's assistants. A murderer is pretty jumpy this close up to his crime—maybe we can trap him!"

"What can we lose?" the Inspector said. "Only don't make any accusations you can't prove. It might be embarrassing for both of us!"

Colonel Norden nodded, then said:

"One other thing—Dr. Huebner's body. Can it be left right where it is for a few minutes more?"

Again the Inspector shrugged, and he motioned to his men and the Coroner: "Wait in the hallway a few minutes, will you? And send in Doctors Hayes," here he consulted his notebook, "Hayes, Reyburn, and Ambel."

Colonel Norden replaced the two white pawns and the black Castle on Dr. Huebner's book, and stood back, a little behind the dead man's chair. Inspector Thurmond leaned at the far side of the fireplace. Then the door opened and the three men came in. Dr. Ambel was noticeably nervous; Dr. Reyburn glanced once at the body, and then looked from the Colonel to Inspector Thurmond and back as the former began to speak. Dr. Hayes went pale and seemed to have trouble taking his eyes from the body. He spoke angrily to the Inspector: "Don't you think you could have spared us this, at least?"

Colonel Norden studied the men's

faces for a full minute in silence. Then he spoke.

"You may have heard that Dr. Huebner committed suicide here to-night. He did no such thing! He was murdered—murdered by one of you three!" His voice was like an icy rapier playing at their throats, ready for the thrust. "Fortunately he was able to leave a message telling which of you was the traitor and his killer!"

The room was dead silent, hushed by expectancy, dread, taut with tension for all, and for one—fear. . . .

"Here," the Colonel said, pointing towards the chess-board and the

chessmen," here on this board he wrote the name of his murderer . . . and it was you—*Stephen Reyburn!*"

Even as he spoke the name the former navy man lunged forward, upsetting the table, sending the chessmen flying; only to be seized, cursing, by the Colonel and Inspector Thurmond. Colonel Norden was certain then that even if Reyburn later repudiated his guilt, a search of his private papers would provide both motive and evidence. And *roka*, as Colonel Norden explained to the Inspector a few minutes later, is Sanskrit for *sailor*. . . .



Fallen from his high estate,  
And welt'ring in his blood:  
Deserted at his utmost need  
By those his former bounty fed;  
On the bare earth expos'd he lies,  
With not a friend to close his eyes.

JOHN DRYDEN (1631-1701).

Since twelve honest men have decided the cause,  
And were judges of fact, tho' not judges of laws.

WILLIAM PULTENEY (1684-1764).

You can fool all the people some of the time, and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all of the time.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN (1809-1865).

# THE FIFTH MASK

SHAMUS FRAZER

*The lady had a different face—a dreadful scarred sunken thing. . . .*

**R**EMBER, REMEMBER—the Fifth of November? I only wish it were possible to forget it. But every year at this time one is reminded of what has

been, and—*of what is to come*. The squibs crackle in the fog-shrouded alleys even before October is out; there is the tang of gunpowder in the sharpening air; the frontier incidents of memory, these—the skirmishing before the campaign opens in evil earnest.

I keep to the highways at this season. But even in the Strand, among the neon lights, one runs into those little grim cortèges out of their rat-holes in the river fog: the cork-blackened faces, the trundled soap-box trolley, with its stiff, bloated guy bulging the tattered suit, the desperado hat pulled down over the eyeless, unwholesome mask; and no matter how quickly one tries to get by, one doesn't escape that rat squealing chorus, "Spare a penny for the old guy, mister . . ." Like a finger of ice drawn down between the shoulder-blades—that's how it takes me.

I hurry past, till the ribaldries flung at my back fall off, and I can pull in my stride and plan how to stop myself thinking.

Oh, I've tried the cinemas—but

they're too dark and there's muttering and breathing at your back; and even when the lights are turned on, the faces of the strangers banked around you are like . . . like masks . . . waiting for the dark, if you see what I mean. So it's usually a pub. Luckily I found this one. I was whacked. All the way along, that chant: "Remember, remember . . . *spare a penny for the old guy*." Then at the corner here . . . just beyond the frosted window there with the goat and the pair of stilts on it—there was a kid standing in a mask; he didn't say anything . . . but when I came by he made as if to take it off—his mask I mean. So I turned in here . . . to be out of the way.

Tumbled in, you say? Well, I tripped over the mat certainly, if that's what you mean. Daft sort of place to put a mat.

Nerves? Well, there's something in that, too—but there's nothing without a reason. That's what's so frightening—just why it should have happened to me; and if there's a reason *there*, mind you, I don't want to know it.

Why should I have been picked on—a mere child? Robin Truby and I couldn't have been more than ten if we were that much when . . . this incident I'd hoped to get out of my mind long since . . . took place.

No, let me stand this one. Two double whiskies, miss. The gentle-

man's paid, eh? It's kind, very kind—but no cause; the fall shook me up a bit, but I'm all right now. The whisky helps and someone with patience to understand.

Robin? Robin's dead now. At Normandy it was: one of those phosphorus bombs he was carrying, touched off by a bullet—burning with the phosphorus in his guts. You couldn't put it out: like one of those guys they stuff with fireworks, they couldn't get near him. There's only me left: for the time being, that is. . . .

We were friends as kids, our parents living next door, see. At Failing this was, in Darkshire. I'm from the North, though you perhaps wouldn't guess it: what with the war and living down here since, I've *changed*. A citizen of no abiding city, that's me—and all of us, if it comes to that. But there's something *real* about the place you've lived in as a child.

You've never visited Failing, I take it? Well, there's not much to see: it's not as if it were London or anything. Industrial, you know: smoke-blackened chapels, and row upon row of yellow-brick houses under blue slate roofs. My folk and Robin Truby's lived cheek by jowl, as the saying has it, in one of these rows—and we were always in and out of each other's houses, or scrambling over the wall that shut off the backyards. Robin was a one for mischief: red hair he had, and a way with it. Robin Hood we called him, and I was Friar Tuck, because I was a well-built lad and on account of my glasses.

Yes, I know: you'll be asking yourself what this has got to do with what

I've to talk about—guy, Fifth of November and all? I'm coming to it in my own time, sir—if time is ever our own, that is, and not lent to us, all cut to different lengths as it were. I worked in a draper's once, and . . . but that's not what I've got to make up my mind to tell.

We used to save for the Fifth—Robin and I: save up the pennies and lay in a store of Burmese lights, and bangers, star rockets, Roman candles, Catherine wheels and such, but mostly it was bangers. And for weeks we'd be pestering our dads for an old hat, a pair of trousers with the patch on the seat worn through, a coat with the elbows out—anything that would do for the old guy. We'd get togged up, too, the last few nights . . . in masks . . . and go cadging coppers if we hadn't enough by then: but in a distant part of the town, where we wouldn't be run into by folks we knew. If it had got home what we were doing, we'd have been given a hiding we'd have remembered all our lives. It was *respectable* the district Robin and I lived in, and the worst crime we could commit was behaving like common boys might be expected to behave. That's why we put on those masks . . . so we shouldn't be recognized if a neighbour was to pass.

We bought them at a little news-agent's called Horrobin, where sometimes we'd get a penn'orth of aniseed balls or liquorice sweets when out for a walk this way, to or from the Town Fields. Robin chose a death's-head, greeny white; and mine was a nigger's the time I'm speaking of, liquorice black with red eyeballs; a nigger

demon's you might describe it. We put them on outside, and mark this—I had to take my specs off to fit it to the face, and then put them on again over the mask and all so as I could see my way, being short-sighted. Robin did look a sight, grisly, with his red hair sitting up like flames atop that green hollow skull-face.

"Here, stick your hat on," I said; and we pulled on the old felt hats with the feather in the band that we'd brought with us. They held the masks more firm to our heads: soft cardboard or a kind of paper-mash they were, with a funny smell to them, sickly.

We had settled to cross the Town Fields to a part where there was a new housing estate—working-class with shops, a cinema and everything—raised on the old war-time 1914-18 aerodrome. There was no one to know us that side, and we reckoned it would be dark before we came to it.

The Town Fields in Failing have been turned into recreation space now—tennis-courts, cricket pavilion, that kind of thing; but at the time I'm speaking of they were under the plough. Often Robin and me would play stalking Indians in the corn there—till one day the farmer caught us at it. But by November of course the corn was gone; I can't recollect what was growing there unless some yellowing stalks and stumps of mangel-wurzel.

It was foggy—not thick but moving in swirls. We kept to the top of the fields. There's a wide path there, with seats set out and gas-lamps; set on a ridge, with big villas behind stone

walls and tarred-wood fencing one side of it, and their gardens gloomy with tall trees and shrubberies, and the fields dipping below it the other side in a slow wide curve like they were the sea; a real treasure trail for conkers that path in the early autumn—though after . . . after what happened I never cared to visit it again.

It was late afternoon but not dark when Robin and I took our way along this path. We passed the lamplighter with his long pole; but he was early that afternoon, and in the pale dusk the chain of lighted gas-lamps he'd left behind him gave more of noise than light, a hissing and plopping as if they were trying to tell you something.

We'd almost got to the stile that led to a footpath cutting down half a mile or more to the bottom of the fields—we weren't in a hurry, mind you—we'd been along there in the dark before, and we'd got our battery flashlights in our pockets; but, speaking for myself, when that voice called to us my first impulse was to scramble over the stile and run and run until I dropped. It was a thin voice and high, and somehow cold, very cold. I'd got my leg over the stile, but in my fright I slipped and fell off. Robin pulled me to my feet again.

"Who was it?" I gasped. "Who was it spoke just now?"

"Don't be a mutt, Fred Tucker. It's only a lady. She doesn't know us," he whispered. "She may be good for a tanner if we try it on—winsome like."

"A Death, a little Death—and are there two?" the thin voice continued. "Is Death that small boy's mate? . . .

No, I see—a little negro, a Nubian, Death's Ethiopian slave. . . ."

She was sitting in the middle of one of those seats I've spoken of; fussy iron painted a dark crimson, that must have been put there the same time as the gas-lamps were set up when the Widow Queen sat at Windsor in crinolines. She was thin as her voice, dressed all in black, a kind of black straw bonnet with a purple velvet ribbon nodding on her head; there was a stucco wall behind her, patched and discoloured as a gravestone, and the ghosts of winter trees rising above and losing themselves in the twilight. I got as big a fright to see her as when I'd first heard her voice—and I'd have bolted but for Robin's grip on my arm. "Come on!" he said, and pinching me as if he'd have me join in with him, called out in a kind of wheedling sing-song: "Spare a penny, lady, for the old guy?" "Which old guy?" she said with a chuckle that set your teeth on edge. "I only see two young ones, but my eyes are not as good as they were . . . *in the dark!*" She beckoned us with a long hooked forefinger, white as a leper's: "Come closer . . . closer . . . until I can see the whites of your eyes. . . . Then we can fire away at one another more effectively. . . ."

I would have hung back, but Robin had hold of my wrist and pushed me along ahead of him until we stood a couple of paces in front of her—near enough for her to catch hold of me if she'd have leant forward suddenly.

Robin took the collecting tin from under his coat and jangled it: we'd put a few ha-pence in before we set out so it would make a good noise:

"Spare a penny for the old guy, lady."

"So I'm to stand and deliver, am I? My money or my life? Perhaps both, Master Death, eh?" She took up a horrible black net bag from her lap—like the nets they peg out in a rabbit warren when they're ferreting, only darker and more of it—and her fingers worked at the mouth of it in a kind of weaving way, like long white worms, a kind of maggoty movement in the blackness. "But you must unmask first—or you'll be getting money under false pretences. Now which shall I choose to unmask first?" She pointed a wriggling white finger at us, "*Eenie, meenie, mina mo! Catch a nigger by his toe. . . .*" The finger jabbed stiff, pointed at my heart. "Take it off," she ordered. "Remove that mask, child, and——"

I fumbled with my spectacles: it was as if I were hypnotized into it. I took them off. I took off my hat, and at the last I pulled off the nigger mask.

"And it's just as I fancied," she added. "A whey-faced boy. His mask is black, but oh, his soul is white. A pudding face and a lily liver." Her finger crooked back like a snake, and struck out at Robin's chest. "Next boy!" she said.

I could hear Robin's troubled breathing as he pulled off his hat and eased the mask elastic over his head. "It's worth a copper, missus," he said, and I'd never heard his tone so uneasy.

"Copper?" she said. "And it's a bright, new-minted copper, boy, too! Master Death is pink as Cupid, and his head is a torch brazier to warm the hands at; even *my* hands might thaw with that head for a muff. . . ."

It was as if she were speaking to herself; but suddenly she leant forward and stretched out her hands. "Give me the masks," she said, "and I'll show you a trick, shall I? . . . An optical illusion, if you like long words."

She'd snatched them from us before we knew what she would be at, and was sitting back with the masks caught like moths in a spider's web among that black stuff she was wearing. Her fingers worked again at the bag in her lap, and she took out a couple of pennies. They were black Victorian pennies, and she handed us over one apiece. Mine was ice cold, and the "tails" side was green with a kind of mould like verdigris.

"Now place them on my eyes," she said. "Press them in hard. You needn't be afraid of hurting me." Neither of us moved.

"Give them to *me* then." We surrendered the pennies in silence, and she pressed them into her eyes. In that pale thin face they looked like sockets from which the eyes had fallen in dust. "And now the masks. . . ."

She covered her face first with my nigger mask, and it was as though her face had fallen off leaving only darkness and nothing; or like the black cloth they cover a murderer's face with on the trapdoor—I'd nightmares after seeing that once in a slot machine in Blackpool. It made me shiver to see her—though I couldn't see her well, my glasses being still in my fingers since I'd taken off the mask.

She picked up Robin's mask next and put it on over mine—and the blackness in the sockets where the pennies were was like . . . well, though

the words came to me years later, it was then I was groping for . . . like *eternal night*, sir.

"And now, children," her voice sounded muffled and thinner than ever under the masks, "find the pennies."

"Go on, Friar Tuck," said Robin. "Don't be a fraidy custard. Don't stand there like a dumb loony. The lady wants you to take off the mask."

Very gingerly I reached out my hand to the mask: it seemed to fall off of its own accord into my fingers. I stood and stared fuzzily while Robin, encouraged by my success, reached out for the second mask.

Two masks came away in his hands—and dropped on to the lady's knees. I heard Robin whimpering, and felt my throat go withered at what I looked at. One of the masks that lay upwards on her lap was the lady's face . . . the thin high-cheekboned face with the red line of the mouth now looked up at me vacantly from her knees.

I thought it was something to do with my eyesight being weak; and automatically as it were I fumbled on the mask I was holding and the glasses on top of it.

Then I began whimpering, too. The lady had a different face—a dreadful scarred sunken thing with the flesh of the nose eaten with decay.

"Stop blubbering!" Her voice was sharp and cold as ever. "Why shouldn't I wear masks, too—on the Fifth of November? Did I blubber and cry when two little monsters came up to me out of the fog? You'd think if this was my face I had had some terrible accident, wouldn't you? Or perhaps I was marked with a fearful

disease, eh? But you can stop whimpering: it's only a mask. And if it wasn't—well, accidents on this dark earth are all part of a Design, you know—and that disease, well it's an epidemic as common as the cold, isn't it, Master Death?"

We heard the words, but the meaning didn't come till later, years later: I'm not sure I've caught it, the meaning that is, even now. But the sound of her voice seemed to lull us into a kind of trance. We'd stopped wailing—but I heard somebody's teeth chattering, and couldn't be sure they weren't my own.

"You've not found the pennies yet. Now, who's going to take *this* mask off? . . . *Eenie, meenie, mina, mo. Catch a . . .*" She stopped, and though the black empty eyes showed no sign of life, one *knew* that she was looking at someone else, someone standing a little behind us. It may have been the lift of that hideous mask—something, a new alertness in the thin body perhaps—that made me glance over my shoulder. "Another boy?" she said. "Another dear little child to watch my trick with the pennies. Well, I've quite an audience now: a flock, a congregation. Come nearer, child."

At first I thought he was wearing a mask, too, this new-comer—his face was so white and his eyes stared so. He was a boy a year or two younger than Robin and me; fair hair he had and neatly brushed, and a neat grey overcoat and grey stockings. He had in one hand a linen bag which held his dancing-pumps, for you could see a patent-leather toe stuck out at the top. He had been coming back from a

dancing class or some kid's party across the Town Fields. Perhaps he lived in one of the big villas whose lights we'd seen winking back there beyond the foggy garden trees.

He was not the kind of boy Robin or I cared for at ordinary times; if we'd met him alone we'd have teased him, thrown his shiny shoes among the mangel-wurzels and told him to get his hands dirty looking for them. "Little Lord Fauntleroy?" we'd have mocked at him (there wasn't "cissy" in the dictionary in those days), and pushed him about, rubbed mud in his hair, had our bit of fun out of him. But now . . . I can't speak for Robin, but for myself I was glad of his coming, and pitiful, too. I wanted to warn him; I wanted to say: "Run, lad, run as fast as you can before she pins you here as she's pinned me and my friend. Run and bring help!" But all I could get out was a croaking "Hallo, kid." I tried to sound friendly out of gratitude that we were no longer alone.

Even scared as he was, there was a stuck-up air about that little fellow. Oh, it was courage he had all right. "Is she frightening you?" he asked, and a voice he had like my mother used to call "real class." "I've seen her here once or twice before." And he added so low she shouldn't, not with *ordinary* ears, have caught it: "I think perhaps she's a patient that's been released from some . . . some Home: an *asylum*, you know. . . . What's that she's wearing on her face?"

"A mask!" the thin muffled voice took him up. "And who is going to remove it and find the pennies. . . ."



*Who shall we have to fetch it away?*  
. . . Not you, my little fair-spoken dancing partner? . . . No one? . . . Then I shall be forced to take it off myself. . . .”

Her long writhing fingers went up to her face, and she peeled off that sunken horror—and revealed Robin’s mask, the skull-face, sitting there bonily as before.

Now there was a trick I could appreciate. She must have slipped Robin’s mask out of his fingers while she talked, and fitted it on under the other without our noticing anything. This was quite a trick, I thought—and I lost something of my . . . my discomfort, thinking how she’d done it. It would have needed a real conjurer’s sleight of hand to have slipped it away and under, the way she must have done. . . .

“She’s diddled you, Robin,” I said. “She’s won your mask back again, look.”

And I wasn’t prepared for what happened next. Robin screamed: he just stood and screamed, because the words wouldn’t come.

“Robin, whatever’s up?” I cried, all over gooseflesh. “What’s come over you, Robin?”

He stopped yelling then. He shuddered, and when he spoke it was in a tired voice, not like himself.

“You’re wearing my mask, Fred. You took it off her first time and put it on your face. You’ve got it on now—and your specs sitting over it.”

I put my hand up to the mask, and before I’d taken it off to look I knew that what Robin had said was the

truth. I felt I could drop: I was past screaming.

“So we have four masks,” the old . . . horror cut in, “and the question is still—where are the pennies? Are the wages of sin under *this*?” She tapped the hard frontal bone with her fingernail. “What do you think, Master Wheyface Death? Or is there a fifth mask, eh Redbreast? Or nothing perhaps—nothing at all my little Nijinsky? Well, we’ve got to find out—some day, haven’t we? So who is going to take the fourth mask off, my pretty dears? . . . Shall I pick a volunteer? Eh?”

The long crooked finger uncoiled again from her bosom and she wriggled it at us in turn and began again that fearful singsong—a familiar kid’s jingle, but intoned as if it were some black litany in that chill high voice of hers:

*Eenie, meenie, mina, mo!  
Catch a nigger by his toe.  
If he squeals let him go.  
Eenie . . . meenie . . . mina . . . MO!*

The finger was still and pointed at my heart—and I was moving forward with a dragging sickness on me like despair. It was like the crisis of nightmare, and I was stretching forward my hand to that bony horror under the black straw bonnet when my wrist was seized, and a voice called in my ear—over thousands of light years it seemed: “No, no. . . . Leave her. She’s mad darkness. Come away.”

It was the fair-haired kid, him with the dancing-pumps. “My people live only a little way down the path there.

Come back with me. You're not well. They can telephone. . . ."

He was interrupted by that odious thin and ice-edged voice—sharp now as a claw:

"Then if no one will assist me I shall have to take off the fourth mask *all* by myself. . . ."

Her hands went up to the thing that wasn't a face and . . . and Robin and I squealed. We hollered as if the hearts were being pulled out between our ribs. And it was as if that screaming released the trance in which we had been held.

"*If he squeals let him go. . . .*" Oh yes, we squealed all right, and went on squealing as we raced away under the sputtering gas-lamps. Terror made me glance round to see if she was following. No—she sat there still as a pillar, and there was something white in her hands that maybe was a mask. The fair kid was standing as still in front of her: he hadn't moved or made a single cry. I turned my head away and pounded on, screaming for help.

It was quite dark now, and the fog had grown thicker. Robin had left me behind; but I came across him in a few moments, crouched under an ivy-topped wall and retching.

When we had breath back to speak, Robin sobbed:

"Who *was* she? Who, in mercy's name, was she, Fred?"

"The kid thought she'd escaped from . . . from somewhere," I said.

"Did he run off, too? . . . Did he get away?"

"He stayed," I said. "He stayed to see what was under that bone . . . to look at the Fifth Mask, Robin."

"We shouldn't have left him," said Robin, "not with *her* . . . not alone as he was."

"He could have run off same as we."

"She'd mesmerized him, that's what—same as she done to us."

"He was a plucky kid. . . ." I don't know why I used the past tense: the words seemed to be given to me. "I think he stayed because he wanted to see . . . whether she *was* anything at all, living I mean."

"He wanted to *see*. . . ?" cried Robin. "Oh no, not that. He'd have run off if he could."

"Perhaps it's been us imagining things, Robin. She couldn't have *harmed* us, when you come to think of it. She was a bit cracked, that's all—but not sufficient to be put away."

Robin was always the leader of our gang at school—and now it was the old Robin Hood that was coming to life in him again.

"We shouldn't have left him with her, Fred. It wasn't right. Not after the way he spoke up when you were going to . . . going to—"

"I know," I said, and shivered, "I know what I was going to do."

"We'll have to go back there and . . . and call him, Friar."

"Catch me going back there, Robin—not if wild horses was to come and fetch me. . . ." And I shivered again because the words raised a picture before my mind's eye of the kind of wild horses that might be sent to fetch me—glossy, tar-black stallions with fire-coal eyes, and smoky manes, and black ostrich plumes tossing from their heads—funeral horses and the glass hearse rattling behind.

"You got to," said Robin. "It's an order; and I'm going with you, anyway. . . ."

"No," I said. "I'm sick. *He* saw I was sick. If she speaks to me again I'll . . . I couldn't bear it, Robin. . . . You'll have to go yourself. I'll wait here for you to . . . to come back with him."

"You wouldn't like to be left alone . . . in the dark, Fred. And *I'm* going back. . . ."

I ran after him. I implored him not to go. I wept and swore, but he kept on.

The seat lay on the outer edge of a pool of gas-light. We approached cautiously—but from fifteen yards away you could see there was nothing there.

"It's all right," I said. "She's gone. We can turn back, *please*, Robin."

"There's something huddled up on the path, far corner of the seat, look. Here, let me get my flashlight."

"It's only a Guy Fawkes someone's set there," I whispered. "Let's turn back, Robin; let's get home."

"It's moving," said Robin. "It's moving on hands and knees. It's dragging something that looks like a mask . . . something white." The thing moved painfully slowly towards the ring of the lamp-light, and as it moved it moaned like an animal.

"It's *her*," I cried. "It's her coming for us." But even as I was shouting it I knew that I lied, that it wasn't her and that I was both a coward and a traitor. But in the same moment Robin's nerve had broken again—and it was with a kind of savage desolation in my heart I saw him waver, turn and

run back along the path. I followed in panic of being left behind—but by the time we'd pulled up it was of myself that I was most afraid, and of the thing I'd done. Robin had known, too, what that thing was that crept towards the light: I could tell it in his face that was set like a mask.

We said nothing. The Fifth had begun in earnest. There were heavy thuds through the fog, and here and there in the gardens the red flicker and glow of a bonfire. Once a rocket broke right overhead and threw out a handful of drifting blue stars.

We never spoke of that night again—not aloud: the talking was *inside* for each of us, I suppose, over and over, for ever and ever. But I did hear a scrap of talk between my parents a night or two later when they thought I was sleeping.

"Weak heart, poor kid," my father was saying. "He'd overstrained it the same afternoon, dancing. And there was something that had given him a shock—a banger, I shouldn't wonder. They found him on the doorstep. He'd crept there to die. And that was a peculiar thing, Martha—he was clutching a Fawkes Day mask when they found him: shaped like a sleeping child, it was."

"Poor little boy—*dreadful!*" said my mother. "Why, it might have been our Fred. And fancy *cremating* him—a little boy: it's not as if they couldn't afford a proper funeral."

I was biting my pillow to keep in the sobs that were shaking me in the dark. Before my parents were asleep,

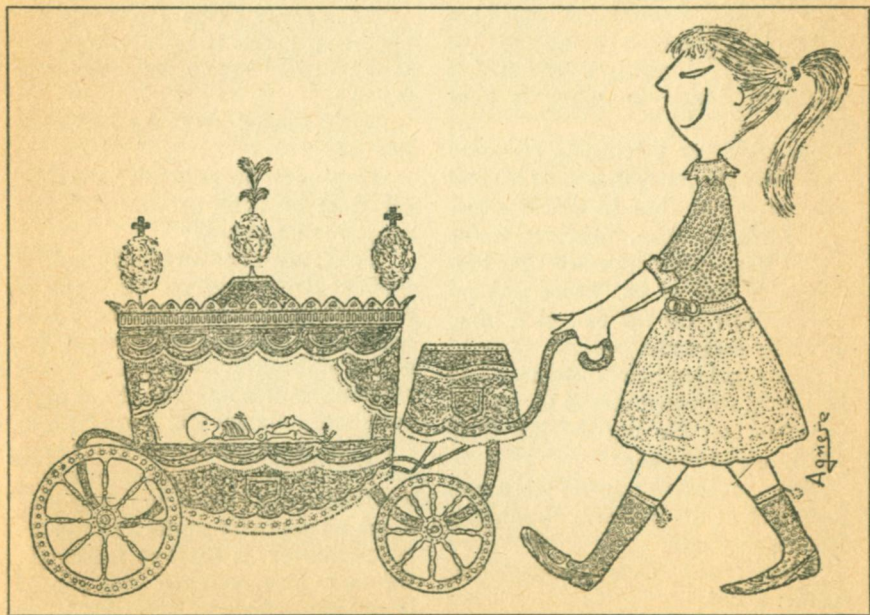
it was wet whichever way I turned it.

It may have been coincidence. After all, I wasn't to *know* it was the same boy. And I didn't tell Robin what I'd heard either; but I believe he knew already.

I've only had two real friends in my life—barring my parents—and both of them's . . . gone. They know what

was under the masks: if there was *anything*, I mean.

You've been kind listening, sir. It would be an added kindness if you'd come with me to the door . . . and look out and tell me if those kids in the masks have gone. . . . No, that'll be all right, sir. . . . It's only a step across the road and there's regular trains to Kensal Green.



# MYSTERY COMPETITION

LONDON MYSTERY MAGAZINE offers a prize of £10 to the reader whose ending to the following story is considered by the Editors to be the best. A second prize of £5 and a third prize of £3 will also be awarded. The three winning endings will be published in a future number. Endings should not be longer than 2,000 words, and all envelopes should be marked "Competition," London Mystery Magazine, Courier House, Blackfriars Bridge, London, S.E.1, England. Closing date, August 21st, 1957.



THE STORY starts at the 21st birthday party of Julian Marshall. The time is 3 a.m., and the merriment, which has been going on for nearly seven hours, is gradually dying—as Julian is himself.

He knew for a Faustian certainty that when the party dispersed his end was near. For then he would sleep, and when he slept, then the terror would start—the nightmare—the bestiality. It had to be. There was no escape. This was the end of a long, carefully measured journey.

Diana, golden haired, eighteen and ravishing, surprised him as he sat disconsolate on the end of the table which served as a bar.

"Why so gloomy? Surely you aren't distressed at the prospect of entering into man's estate?"

"Dear Diana. Dear, young, pure, golden Diana."

She laughed.

"Now, don't start acting like a grandfather because you're twenty-one."

Julian fixed his eyes upon Diana,

full of such utter misery that her mocking laughter died in her throat.

"Seriously, Julian, is anything the matter?"

"Look at me, Diana. I'm not drunk. I'm being perfectly serious. I've got to be because I've only got a few hours to live."

Diana reacted as if she had been slapped.

"Only a few hours to live," she said, her voice breaking nervously; "what are you talking about?"

"Look, just sit down quietly and I'll explain. Every year on the night of my birthday I have a dream—a foul nightmare that annually brings me nearer and nearer to death. My first recollection of it was when I was eight years old. I dreamt that I was lying in a bed in a long dormitory. Between me and the door were twenty beds. I was lying in the twenty-first. A hooded figure entered and shuffled slowly up the dormitory. A shaft of moonlight fell on its face, or rather what should have been its face. In fact, what I saw was a skull with pieces of half-decomposed flesh still adhering. There were maggots and other crawling things in the nostrils and eye-sockets, and it carried the smell of the grave. It was

at once the symbol and the sum total of death. The figure stopped opposite the eighth bed and, holding out its skeletal arms, slowly bent over the pillow in an attitude of complete possession. Come, it seemed to say, embrace me, for I am death.

"I awoke, screaming, in a cold sweat. It was some weeks before I got over the experience, but gradually the dream faded from my mind. A year later, on my ninth birthday, the dream recurred. It was practically the same, only this time the figure went to bed number nine and took possession of it.

"It has been the same every year since on my birthday, with the figure getting closer and closer. Last year it stopped at the bed next to mine . . . and this year . . . well, I'm afraid it's journey's end."

Julian stopped speaking and stared moodily at the floor. Diana, her face white, sought vainly for words of comfort. Julian's guests, shouting their good-byes as they left the flat, went unheeded.

"But why go to sleep at all," said Diana. "Why not stay awake all night and sleep tomorrow?"

"I've tried that," Julian replied dazedly, "but it's no use. I must go to sleep. It's a compulsive thing, beyond my control."

Diana rose and put her arm round him,

"I wish I could help. Is there nothing I can do?"

"Well, there may be, Di, but I hesitate to suggest it—you might take it the wrong way. You might think I was trying to proposition you."

"Are you?"

"In a way, yes. But the proposition is strictly non-carnal. You see, I feel I've only got one chance to fight this thing, and that is to provide myself with a shield—a sort of mediæval talisman."

"And I suppose I am to be that talisman?" asked Diana, lighting a cigarette with trembling fingers.

"That's the general idea," Julian replied slowly. "I feel that if I slept through this night in the arms of someone as lovely and innocent as yourself, I might escape. I know it sounds like the most tremendous line, but I swear it is true. It's my only chance, Di. Will you help me?"

"Yes, I'll help you," Diana replied in a small voice. "I have no choice, but I don't know what good I'll be."

"I don't know. Innocence is traditionally supposed to defeat evil. We can only hope."

Half an hour or so later Julian lay fearfully in Diana's arms. He offered up a fervent prayer, then fell quickly asleep. Almost instantly the dream started. He was back in his bed in the dormitory. Slowly the door opened and the hooded figure entered and started its painful yet purposeful shuffle down the dormitory. . . .

*Now take it from here . . .*

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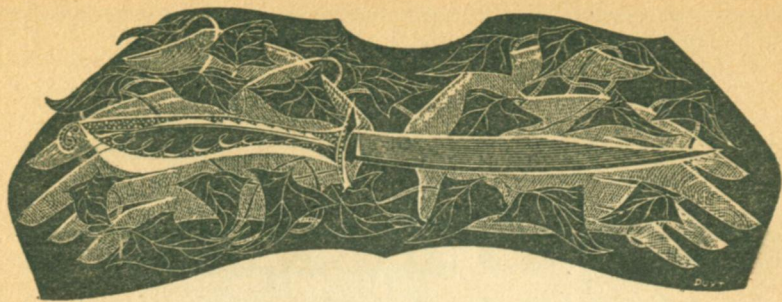
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## CROOKS IN BOOKS

*A review of some recent crime, mystery and detective books*

ANTHONY SHAFFER

"SWEET WATER," by Michael Cronin (*Museum Press*, 10s. 6d.).

The Pilgrim is back in this new novel by Michael Cronin. This piece of news, even to those people who realized that he had ever been born, is hardly of compelling interest. For try though Mr. Cronin does to make the Pilgrim a fierouser Scarlet Pimpernel, a blander Robin Hood, he yet remains a tiresome garage-attendant type with ideas above his station. This adventure of his is all about uranium mines in Mexico and his timely salvation of a young damsel who has inherited the mine from an unscrupulous gang of international crooks who are anxious to get hold of it. One of these days someone will have to make a timely salvation of the Pilgrim from a gang of scrupulous critics anxious to get hold of him—and it won't be me.

"SHOOT ME DACENT," by Aaron Marc Stein (*Macdonald*, 10s. 6d.).

*Shoot Me Dacent* follows the same author's *Moonmilk and Murder* in its mixture of archæology, light-heartedness and incidental murder. Here the background has shifted from the Dordogne Valley to Dublin, but it is equally well-observed. Tim Mulligan and Elsie Mae also recur, and their mutual specialized interest, which here shifts from speleology to the pursuit of the zoomorphic interlaced in Irish Art, has again the same pleasing irrelevance to the crime in which they are embroiled. This is just as well, for the problem (man found in Liffey dead from head wounds; man run down by car; woman shot; why? how?) is a little too cursorily dealt with to be fully gripping, and the suspects are far too few in number really to baffle the practised



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reader. Still, full marks for the distinctive Stein flavour.

"DEATH IN THE WIND," by Edwin Lanham (*Boardman*, 10s. 6d.).

A good, straightforward tale of murder in the American idiom set in hurricane-assaulted Connecticut. (Brad and Ruth quarrel over the custody of their adopted son; murder of wife; who suspected, but poor old Brad?; who only character to believe in him but dear old (attractive) Paula?; who not guilty of woman slaughter but intrepid old Brad?) But the hurricane which underscores the action is a good idea. After all, it could have been just another storm.

"INSPECTOR GENTLY DOES IT AGAIN," by Alan Hunter (*Cassell & Co.*, 11s. 6d.).

The Broads murder (here a waterway, not a woman) is Mr. Hunter's latest stint for Chief Inspector Gently—that pipe-smoking, peppermint-cream-eating policeman who so endeared himself to us in *Gently Does It* and *Gently by the Shore*, as being one of the few wholly credible yet non-dull detectives. The atmosphere is as considered as before, the style pleasant if over reliant on the facetious, and the knowledge of police technique seemingly flawless.

The plot—more in the classic "who dunit" pattern than its two predecessors—suffers somewhat from an overworked twist; but I suspect it is not overworked enough not to baffle sixty per cent of the customers.

"THE CHINESE PUZZLE," by Miles Burton (*Crime Club*, 10s. 6d.).

Chinese have an enviable reputa-

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tion in the thriller world. For so long have they been either inscrutable or wholly evil that the writer anxious to introduce these indispensable characteristics into his work needs must call on them.

What is true of the thriller is not, however, invariably true of the detective story, and here Mr. Burton has set his problem in a colony of opium-smoking Chinese who, being for a change three-dimensional characters, are required to do more than smile in the impenetrable manner of the East.

The plot, which as is the custom these days starts humble and grows grand, kicks off with a Chinese gentleman attempting to cash a Savings Bank Account belonging to a fellow-countryman, and ends with a political execution in a wood. The devious journey between these points is travelled dexterously enough by the urbane Desmond Merrion, and of course more stumble-footedly by the Police Force. But that's only natural, I suppose.

"END OF CHAPTER," by Nicholas Blake (*Crime Club*, 12s. 6d.).

Mr. Blake, after his exercises in the macabre (*The Whisper in the Gloom*; *A Tangled Web*) here returns to the formula of classic detection which he used so successfully in *A Question of Proof*.

The setting, far from surprisingly for an Oxford literary don, is a publishing firm in which someone has invited a libel suit by maliciously altering the proofs of an explosive autobiography.

The suspects, all naturally in the firm, have a reasonable equality of motive for ruining either/or the firm, the author or the man defamed, and an equality of opportunity. Murder is done—the two events naturally being connected—and the search for the killer drives back into the unsavoury past of the suspects. The final revelation can be “divined” by the less-than-acute reader two-thirds of the way from home, but the literary standard is high and the tangle nicely woven.

“DEATH KEEPS A SECRET,” by Clarence Buddington Kelland (*Robert Hale, 10s. 6d.*).

The hero of this story is an improbable young scientist whom we are told is as handy with his fists as with electronics. He has more than ample opportunity to demonstrate the truth of this in a lively involved tale of espionage and intrigue designed to secure for one of the four competing nations an amazing electronic brain.

Though the world on this occasion is eventually made once again safe for democracy, the rapid developments in the fields of electronics and ballistics are opening up acres of fertile ground for the thriller writer of tomorrow. Vade giant bombers. Salve intercontinental missiles.

“ANYTHING TO DECLARE?” by Freeman Wills Crofts (*Hardyman, 12s. 6d.*).

As the veriest moron could discover from its title, this is a book about smuggling. Equally obvious to the connoisseur of detective fiction is that this, being a book by Freeman

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A BIOGRAPHY

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Wills Crofts, is concerned grossly with time.

The old master seems to have grown even more addicted to time-tables and watches than ever, and the reader is spared none of the calculations which go not only to finding the smugglers and murderers but incontrovertibly to proving their guilt. So great is Mr. Croft's passion for time that it is hardly necessary to divulge the nature of the articles smuggled.

Comforting, convincing, French is at his same old best.

"TOP SECRET," by Leonard Halliday (*Hammond & Hammond*, 10s. 6d.).

A thriller for mountaineering enthusiasts, as it moves from the peaks of the Salzkammergut to those of Skye. The story—a familiar triangular one with little to distinguish it except a perverse emotional ending—stumbles down well-trodden spy paths. But the book is redeemed from being read by the minimum of readers (as indeed a document labelled Top Secret should be read) by the author's expertise in mountaineering matters. The climax on Skye is most exciting, graphic and above all cinematic, but it would seem that Mr. Halliday has kept a firmer eye on the box office than on the lending library.

"THE BLACK SPIDERS," by John Creasey (*Hodder & Stoughton*, 11s. 6d.).

Another story similar to *The Flood*, only this time poisonous black spiders take the place of water-filled

creatures. Mr. Creasey is indefatigable. The more one reads of his work, the more one realizes that there is no holding him. Nothing is too preposterous; nothing too outrageous. Somehow his very zest for thrills and spills excites the reader into a state of a childish non-reflection where all seems possible, or rather all is impossible.

In these terms *The Black Spiders* is a splendid bit of hokum—fierce, fast and deliciously thrilling. A horde of venomous spiders is imported into England to do the work of certain Eastern Nationalists. The threat, as on numerous other Creasey occasions, is only averted with the timely help of the Prime Minister, the Militia, the Police and several intrepid representatives of Department Z.

"BOILED ALIVE," by Bruce Buckingham (*Michael Joseph*, 12s. 6d.).

A second book by the author of *Three Bad Nights*, in which the delightful Mexican detective Don Pancho was introduced. We have once again the same excitingly strange and torrid background and the same beautifully controlled sense of mounting claustrophobia. The plot is possibly stronger than last time; the motivation is decidedly weaker. Rival business-men are bidding for mercury concessions in Mexico, and a meeting has been arranged between them and members of an old, proud Mexican family.

Enmity abounds, murders follow—and the climax comes with the unmasked killer being boiled alive in a



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# THRILLERS

## OF THE MONTH

*Three recent successes*

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"Enthralling . . . first-rate to sustain such a pitch of excitement."

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### SHE DIED DANCING

*by Kelley Roos*

"As crisp as a celery stick."

*Pat Wallace*

*Choices to come*

### The Floods of Fear

*by John & Ward Hawkins*

### House of Numbers

*By Jack Finney*

*(Author of Five Against The House and The Bodysnatchers)*

THRILLERS OF THE  
MONTH from

—EYRE & SPOTTISWOODE—

hot spring. This is remarkable, both on account of its being original and because, for a change, it makes sense of the title, though for a few horrific seconds it seemed as if we were to be treated to a whodunit with a closed circle of lobsters as suspects.

"PICTURE OF DEATH," by E. C. R. Lorac (*Crime Club*, 10s. 6d.).

Murder in a decayed mansion—sinister tumbledown background, ideal for the closed, if crumbling circle of suspects conglomerated by Mr. Lorac in his latest novel. The distribution of suspicion is as professional as ever, and the plot more than adequate without breaking any new ground. (How hard we are to please. Fifteen years ago this sort of plot would have been considered masterly.)

But I'm not at all sure I agree with the snivelling conclusion of the hero and heroine who, resolving at the end of the book to put the nightmare through which they have just passed in the old mansion behind them, declare: "We'll buy our own version of home with no splendour at all—a semi-detached three up and three down and no problems we can't cope with." This seems to me like the original picture of death.

We regret that an error was made in our last issue, regarding "You Find Him—I'll Fix Him" by Raymond Marshall. The publishers of this book are Messrs. Robert Hale, and not Messrs. Hodder and Stoughton.



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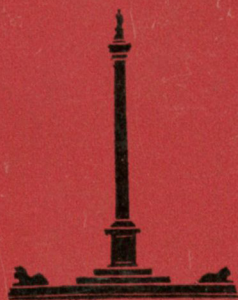
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