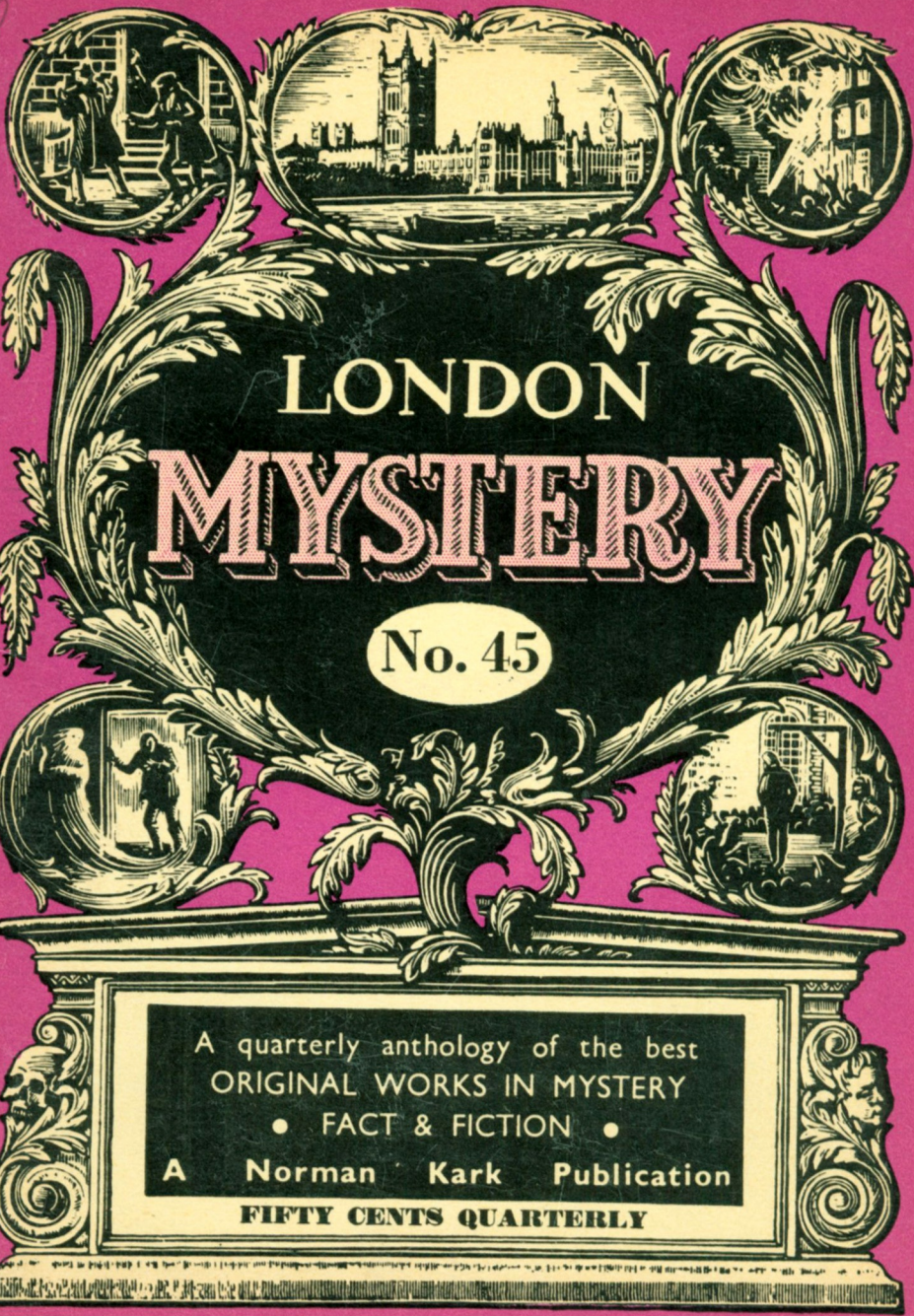

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No. 45

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THE LONDON MYSTERY SELECTION

"Other things are all very well in their way, but give me blood," said Mr. Waterbrook in "David Copperfield". Well, blood, too, is all very well in its way, but the discriminating reader of crime and mystery expects something more than a chilling. Since our ancestors wallowed in the terrors of the Gothic novel the thriller has moved through various phases, from the magnifying-glass-and-footprint era, through the blood-and-thunders of the 'thirties to the smart-talking private eye who seems to be blessed with a considerable amount of luck. Indications are that the psychological vogue will also establish itself. Each of these types is complete in itself, each supplies all the answers; only tales of the Unknown leave us speculating. Some well-wrought contributions to this issue of LONDON MYSTERY SELECTION explore that realm—"Wall of Time", by Leslie Vardre, "Tiny, Willing Hands", by Harry Mansfield, and the factual "Dream of Death", which may quell your scepticism a little.

Two tales take us to Africa and the Orient, the adventurous "Oasis Incident" providing as ironic a twist as the reader could wish and "The Idol of Baked Clay" offering a similar high standard of short-story writing. All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy—and from David Warner's "Metamorphosis" we gather it might have more unpleasant results. . . .

A. E. Murch, whose excellent history of the detective novel is concluded in this edition, contributes an authentic account of a Swedish queen's revenge, which is bloody enough—and which is where we came in. Over to you.

EDITOR.

NORMAN KARK PUBLICATIONS, 77 BROOK STREET, LONDON, W.1.

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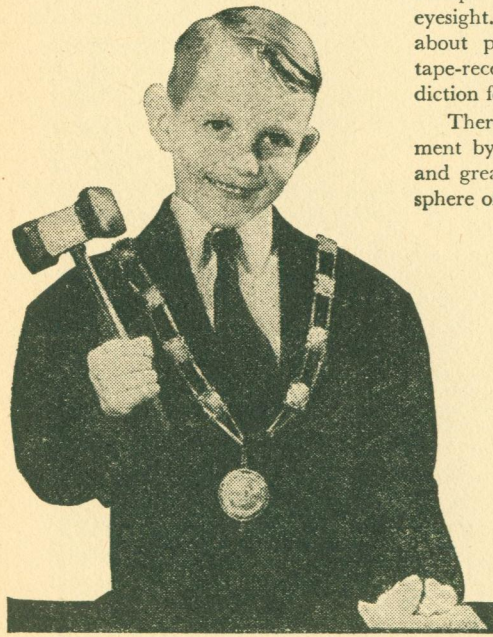
First Citizen



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METAMORPHOSIS

DAVID WARNER

Illustrated by the Author

MY UNCLE, ALFRED MORGAN, died last week. You may have seen his name in the small type at the base of the obituary columns in any of the more serious daily papers. Alfred Morgan was a distinguished entomologist and undoubtedly famous within his own sphere of activities. His erudite and peaceful career was, however, marked by one mysterious incident, namely, the disappearance of his noted colleague, Ernest Groves, in a rather distressing manner. The following document, which I found while going through my uncle's personal effects and papers, will give a hitherto unguessed explanation of his colleague's decease.

* * *

Groves and I had worked at the Institute for nearly the same period of time—thirty years or more. Our reaction to our respective careers had been marked by one great difference: whereas the years of close contact with the insect world had brought to me a great revulsion towards its character and nature, to Groves it had become an obsession that had swept all other emotions from his life. This difference was even evident in the way our system of work had evolved. Groves was more than content to spend his working hours industriously breeding insects, in that section of the laboratory devoted to this task, while I employed myself collecting specimens in the field and subsequently despatching in the killing-jars and setting-boards back in the laboratory.

There was a time when I felt that my nausea of insects was a childish thing that had become out of hand and ought to be controlled, until I became aware that it paled into insignficance compared to Groves' obsessional love of his crawling menagerie. He was always pottering about when I arrived in the morning, and at the end of the day inevitably managed to find some excuse for staying on a little.

One day I left the laboratory in mid-morning hoping to capture some specimens in the heat of noon. On arriving at the fields on the outskirts of the town, I was frustrated by a storm which had cloaked the sky in a blanket of sulphurous clouds that sent every butterfly scurrying to their invisible hiding-places in the rain-sodden grasses. The prospect of work seemingly hopeless, I had no alternative other than to return on that conglomeration of rusting metals I flatteringly call my bicycle.

After leaving my cycle in the shed, I looked through the laboratory window. There, seated by his

bench, Groves was eating his lunch. This in itself was nothing, but the manner in which he was eating froze me into shocked immobility. Groves's hands were pressed together in the attitude of prayer, and between his fingers was a large, succulent lettuce leaf, the serrated edge of which was pointed towards his mouth. Slowly, and in a trance-like manner, he was nibbling with his slightly protruding front teeth in the manner of some monstrous caterpillar. I did not enter but returned to my rooms to think the thing over.

In the more congenial surroundings of my study I considered the facts with perhaps a calmer state of mind. It occurred to me that I had noticed, on several occasions in my life, people who had taken on distinct similarities to things with which they had formed strong attachments—sometimes an old married couple, sometimes a man and his dog, and more than one aged spinster have I noticed who had many delicate, bird-like qualities in common with the feathered friend on whom she poured all her affection and emotion. These similarities may well exist only in the eye of the onlooker, and it was with this thought that I tried to dismiss the disturbing image of the lunch-time scene from my mind.

* * *

For a week or so work continued as usual and I thought that my fears were the product of an overworked imagination. Then one day I made a discovery that disturbed me more than ever. It happened that I had occasion to examine the waste dispenser, for some accidentally discarded data. There, among the sheets of crumpled paper, was the remains of another lunch, the remnants of several cabbage leaves of which the ribbed vein structure was left perfectly intact, like delicate green lace fans. They were identical with the remains one can find in any cabbage field after its pillage by a plague of caterpillars.

I could no longer pretend to myself that these incidents were the products of my own neurosis. I would have to watch what was happening to Groves very carefully and, in fact, I was fascinated by the phenomena, in the same way as when passing some hideous street accident I am unable to avert my eyes from the scene, no matter how distressing the subsequent effect on my mind.

The third, and I think the most significant, happening was the result of a small, nondescript mishap. In the act of tidying his desk, Groves had picked up a fragile glass tube which had splintered in his hand. He emitted a small, reedy note of pain, dropped the glass fragments into the dispenser and carefully dabbed the wound with a cotton swab which, in its turn, was dropped into that same receptacle. I could hardly wait to examine this normally uninteresting refuse. When the opportunity arose, my findings were exactly what I had expected. The cotton swab did not disclose any sign of normal blood—instead there was a small, bright green smear. The broken glass was even more informative—on it was more of the green

substance still in liquid form. Under examination with my most powerful microscope, this proved to be almost exactly similar in structure to the "blood" of any vegetable-eating insect.

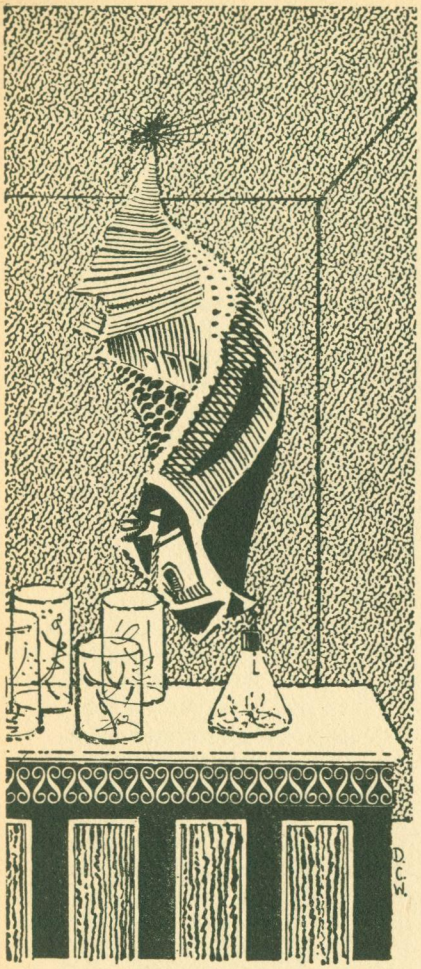
* * *

In the weeks that followed, I felt overpowered by the monstrosity transforming before my eyes. I was urged constantly to attempt some action or, at least, communicate with someone about my terrible knowledge; but who would believe my story and how could I prove it anyway. I even, at times, began to doubt my own sanity. There came at last the time when a climax to these events was inevitable. All visible changes in Groves's physique had ceased, and an atmosphere prevailed similar to those stifling, overcast midsummer days when one can walk down a deserted city street, and the silence, the motionless air itself, seems charged with some unseen drama. For some days we had hardly spoken to each other except for the customary pleasantries, and on these few occasions Groves's voice seemed more distant, higher pitched and fainter than ever.

It was a depressing day in early September, the summer's heat was unabated and the humidity unbearably high. All mental and oral contact between Groves and myself was completely broken. He sat, hour after hour, in his large, black leather swivel chair, ignoring my existence, while my nerves were stretched almost to breaking-point. I felt I could stand no more. Hastily collecting my things together, I made for the door, pausing just once to take a final look at Groves. He sprawled in his chair, seemingly in a torpor, his breathing slow and regular, his eyes sightless behind thick, powerful spectacles. His skin appeared damp and almost transparent in the way it hung loosely round his featureless face. I shut the door quietly behind me and left in a hurry.

Taking refuge in my rooms, I tried to find a means of escape from the appalling thoughts that invaded my consciousness. My favourite authors, drink and sleep were all powerless to dispel the invading fears. Midnight found me pacing the floor, the perspiration streaming from my brow, in a quandary as to what I should do. The suspense became intolerable. I donned an overcoat and rushed out into the empty streets. When I reached the laboratory my pulsing heart sent the blood rushing through my head, the drum-beat of the inner ear drowned the silence of the night.

Blazing light streamed from the laboratory windows, as they had done when I left earlier in the evening. I had to force every footstep up the gravel path. With a power born of desperation I pushed the door wide. There, iridescent in the glare of the direct lighting, was a sight that filled my trembling limbs with ice water. Hanging from a silken web, directly above the desk, was a gigantic chrysalis. It spun slowly, its ribbed and plated structure reflecting a fantastic sheen of metallic colouring. I stepped forward for a closer examination and was violently sick. Behind the desk



in a shapeless, mucilaginous heap, containing obsolete arteries and bones, was the skin of the creature I had known as Ernest Groves.

In a moment of clarity I knew exactly what I had to do. This obscenity of nature and blasphemy against creation must be destroyed before it, in turn, could change into something even more revolting. From the shed I brought several gallons of petrol with which I splashed all the available woodwork of the laboratory, especially the big wooden desk over which the chrysalis was suspended. Standing well outside the door, I flicked a lighted match on to the sodden floor. In a flash, the petrol ignited. The yellow flames ran quickly round the dusty wooden floor and soon caught the base of the desk with their eager, pointed tongues. The wooden panels cracked in the vicious heat and as the flames licked hungrily around the extremities of the chrysalis it began to jerk spasmodically. I could not bear to watch any longer. I let the door swing shut and made my way, utterly spent, back to my rooms.

* * *

I write these lines—perhaps as a form of confession—hoping they will ease my conscience of the thing I have witnessed and the deed I felt compelled to commit. As I write, the weak light of dawn silhouettes the University buildings against an indigo sky, and beyond them, at a point just outside the city limits, there periodically shoots a whirl of red and yellow sparks towards the frowning heavens.

NO VACANCIES

LEO BERNE

T COULDN'T have been far off midnight when the door-bell rang. I had just finished my usual tour of the house and was on the point of leaving. I went through the moon-filled hall and opened the door.

He was only small, a wizened slip of a man, muffled in a grey scarf and shabby raincoat and with a greasy cloth cap pulled well down over his face.

"You the caretaker?" he asked in a dry brittle voice.

"What d'you want?" I asked the tip of his nose.

"They said this house was to let," he replied.

"That's right."

"Well . . ." He shuffled uneasily. "Can I—would it be possible for me to look round?"

"At midnight?" I commented, eyeing his clothes.

"It took me a while to find the place," he apologized. "An' it won't take me long."

"Come in, then," I invited ungraciously, and stepped aside for him to pass.

"You live here?" he asked, looking round the cobweb festoons.

"No," I said shortly, "I just look in from time to time."

"Caretaker, then?"—dusting a lace of cobweb from his shoulder—"You don't keep it very clean."

"Not my job," I told him.

"When did they leave?" he asked, "The others, I mean; the people who used to live here?"

"Three, four years." I shrugged. "I forget."

The moon went behind a cloud, and the hall was plunged into darkness.

"Lights . . .?" he asked.

"You've a hope," I told him, smiling to myself.

"'Ow d'you manage?" he wondered, and then, as the cold light flooded back, "That's better."

"Know it off by heart," I replied. "In any case, they always turn off the power in an empty house."

He started to unwind his scarf.

"Can I look round then?" he asked, and let the ends of the scarf dangle down his coat.

I could see his face now, although he did keep his chin well down on the dirty collar. It was a very ordinary sort of a face . . . He'd be about fifty, I would think, with dirt etched deeply in the wrinkles. His eyes were kind of dull, and there was thick black stubble round his mouth.

"If you want to," I said off-handedly, and turned to lead the way.

I thought I knew his type: tramp, probably, looking for a kip for the night. Saw the darkened windows, noticed the thick grime on them and thought the place was empty; but rang the bell to make sure. He'd look

round the silent rooms and then go off into the night, thanking me for my trouble.

And if he'd've come just ten minutes later, I'd have been gone, and he'd probably have moved in, and then I might have lost my job.

Not that it was much of a job, but it was the only one I'd got. Mind you, these sort of jobs are fairly easy to come by, but I didn't relish the idea of looking for somewheres else, not at my age, and the people about are getting to know me.

I took him upstairs, first, and waited on the wide landing while he plodded after me. I suddenly had the feeling that there was something strange about him, but it was just a feeling.

"Did you know the folks what used to live 'ere?" he asked, panting a little.

"Quite well," I told him, "I used to come regularly when they were still here."

"Not much of a job—lookin' after a dump like this," said he.

I went along the landing, and turned to guide him over the place where the floorboards are missing.

He clicked his tongue as he sidled past the gaping hole.

"Why did they go?" he asked, stopping to peer over the banister.

"They said as how there was a ghost," I told him; "they said it was haunted."

"A ghost . . ." he said. "Well, what d'you know. And was there?"

"I've never seen one," I replied. "Not in all the time I've been coming."

He giggled, a horrible sliver of sound that made me reach for the rail.

"A nun in flowing robes . . . ?" he hazarded. "A cackling old crone at midnight."

"A tramp," said I, watching him, "Only a tramp. They said he hung himself, here, over the banisters . . . A long time ago."

The wind seemed to be getting up, I could hear the bare branches tapping on the windows.

"And aren't you scared?" he asked.

"I've never seen anything," I said stubbornly, "why should I be afraid?"

"P'raps you come at the wrong times . . ." he suggested. "P'raps you've never bin here at midnight before."

His dim shape seemed to be moving in the gloom. I strained my eyes to see what he was doing. He had something in his hands, something long and sinuous, a snake, twisting and coiling.

But I could see that it wasn't a snake . . . It was a rope. He must have had it under his coat; and now it was dangling, trailing on the floor.

I moved into a broad swathe of light, and he followed, the rope dragging behind.

The dust . . . And now the moonlight. I knew what was wrong.

When he had followed me up the stairs, his feet had left no marks in the thick dust. And now, as he stood in the light there was no shadow on the panels behind.

He laid his hands on the rail and peered down into the hall.

"Yes . . ." he told the shadows.

He half turned to look sideways at me, and I stepped back into the darkness.

"Yes . . ." he whispered, and sniggered.

I knew now why his chin rested so heavily on the dirty collar. That was how a man with a broken neck would look. But that was all wrong . . . that should come after.

I clutched the rail, fear gripping me with a cold hand.

He had the rope in both his hands, and I could see that he was making a noose.

Then my fear left me, and anger took its place.

I uncoiled the rope from about my own waist.

"Too late," I told him, "I was here first."

He stood back, watching.

"Just because I've missed a few nights," I said bitterly. "The word soon gets round. Coming here, all dressed for the part." My voice rose with anger.

"Clear off, and find your own place."

"Damned cheek," I called down the stairs after him. "There's plenty of empty houses, go and find them."

I flung my rope over the banisters and hanged myself.

And I pride myself I made a good job of it. But then, I've had plenty of practice.

What gentle ghost, besprent with April dew,
Hails me so solemnly to yonder yew?

BEN JONSON.

Life itself is but the shadow of death, and souls departed but the shadows of the living.

SIR THOMAS BROWNE.

OASIS INCIDENT

L. P. DAVIES

Illustrated by Norman Battershill

COLLEY PUSHED HIMSELF away from the warm stones of the warehouse wall and tossed his cigarette away when it became obvious that the two French officers were making towards him.

The hot Algerian sun burning his face, his ears filled with the dockside tumult, the sickly sweet of over-ripe fruit in his nostrils, he had been anxiously watching for Koln's khaki shirt and shorts when he had seen the two thrusting an arrogant, shouldering way through the milling dock-labourers.

The taller, vividly bright against the brown robes of the Arabs, with swirling blue cloak thrown back from narrow shoulders, the flat khaki breast a blaze of colour; his companion, thick-set, cloakless, and with but a single row of ribbons on his tunic.

They came to stand in front of him, hands raised to khaki kepis in salute. Colley nodded, embarrassed at the attention, and the taller one smiled, his teeth surprisingly white against the brown of his face.

"Leforte, Captain, Customs," he introduced himself, the words accentless, clipped and sharp. "My associate, Captain Manet."

Colley nodded again. The breeze stirred the thinning fair hair at his temples; his watery blue eyes were anxious.

"You will be the partner of Mr. Koln?" Leforte asked, and without waiting for a reply, "Excellent, I thought we may find you here. I wonder if you would be good enough to accompany us to the office—a mere formality. . . ."

"Our equipment," Colley said warily, "it's in this warehouse. I was sort of keeping my eye on it."

"I can assure you," Leforte replied gently, "that your equipment will come to no harm." He stressed the word "equipment".

The door to which he led the way was flanked by lazily-moving tricolours; the office into which he ushered Colley was small and cluttered with metal filing cabinets, chairs and a massive desk. A large, highly glazed map filled the whole of one wall. He touched a chair with a gleaming boot and Colley sat down.

"And why do you come to Algiers?" Leforte wondered, hanging his cloak behind the door.

Colley looked up, surprised at the question. "We are to farm," he explained. "We are going to Ham Alyad."

"So . . ." Leforte breathed, and the other officer moved silently to stand by the map. "And what do you hope to grow at Ham Alyad."

Colley wished that Koln was there

to help. "We're not sure," he told the raised brows. "We shall have to feel our way."

Leforte nodded, sucking in his lips. "And this equipment?"

"Tools of various kinds, a tractor, the usual things. I've got a list somewhere——" Colley fumbled in the breast-pocket of his khaki shirt and the officer waved his hands.

"Not necessary," he told Colley. "It has travelled all right? It has suffered no damage from the voyage?"

"There has been no time to look, we hope to move off this afternoon."

"We have spoken with your partner, Mr. Koln," Leforte said. "Perhaps you will explain your part in this little enterprise?"

"It's simple enough," said Colley. "We pooled our money, and I made a list of what I thought we'd need; my partner saw to the buying and crating. I haven't seen the stuff myself, but it should be all right. I hadn't much time, what with having to sell my shop and my furniture, so I left most of the work to Koln?"

"So you're perfectly satisfied that all is going as arranged?"

The question took Colley by surprise; it seemed pointless, and yet there was some indefinable quality in Leforte's voice.

"Of course," he retorted, anxiety sharpening the words. "What could go wrong? It's all straightforward, the stuff's in the warehouse and Koln

is arranging to buy a lorry right now."

The officer smiled, seeming to arrive at a decision. "I think that will be all, Mr. Colley. I'm sorry that we have had to annoy you with these questions, but you will understand that we are having a certain amount of trouble in Algeria. We have to take precautions. . . ."

"Of course," Colley agreed, mollified.

"And if I may offer you a word of advice"—the officer smoothed the front of his tunic—"avoid, if you can, the terrorists. Those we have here are of the Senussi, a wild and vicious race. In their eyes, every white face they see must be French. If they take you alive . . ." He drew his finger across his throat. "But slowly, you understand—very slowly."

Colley stiffened. He knew of the Senussi, and he knew of their handiwork. And now, as Leforte spoke of them, forgotten memories came flooding back.

During the war they had fought with equal impunity on both sides. They had killed for the very pleasure of it; and they had killed, as the captain had said, very slowly.

There had been the morning when he and Koln had found the naked, half-eaten body pegged across a teeming ant-hill; there had been the man who had crawled into their camp at daybreak, clutching with anguished hands at the salt-filled cavern which once had held his bowels. He had taken long, pain-racked hours to die, and his last words had been of the Senussi.

"They are still here?" Colley asked.

"The Senussi?" said Leforte. "They are always here; they always will be, I think."

He held out his hand. "Good luck, my friend."

Outside, Colley blinked and shaded his eyes against the fierce sunlight. He tried to persuade himself that everything would be all right, that there was nothing that could go wrong, and that the customs officer had only been doing his duty when he issued the warning.

All the same, he wished that Koln would hurry back; his very presence would be reassuring, quelling all doubts.

The trouble was that things had happened so quickly, all in four short weeks. From the comfort and security of his little shop to the bustle and uncertainty of North Africa.

"Ham Alyad," Koln had explained that evening when they had sat together in the small room at the back of the shop, "you must remember it —small oasis, perhaps half a day by truck from Algiers. Used to be a petrol dump."

Poring over the map, Colley had toyed with the name, finally recalling the almost perfect circle of palms, the deep wadi and the surrounding dunes. There had been water, a round circle of glistening blue. They had bathed . . .

"Free for the taking," Koln had told him. "Free as the air, and the French authorities leaning over backwards to help. Remember how you used to go on about having a farm some day? We could develop this into

two, three squares miles . . . dates, melons, the lot."

A fertile patch of desert and a pool of water. Trade in his small business for a dream in Africa?

"You're single, like me," Koln had urged. "No ties—what have you to lose?"

It had sounded foolproof the way Koln described it; land for the taking and a ready market for the produce.

But then Koln was good at that sort of thing. There had been the American cigarette racket. . . . That had been at Bizerta, and they had nearly copped a real load of trouble. But Koln had talked his way out of it.

With the brown-robed Arabs bustling about and the hot sun burning his face, he found it easy to bring back memories of Koln. Sergeant Koln, in those days of the desert war.

Koln sitting, leg-swinging, on the tailboard of the battered, yellow-camouflaged three-tonner, his lean face deceptively earnest as he bartered with the Arabs. The tea-racket probably—that had been one of his favourites. Used tea-leaves, dried, tumbled into a bag with a handful of the real stuff on top.

"You're too honest for your own good," Koln used to tell him, grinning, his devil's sweep of eyebrow vanishing into the thick, tumbled black hair, his blue eyes alive with a mixture of amusement and derision. "These boyos deserve all they get . . . pinch the soles of your boots if they get half a chance."

Which had been true enough; but all the same, Colley had felt sorry for them, with their filthy rags and whining voices, and had felt uncomfortable as Koln had gone about his business of relieving them of their francs.

But that was many years ago, and now they were both older. Koln looked more settled now, his very appearance speaking of reason and stability. His hair had thinned and become iron-grey, his lean face had filled with a comforting plumpness, his eyes had lost much of their brilliance, but were still alert and calculating for all that.

They had sat together with the map between them and Koln's finger had traced the roads, breathing names filled with nostalgic memories.

"Free for the taking," he had said again. "All we need are the tools and the knowhow. That's where you come in . . . I've heard you talking about the farm your old man had; you're the boyo for me, that's why I'm giving you the first chance."

He had gathered the dishes together, watching Koln's bent head, and had carried them into the kitchen. Then he had busied himself at the sink, just to give himself time to think and to weigh up the proposal.

It had all boiled down to money, of course.

"How much?" he had asked, his eyes on the bare tracery of branches through the little window.

Koln had been airily evasive, giving the impression that that was the merest detail.

"Hard to say," he had replied. "That's more in your line than mine. We'll need a tractor, and the usual tools. . . . Then there'll be the expense

of the journey. A truck as well, an ex-service job'll do. Say a thousand. Each."

A thousand. The shop, his savings; everything.

He had poised a plate, the water dripping to the floor, and turning had met his own face in the mirror above the cabinet.

Too old for such a risk? he had wondered. Had he become too much of the smalltown shopkeeper to strike out on such a venture?

"Another thing," Koln's voice had broken in on his reverie, "I've always felt a kind of responsibility to you, ever since that time at Kasserine. . . . Remember?"

He had set the plate on the draining-board, his mind back to the time when Koln had saved his life, his eyes suddenly filled with the memory of exploding ammunition and Koln's smoke-blackened face as he had dragged him from his burning lorry.

For a moment he had felt a surge of resentment at Koln dragging that up, throwing its influence unfairly into the balance. Then he had pushed the thought aside.

"I'll do it," he had decided quickly, giving himself no time to change his mind.

And afterwards, when he had come back into the cluttered living-room from seeing Koln on his way to the station, he had taken a cigarette from the mantelpiece, and had held it unlit while he rummaged in the junk drawer of the sideboard.

He had taken out the gun, holding it up to the light while he had first slid out the magazine, counting the five shells it contained, before peering down the barrel. Then, snapping the magazine back, he slipped the gun into his jacket pocket. Its solid weight had felt reassuring.

And now, as he shaded his eyes against the sun while he searched the crowds for Koln's return, it still hung heavily by his side.

Koln had been gone for the best part of an hour. "I'll go and have a word with the authorities," he had said, grinning. "Break the glad tidings that civilization has come to Algeria. All the stuff's in the warehouse, be just as well if you were to keep an eye on it."

* * *

Standing in the shadow of his office, Leforte turned to Manet.

"Well . . . ?" he asked softly.

"The other," Manet said. "That one," shrugging, "a sucker. He trusts his partner. I feel he has no knowledge of what our M'sieur Koln is about."

"You're quite sure about the whole thing?" Leforte wondered.

"Quite sure; the same method has been tried before. But this time—poof!" Manet raised his eloquent shoulders. "This man Koln must take us for simpletons of the first degree. Eight crates of equipment to farm a few square metres . . . ?"

"And now?"

"Perhaps two birds with one stone," said Manet thoughtfully. "I am informed that M'sieur Koln has chartered two lorries to be loaded and on their way by two o'clock. That means they should reach the oasis by

sundown. I think we may assume the rendezvous will be early tomorrow. In any case, we will move out tonight."

Leforte picked up the 'phone. "What force would you suggest?"

Manet turned to examine the map. "Three armoured cars, I think." He tapped his teeth with a pencil. "Let them take up position in this wadi to the south. From there they can watch unobserved and move in when the time is ripe. I will lead the patrol myself."

"M'sieur Koln," he added thoughtfully, "is in for one very big surprise. And the other, too, and that, in a way, will be a pity. I have taken a fancy to M'sieur Colley."

* * *

"I left him watching the warehouse," Koln said, stretching luxuriously, "he'll be all right; a patient soul." He smiled into the small coffee cup, then leaned back to watch the variegated colours of the busy pavement.

The Arab bent over the map, his thick brown fingers resting on the green circle that denoted the oasis.

"A good map, in its way," Ibrahim El Hamid approved, smiling into his beard. "Inviting, yes?"

"It served its purpose," Koln said, setting down his cup.

"Ham Alyad," the Arab mused. "That is quite suitable, I think. A little close, but I have used it before."

A swarthy, white-aproned waiter hovered over the table, and El Hamid laid a large hand over the exposed map.

"It must be done my way," Koln said, his eyes on a clanging tram and trailer, their outlines barely discernible through the clinging mass of bodies draped on their sides.

"Your way?" El Hamid wondered gently.

"It was my idea from the start," Koln told him, watching the busy pavements. "When I start a thing I like to finish it my own way. Besides, I feel it would be safer."

The Arab nodded his approval.

"And, of course, I may want to use the same method the next time," Koln continued, smiling. "And this way, there will be no hampering."

El Hamid turned to follow his eyes. "An interesting city, Algiers," he offered. "Tell me, my friend, just from curiosity, you understand, what is this method of which you speak?"

Koln stroked his chin. "I met Helopsis in London," he explained, "and he first gave me the idea. He told me that he had these crates of merchandise and that he wanted to dispose of them quickly. I hadn't any capital, so I went to quite a lot of trouble to find some of the old ex-army types. Colley was the first one that fell for my story, so I er—borrowed the cash from him."

"And he is the one that waits at the warehouse?"

"The very same," Koln said smiling. "All set to start a farm. The crates are filled with farming equipment, you know. . . ."

"Simple and effective," the Arab approved again, "and how will you disillusion your friend when the time comes?"

"You speak damn good English," Koln told him.

"I ought to," Sheik Ibrahim El Hamid replied. "I have rowed stroke for Oxford in my time."

Koln grinned at the sudden incongruous picture that came to mind; the narrow, brown face with its thick mat of eyebrows and hollowed eyes beneath a blue peaked cap, the arched rock of a nose and the thin-bearded mouth above a matching blue scarf, trees, and the placid river behind.

"This is what I had in mind," he explained, pointing to the map. "I shall take the stuff to the oasis today; we should be there before dusk. . . ."

The other nodded, his eyes on the map.

"Tomorrow, at first light, you could launch a mock attack, leaving the rear open so that my partner and I may escape."

El Hamid smiled and leaned back, the white stuff of his burnous falling apart so that Koln could see the plain grey-flannel suit beneath.

"I see," he murmured. "Two innocent English farmers are driven from their new land by the terrorists, losing their all. . . . Yes?"

Koln nodded, avoiding the mocking light in his companion's eyes.

"So . . ." El Hamid bent over the table again. "It shall be as you say. My men will enjoy a skirmish, especially with such a reward at the end. Now," his voice becoming brisk, "a few details about this merchandise."

"Stens, Mausers and Brens," Koln recited from memory. "I'm not sure of the actual numbers. There are some American carbines complete with ammo, automatics of various types and a couple of old Lewis guns —very efficient, so they tell me."

El Hamid settled his burnous about his shoulders.

"And the price . . ." Koln asked, "that is satisfactory?"

The Sheik nodded, gathering the folds of his robe about him.

"The money will be sent to your hotel as soon as the weapons are in my hands."

* * *

The lorries disappeared over the dunes in a swirl of sand and blue exhaust fumes.

Colley said: "Smaller than I remembered." He tried to sound casual, to keep the excitement from his voice.

Koln hoisted himself atop one of the crates and dragged a battered packet of cigarettes from his breast pocket.

"Does look a bit smallish," he agreed genially, "but wait until we get cracking." He winked hugely at Colley, drummed his heels against the crate and whistled softly under his breath.

Colley yawned, suddenly feeling tired. He watched the shadows lengthening across the small lake. The silence was intense, the palm fronds hanging still and heavy. He thought about the Senussi and patted his jacket pocket, reassured at the feel of the revolver and Koln's obvious nonchalance.

"Bed down," Koln said gaily, sliding from his perch. He stubbed his cigarette in a golden shower.

Colley unrolled his sleeping-bag


NB

under a tall palm and slipped into it just as he was.

Koln wandered about for a while, idly touching the crates, his lips wrinkled in a secret smile.

"Tomorrow and tomorrow," he said, looking at the sky, "busy day tomorrow."

Colley folded his arms behind his neck and relaxed against the rough trunk. He was filled with content for the very pleasure of Koln's companionship.

"Wonder if we'll have any trouble with the Arabs," Koln mused, still smiling. He pronounced it "Ay-rabs."

"Could be," Colley answered sleepily.

"Senussi"—Koln moved out into the moonlight, peeling his shirt over his head—"they say the Senussi are mucking about round here." His voice was muffled.

"We'll be O.K.," Colley assured. "It's not as if we were French."

Koln flexed his muscles.

"No," he agreed, "it's not as if we're French."

* * *

Colley awoke with a start, his heart pounding and with an echo ringing in his ears. He lay and stared up at the slivers of blue between the fronds of the palms.

A sharp crack wiped the last traces of sleep from his eyes and he clambered hastily from the sleeping-bag. On the far side of the lake he could see Koln struggling with his blankets.

"Hear that?" Koln called, and Colley called back. "Sounded like a shot."

He kicked the bag aside and narrowed his eyes against the sun. Another sharp crack, a sudden whine and the crackling of the leaf-fronds close above his head sent him to his knees.

He wriggled through the tall grass to the edge of the palms, and peered out at the encircling dunes. As he watched, a white puff blossomed, followed immediately by the sound of the shot. He dropped to his face while fragments of dried leaf and bark showered on his back.

"Arabs," Koln shouted. "They're over here, too; I can see them."

There was a sudden burst of firing, and more pieces of palm debris showered down.

"Hell!" Koln shouted. "There's dozens of them!" He worked his way round the edge of the lake to Colley's side.

"All round!" Colley asked, and Koln raised his head. "I'll go see," he said, then dropped to his face as yet another fusillade crashed and ricocheted overhead.

"Bastards," he swore again. "What an 'ell of a way to start a farm." He looked up cautiously, grinned briefly, a quick flash of white, then wriggled away.

The firing died and Colley parted the grass; the dunes were alive with running, sliding, brown and white-robed figures. A machine-gun came into action from one of the taller dunes sending a stream of bullets through the leaves.

"Damn them," he muttered, impotent anger boiling up; and then, as

the chattering stopped, he slid the revolver from his pocket and took careful aim at one of the running figures. He fired four rapid shots and the figure vanished in a satisfying flurry of flapping robes.

At the other side of the oasis, hidden from Colley by the thickly massed palms, Koln rose erect and waved his arms above his head. A tall, white-robed figure detached itself from a sheltering dune, waving in reply, then indicating with outflung arm the entrance to the wadi.

Koln acknowledged the gesture by clapping his hands and raising them to shoulder level. Then he dropped to his knees and wormed back to Colley's side.

"Round the other side," he said urgently, "there's a wadi; seems to be clear; if we move quickly we might be able to slip away. You go first. I'll give you ten minutes, an' then I'll follow. I don't think they'll try to rush us—for all they know we might be armed."

"Be careful," he warned as Colley backed away. "These boyos will play rough if they catch up with us; they're Senussi, sure enough."

Keeping his head low, Colley worked his way round the lake to the fringe of wiry grass at the other side. Then he rested for a moment, his pulse racing and temples throbbing. Koln's words had crystallized the fears that had nagged him ever since the first shots. He fought down a wave of nausea, his eyes filled with the picture of a man without bowels who had screamed, asking to be killed.

He knew now what would happen to them if they were taken alive.

He raised his head and parted the grass so that he could see the entrance to the wadi. There was no movement, the way seemed clear and inviting.

He pushed himself to his feet, gathering his breath for the dash across the open stretch of sand. He was already on the move when the sudden sound of an engine springing into life froze him in his tracks. He dropped to one knee, watching with fear clutching at his throat, while the green and brown camouflaged bonnet of an armoured car filled the narrow mouth of the wadi.

The engine roar rose to a grinding crescendo as the heavy vehicle laboured up the incline, the short, vicious stump of a heavy machine-gun revolving ominously.

And as he backed away, he could see the turrets of a second and then a third car following closely behind the first.

He backed until he reached the broken rock on the fringe of the lake, and there, with his heels touching the water, he crouched in thought.

They were surrounded; the Senussi had covered every alley of escape. He owed Koln more than he could ever hope to repay; this opportunity; his life, even. And at this moment, Koln was risking his life once again, trying to give him the first chance of escaping from the trap.

But there was one last thing he could do to help repay the debt. He

could at least ensure that their deaths would be quick and clean. And then he remembered . . . he opened the magazine of his gun and looked at the last remaining shell.

He drew a deep breath, then slammed the magazine back with a slap of his palm. He inched his way to where Koln still crouched by the tall grass.

He watched the silent, sprawling figure for a moment, then called softly, "Koln . . ." And as the lean face turned, startled, he shot him neatly through the centre of the forehead.

He turned quickly from the twitching body and rose to his feet, weighing the empty gun in his palm.

And then the first armoured car broke through the grass and palms to come to rest with its bonnet overhanging the blue water, and so near that he could see the French tricolour that floated from the radio antenna, and see and recognize Captain Manet, leaning from the front seat, his hand raised in welcome.

He bears the seed of ruin in himself.

MATTHEW ARNOLD.

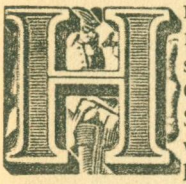
Like one, that on a lonesome road
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And having once turned round walks on,
And turns no more his head;
Because he knows, a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread.

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE.

THE VENGEANCE OF A QUEEN

A. E. MURCH

Illustrated by Vera Jarman



ISTORY RECORDS few stranger life-stories than that of Queen Christina of Sweden, so bright with promise were her early years, so profligate her maturity and old age. She was the only child of Gustavus Adolphus, and when that well-loved king fell in battle in 1632 all Sweden gladly acclaimed the little six-year-old princess as their queen.

Christina was beautiful, fearless and brilliantly clever, eager to master every branch of learning, but when she assumed full control of her kingdom on her eighteenth birthday her people soon grew alarmed by her headstrong arrogance, total disregard of tradition and the counsel of her ministers and contempt for the Protestant faith held by her subjects. When her extravagance had brought Sweden to the edge of bankruptcy, she turned her back on her throne and its responsibilities and set out with her court to travel across Europe in search of every exciting diversion the fashionable world could offer. Her reputation as a queen and a scholar brought her a welcome from kings and learned men of almost every nation, but all whom she visited were sooner or later appalled by her high-handed exploitation of their hospitality and breathed a sigh of relief when she and her dissolute courtiers moved on. One of the most infamous episodes of her wandering career can be told in some detail, for its terrible outcome was recorded by a trustworthy, independent eye-witness three hundred years ago?

In 1657, Christina was received with great kindness by the French King, Louis XIV, and installed with her court at the palace of Fontainebleau. Her chief equerry was an Italian nobleman, the Marquis of Monaldeschi, young, handsome, ambitious and totally unscrupulous.

Gossip named him as the most favoured of Christina's many lovers, and it seems probable that, on her side at least, their long intimacy sprang from as deep an affection as it was in her nature to feel. The gallant marquis, however, had a roving eye, and in the spring of that year he wearied of his royal mistress, then in her thirties, and fell passionately in love with a young Italian girl, the daughter of a Roman aristocrat stationed at the French court.

This damsel, like many another then and since, was intensely curious about the love affairs of royalty, and Monaldeschi found he could gain her private ear by telling her intriguing tales of Christina's secret amours. Perhaps the girl disbelieved the account of his part in them, perhaps his conceit betrayed him into fatal in-

discretions, but, whatever the reason, the marquis so far forgot his honour that he actually let her read several passionate love-letters addresed to him by the queen's own hand. With even greater folly, he wrote *billets doux* to his new sweetheart praising her young beauty, swearing his eternal devotion, protesting he had never really loved Christina, ridiculing her fondness for him and deriding with heartless gibes the physical imperfections of her ageing body.

These disclosures proved too weighty for the girl to keep to herself and she confessed the whole story to a certain cardinal who, as luck would have it, hated Monaldeschi. This churchman took all the letters into his keeping, craved a private audience of the queen and placed them in her hands, explaining how they had reached him. Thus the stage was set for a drama of jealousy and revenge that was soon to horrify France and, indeed, all Europe.

* * *

Christina's opening move was ominously quiet. At dawn on November 6th, she sent secretly for Pierre LeBel, Father Superior of the monastery at Fontainebleau, whose memoirs reveal the part he played in the tragic outcome. His first interview with the queen gave no hint of her purpose. She talked with kindly interest of church affairs and, having satisfied herself of his integrity, asked him to take charge of a sealed packet she had been balancing in her hand, and return it to her whenever she required it. After four more days of brooding, Christina took action and again summoned LeBel to the palace. The servant who conducted the venerable father to the famous *Galerie des Cerfs* seems to have had an inkling of the coming storm, for LeBel was alarmed by his trembling urgency and the violent haste with which doors were flung open and bolted behind him.

In the gallery, the queen was standing with the captain of her guard and two of his men, confronting Monaldeschi. She asked LeBel for the packet entrusted to him, gazed at it thoughtfully for some moments, then broke the seal and took out the papers it contained and ordered the marquis to examine them.

Had he seen these letters before? He denied all knowledge of them, but grew grey with fear, clinging to a shred of hope that fervent lies might yet save him, for the letters were not in his own handwriting. They were, in fact, copies which the queen herself had made—how the knife must have turned in her wounded pride as she did so—and for a time she silently watched him enduring the tortures of suspense. Then, taking up a second packet, she produced the originals and forced him to acknowledge his signatures and his personal seal.

In panic, he seized Christina's arm, drawing her aside while he protested his loyalty, claimed that he had been tricked, swore repentance and begged for forgiveness. She listened unmoved. "Father LeBel," she called, "bear witness that I am treating this perfidious wretch with more mercy that he has any right to expect. I will

allow him all the time he needs to justify his conduct, if he can."

For an hour she stood listening in silence to the agonized pleading of the man she had loved. Then she addressed LeBel: "Father, this traitor has failed to justify himself. I will retire and leave him to your ministrations. Prepare him for death!"

As she withdrew, LeBel, greatly distressed, began to exhort the marquis to turn his thoughts to God and make confession. Monaldeschi silenced him, quite unable to believe that Christina would really have him killed in cold blood. Even the captain of the guard felt doubtful and went to seek confirmation, but returned immediately, saying, "My lord, you are to die here and now, and Her Majesty commands me to make haste!"

Beside himself with terror, Monaldeschi implored the priest to intercede for him. LeBel found Christina alone in her room, calm as a stone. He besought her to pardon the marquis, or at least to punish him in some other way. "Impossible," she replied. "Men have been broken on the wheel for far less serious crimes. I trusted him completely. He betrayed that trust and I, as his queen, have condemned him to death."

LeBel ventured to remind her that she was not in Sweden but in France, the guest of the French king, and should therefore observe the laws of that country. Such an act as she proposed would not only be illegal but also prejudicial to her own prestige.

"Consider the matter further, Your Majesty," he urged. "Violence will antagonize all who now respect you." She retorted haughtily that she was a sovereign in her own right, answerable to no power on earth, with absolute command over the lives of her servants, in her own country or elsewhere. The traitor's guilt was proved and his sentence just.

Sadly LeBel returned to the marquis and administered the last rites. The guards drew their swords and closed upon their victim, but found it unexpectedly difficult to kill Monaldeschi, for under his velvet robes he wore a suit of chain-mail covering his body up to the very edge of his high collar. It turned aside the points thrust at his heart, but three of his fingers were severed as he clutched at the blades.

Screaming, he ran this way and that, while the guards rained blow after blow upon his unprotected head till at last he fell, grievously wounded. At that moment, Christina's private chaplain entered the gallery to inquire why the assassination was taking so long. Half-crawling, half-dragging himself along by the tapestry, Monaldeschi managed to reach his feet, murmuring a last plea for mercy—in vain, though the chaplain paused to bless the dying man before returning to the queen. As the door closed behind him, the guards finished their work with a sword-thrust through the throat. Powerless to speak, the marquis lay bleeding to death, LeBel ministering to him till his agony reached its end.

Rumour said that Christina came to gaze on her dying lover and curse him as he lay. Recalled from the very

threshold of death by the sound of her voice, Monaldeschi slowly opened his eyes and stretched out his arms towards her in a last piteous gesture. "What!" cried the queen. "Still breathing?" and seizing a sword she struck the final blow with her own hands.

LeBel, charitably seeking for something to say in Christina's favour, records that when the marquis was buried she sent lavish gifts to the monastery to pay for a mass for the repose of his soul. Remorse? Who can say? One thing is certain—she found no peace herself. Her crime could not be concealed, and though the law took no action against her the world looked coldly upon her thereafter. She was sternly ordered to leave France at once, and she turned homewards. Her own country refused to receive her and she perforce wandered on till she died in Rome in 1689, poor, friendless and neglected; her life as an honoured queen had ended more than thirty years earlier, on that chill November afternoon in 1657 when she murdered the Marquis of Monaldeschi.

THE WALL OF TIME

LESLIE VARDRE

HERE'S NO SUCH thing as a supernatural occurrence," Patterson said forcibly, using his finger for emphasis. "As times goes by, so explanation will be found for everything. Until electricity was discovered, St. Elmo's fire was regarded as a supernatural manifestation."

"Take poltergeists," he added. "We know that they exist—we know what they can do. And yet we don't know what causes them. But one day we will. . ."

He sat back, breathing a little heavily after the fury of his tirade. A little man, with a perpetual intensity of purpose. Small features gathered together in the middle of a round face. He progressed through life on a dreary succession of private hobby-horses.

We sat together on the leather-covered corner seats at the club. There was Patterson, of course, and Fawcett, the solicitor. As usual, he had had very little to say. And there was the doctor, Dr. Cromby, new to the place but as pleasant as they come. Fiftyish, tall and angular, slick greying hair and slanting eyes with matching brows that tended to give him a continual wry expression, as though he were permanently amused with some private, futile joke.

"There are more things——" he quoted, then, meeting my eye, grimaced apologetically.

"Everything, in its time, will be capable of explanation," Patterson said from the corner. "Everything—one day. It's just a matter of time." He brooded silently.

"Just a matter of time. . . ." The doctor took the words and turned them over, as if inviting inspection and assessment. "I remember," he said slowly, "something that once——"

Patterson broke in, "When you were young and you had your first practice, you lived out in the country, and once, you saw a ghost. . . ."

"Ghost!" Cromby shook his head. "Oh dear, no; it wasn't like that at all. So far as I know, I've never seen a ghost. Not an approved one, that is."

"Can ghosts be approved then?" Patterson wondered bleakly.

"I mean that ghosts are usually regarded as shadows of death," Cromby explained. "Reflections of memories on the shadowy walls of time." He nodded to himself, obviously approving the phrase.

"Well?" Patterson asked impatiently.

"Reflections," Cromby mused. "That's all it could have been."

"Sleight of hand?" Fawcett asked gently. "All done by mirrors?"

"The stage? Good Lord, no. This was, like our friend here suggested, way out in the country. And I was

only young; and it was my first practice."

He sat back, closing his eyes and frowning a little.

"For what it's worth," said he, "it happened in a small village called—bless me, I nearly forget—Haversham? Ilversham? Something like that, anyway. In Herefordshire, that I do remember, and a sprawling practice that took in three villages, a town and innumerable scattered communities and isolated farms. I had my surgery in quite a large house on the outskirts of the village with the hills rolling up behind, and the valley all round. I was still single, and there was a woman who came in each day to 'do' for me . . .

"I had all my own clerical work to do—entering up details on case cards, you know? It was a bit of a bind, every night the same. Not that there was anything else to do—no cinemas, and television still in its supernatural stage." He opened his eyes to grin briefly at Patterson.

"It was early November, and a nasty night, too. Earlier in the day I'd had a call from somebody out in the wilds. A woman's voice it had been.

" 'That the doctor? My name is Wilson; I'm calling from Plantagenet Farm.' I pulled my small pad towards me, and jotted down the names while she spoke. 'It's my father,' she told me. 'I don't want to drag you all the way out here on a day like this, but——'

" 'He's ill?' I asked sharply.

" 'Not really ill,' she replied. 'Not as you could call "ill", but I'm worried.'

"I remember that I felt annoyed. If there's one thing a doctor detests, it's the disembodied voice that rings up, talks all round the subject, refusing to be pinned down, then hangs up, leaving nobody the wiser.

" 'Can you explain his symptoms?' I asked, very much the professional man.

" 'He's queer,' she told me; 'rambling a little. Mind you, he's been like this afore, but never so bad.'

"I looked out through the window. It was just beginning to get dark, and it was a filthy day. The tree-skeletons were dripping and lifeless, and the lawn dank and sodden. There were melancholy pools all over the gravel drive. Everything seemed steeped in a horrible, depressing heaviness.

" 'His bodily health,' I asked her. 'How does that seem?'

" 'Oh, yes. He's healthy enough, I suppose, except for——' The voice died away.

"I made my decision. 'I'll come round tomorrow,' I promised. 'But if you feel that he's getting worse, ring me again tonight.'

"I rang off then, and went to speak with Mrs. Harrison, the lady who looked after me. She was just getting dressed ready to go. A stolid, unimaginative country type, tall and broad with it, with a face pitted and chaffed by the wind like the bark of a tree.

" 'Wilson from Plantagenet Farm,' she told me. 'Oh, ay, us all knows 'im. He's queer.'

" 'Queer?' I persisted, and she lowered her voice as people of her kind do when confronted with some-

thing beyond their comprehension.

" 'All on twenty year,' said she, 'an nobody rightly knowing the ins an' outs of it. Good job 'e 'ad, over in Wrenton, and 'ad to give it up. Lived wi' his son an' daughter, and after he gives up work, they takes the old farm over. Not as you could rightly call it a farm, more like a market garden.'

" 'He'll be getting on, then?'

" 'Bless you, no, sir. Not as you'd call it in these parts. Not sixty yet, I'd say.'

"She went on her way then, complaining bitterly about the weather.

"That was about five. I had my tea that she'd set out ready, and then I went into the surgery and started on my work. I took my job very seriously in those days.

"Then, about nine, the 'phone jangled. It was the Wilson woman. Father was much worse, and she'd had to put him to bed. She didn't like the looks of him at all. I swore under my breath and said I'd be right round. I asked for directions and was inundated with a profuse and garbled description of a road that swung into the hills by the fork, then swept to the right by the old barn, then turned left at the corner by the slang. It was a typical rural description of an unsignposted road.

"I wrapped a scarf round my neck and sorted out my oldest raincoat. Then I went to the garage and tried to start the car. They weren't so efficient in those days, and mine was an old model.

"She wouldn't start. I paddled about in pools of water from the leaking roof, and the rain dripped down my neck and I felt unutterably miserable. After a while I gave up swinging the handle and pushed her out into the drive. There was a bit of a slope and I hoped to get her rolling on this.

"She fired at the bottom and I swung out into the lane, shovelling a spray of muddy water each side and, with the laden bushes dragging against the body, sending cascades of cold rain all over me. I didn't put the hood up—it was ripped, anyway, and I doubt whether it would have held. The lights were the merest glimmer, and I had to drive very slowly.

"I'd figured from the Wilson woman's description that I'd got about three miles to go in all—two along this comparatively straight road, then a further mile up the winding track into the hills.

"Then just as I reached the end of the road where it forked, with the right-hand way leading to the valley and Wrenton and the other swinging off under the trees, the car back-fired a couple of times and churned to a halt. I climbed out and started swinging the handle again, but there wasn't a flicker of life. Then I looked at the petrol gauge, and of course it was empty.

"I kicked savagely at the tyres and looked up the tunnel of dripping trees that led to my destination. A gust of wind folded my raincoat against my trousers and a deluge poured down from the overhanging branches. I dragged my case out of the car, and then, as I turned to start my climb, I saw a flicker of light—two round beads of light, rain-hazed and ten-

uous coming along the road behind.

"I waited until I could hear the sound of an engine above the whining of the wind, then I stepped into the road, vigorously waving my free hand. The car drew to a jerky stop.

"It was a mail van—one of those red beetles that one sees everywhere in this country of ours. But it wasn't one of those sleek little jobs that bustles about the suburbs, it was one of the earlier, top-heavy vans. The driver leaned from his seat, his eyes half-closed against the driving rain. He was wearing, I could see, a shiny black macintosh.

"He was middle-aged, with a small, oval, brown face, and a central shock of curly black hair that pushed his peaked cap to the back of his head.

" 'Broke down?' he asked.

" 'Out of petrol,' I said briefly, and he grinned, pushing his cap still farther back on his head.

" 'Nice place you've picked an' all,' he said cheerfully. 'Can I give you a lift? Going as far as Wrenton.'

" 'I'm going the other way,' I told him, pointing. 'I've got to get to Plantagenet Farm.'

" 'Sooner you than me, mate,' he said bleakly, and made to move back to the driving-seat.

" 'But I'm a doctor,' I cried, suddenly alarmed at his indifference. 'I've got a patient up there, and it may be urgent. Is there no way you can help?' I rested my hand on the sharp edge of the door, and spoke as urgently as I could.

"He sucked in his bottom lip, his eyes narrowed ahead.

" 'Got to be in Wrenton by ten,' he mused. 'Got the last collection on. . .'

" 'Well, petrol then?' I asked worriedly. 'Can you spare a drop?'

" 'T'aint mine,' said he. 'Belongs to the Post Office. Every ruddy pint to be account for. Sorry, mate.'

"He nodded, and the van started to move.

"I cursed under my breath as my grip was torn away. I stood and watched the faint red ball of his tail-light as it weaved down the road and out of sight. The sound of the engine died away and I was left in the pouring rain, with the wind seeking to lift the coat from my back. I felt very lonely.

"I wrapped the coat more tightly about me and set off on my way under the trees. The sodden leaves underfoot deadened all sound and my feet slipped continually as I struggled upwards. It was a nightmare journey that I shall never forget. Only a mile, according to my informant, but the landmarks she had mentioned were all obliterated by the darkness and the driving rain.

"The trees thinned out, but I lost my way several times, twice finding myself in newly-ploughed fields. I fell once, catching my foot on a projecting root and sprawled head-first into the slime, my case tumbling away into a ditch.

"I ran into a low, overhanging branch, and cut my cheek open, so that the warmth of blood mingled with the cold cut and flurry of rain.

"Time ceased to have significance and I forged steadily upwards, now slipping over stones, now splashing

through deep wheel-ruts filled to the brim with muddy, ice-cold water.

"Once I decided to give up, and stopped, fighting for breath, before starting on the way down. And as I waited, so I saw the sudden gleam of a yellow light ahead. I trudged towards it, and it separated into first two, then four lights. An open door, with a dark hooded shadow inside, two ground-floor windows and a curtained bedroom window.

" 'Plantagenet Farm?' I shouted against the wind, and the shadow came out to meet me, a woman with a black shawl draped over her head, eyes faint glistening pools against the dull oval of her face.

" 'He's worse,' she said, her eyes on my case, 'You'll be the doctor? I've rung several times, but there's no answer. . .'

"Inside the house I waited, dripping, while she slammed the door against the wind. Then I stripped off my wet clothes, and set them on the floor, my hat atop. Behind me, an old grandfather clock groaned and wheezed into a series of discordant scales and I turned to look at the cracked face. It was quarter past two.

" 'I expected you much sooner,' she reproached. I could see now that she was about forty, with a thin, much-lined face, and a lipless mouth. Her eyes were cold pieces of agate.

" 'My car broke down.'

"She nodded, and her face softened a little. 'It's a wretched night,' she said, and turned to lead the way up the winding stairs.

"The bedroom door stood open and an old-fashioned oil lamp, standing on a small table by the red-quilted bed, flickered in the draught. The man who lay in bed, white hands tight-clasped on the cover, had a shock of greying hair and a pallid, unlined face. His eyes were closed, the mouth open.

"I set my case on the table, and felt for the pulse. There was not even the faintest thread. Alarmed, I bared the bony breast, and laid my ear against the flesh. After a while I straightened up.

" 'I'm afraid——' I started hesitantly, and the woman came to stand at my side. 'It'll be his heart then,' she confided, and her voice was completely unconcerned, cold and bloodless.

" 'His heart?' I wondered, then noticed the blue shadows beneath the sunken eyes.

" 'He's been under a doctor from Wrenton for well over two years,' she explained. 'Been on tablets, but he ran out of them yesterday. I 'phoned up, but they said as how the doctor was away for a few days. Then when Dad was took bad this afternoon, I rang you up.'

" 'Why on earth didn't you tell me then that it was his heart?' I asked harshly.

" 'We never told him that his heart was bad—we were afraid of how he might have took it. He was a bit queer, you know. And he was listening when I 'phoned you, so I couldn't say much. I did try to give you an idea.'

"I drew the coverlet over the thin white face. If only I had arrived just

half an hour earlier—he couldn't have been dead for very long, the body was still warm. With proper care he could have lasted another, ten, fifteen years. If it hadn't been for my damned car running out of petrol, and that postman refusing to help. If—if—if. I wondered what the postman would say if ever he found out.

"The woman seemed to be trying to read my face.

" 'I was only at the door for a few moments,' she offered. 'He was all right when I left him. Well, in a way it's a blessing—he never was what you might call well. You'd never believe the trouble we've had, looking after him. You can't blame yourself, doctor—you came as quickly as you could.' She hesitated, looking at me from beneath her heavy lids. 'I suppose—if you had got here sooner . . . ?'

" 'I could have saved him,' I told her. A wave of tiredness swept through me, so that I was forced to lean against the tarnished gilt bedrail.

"She suddenly became very brisk, turning the lamp down, then motioning to the landing with a quick flick of her head.

" 'Be going downstairs and taking off your things,' she ordered, 'Why —you're saturated! I'll have a cup of coffee ready for you in just as long as it takes the kettle to come to the boil.'

"The old clock chimed the half hour as I drew a chair up to the fire, stirred into blazing activity with a few quick jabs from the poker. The smell of coffee filled the room and I could hear the woman clattering cheerfully enough in the little scullery.

"My coat and shirt steamed away on a wooden contraption—a clothes-maid do they call them?—on the other side of the hearth. My trousers clung warmly damp to my legs.

"The firelight sent shifting, dancing shadows a-leaping about the whitewashed walls; a row of brass ornaments—candlesticks, jugs, horse-brasses and the like—set in a row on a shelf above the grate, glinted and sparkled as if they were alive.

"I thought about the postman, probably home in the comfort of his family. It seemed wrong that he shouldn't know of what had happened. . . . He had put his petty job before a man's life—he was a murderer.

"I closed my eyes and forced the unreasoning thoughts from my mind.

" 'Two years you said?' I called, in an attempt to stop the circle of thoughts.

" 'Well over that since his first attack,' she called back, 'but even before that—he's not been well for a long time.'

"I remembered what Mrs. Hanson had told me about 'Mr. Wilson being queer'. 'What was the matter with him?' I asked.

"She bustled through with a tray and two cups and saucers. She seemed cheerful enough, and not at all put off her stride by the death of her father. I felt vaguely resentful.

" 'I'll join you in a cup, doctor,' said she, 'I've been on the go since dinner. Dad—? Oh, he was a bit

queer—it's a wonder you hadn't heard them talking about it down in the village.'

" 'All of twenty years ago,' she said, moving the clothes-maid and its burden so that she could pull up a chair facing me. 'On such a night as this, and about the same time of the year. We lived in Wrenton then, and Dad had a good job there. A nice little house it was; I used to work in the factory, and Judd, he's my brother—he's over in Halton this week, selling plants, and not due back till Friday—this'll be a shock for him—Judd, he worked in a market garden.'

"The rain pounded suddenly against the window, and she rose and peered through the curtains.

" 'Just such another night as this,' she echoed, 'And Dad, usually so punctual, coming in nearly two hours late. And when he did come, his face was all white and staring, and we couldn't get much out of him. Then, in the middle of the night—half past two it were, for he woke me up with his shouting—he sits up in bed, and cries out, "He's dead—I killed him—I'm a murderer!" We couldn't do a thing with him for a while. The doctor said as how it was a form of hysteria. He asks to be taken off the run, and when they won't move him he packs his job in. Seemed to go right to pieces after that and he was never the same. That's when Judd bought this farm, although Dad wasn't at all keen. We had quite a job getting him up here at all. But Judd got his way in the end; he'd had his eye on the place for some time, and with Dad finishing work it seemed the right time to branch out on our own.'

"I sipped my coffee, its warmth making me even more tired.

" 'We got it for a song, this place,' she continued. 'It had stood empty for nearly five years. Too out-of-the-way, you know, and too small to be run as a proper farm. But we get along all right, do quite well with plants in Wrenton and Halton.'

"She let the curtain fall, and came to sit down again.

" 'Another cup, doctor?' I offered my empty cup, and as she tipped the blue enamelled jug, 'We never did find out what really scared him that night. Mind you, he did try to tell us, but it didn't make much sense. If he'd been drinking—but there, Dad was a teetotaller.'

" 'Something frightened him?' I wondered.

" 'He was fair terrified,' she assured me. 'Told us a story of how he was coming along the bottom road—you know the one, you must have come along it tonight—and just at the end where it forks he sees a man and a car.

" 'The man stops Dad and says as how he's a doctor, and on his way to an urgent case, and that he's out of petrol. Wants Dad to help, but there, when you works for someone else, you can't be giving away stuff that isn't rightly yours. Then he more or less asks Dad to run him up the hill, said as how he was coming to this farm, only, of course, there isn't anyone living here then. But Dad doesn't think of that at the time, and he explains how he's running to a

schedule, and that he can't do anything to help.

" 'In a fair state, this young doctor was, just as it might have been you coming up here tonight——' Her voice tailed away, and she sat back in her chair and looked at me with eyes that were suddenly filled with wonder. Then, after a minute or two:

" 'Dad goes on, but after a bit he gets to thinking that perhaps there's somebody dying, and that doctor stuck out there, and with no way of getting to his patient. So he turns his van, and he goes all the way back. But there's nothing there, no man, no car. He gets out of his van and has a look round, and there sure enough are the tracks of his own van, but not another mark on the road. It was muddy, you know, and there were rotted leaves, so that his own tyre-marks showed up as plain as day. Then he drives up the road under the trees and comes to this farm. Only it's all dark and empty, and half the roof missing as it was in those days. And Dad knows there's nothing more ahead except the hills.

" 'Then he comes back home, and he's in a shocking state. And he wakes up in the night like I told you, screaming almost, and calling himself a murderer. . . .'

"My coffee had gone cold; I set the cup down carefully.

" 'I don't suppose that you'd have a photograph of your father,' I asked, 'taken round about the time you speak of?'

" 'Only in a group,' she told me, and went to the sideboard, bringing back a small framed picture.

" 'Taken when they got the new vans,' she explained. 'It's the back of the Post Office in Wrenton. All the postmen are on it. That's Dad, the one standing by the end van.'

"But I didn't need her finger to show me which was her father. There was no mistaking the postman with the oval face, and the equally round shock of black hair that pushed the high peaked cap to the back of his head."

* * *

We were silent as the doctor's voice died away. After a while, Patterson stirred uneasily. "But I don't see——" he started, then stopped.

"If——," he started again.

The doctor smiled.

"If," he said. "It's all 'ifs'. No matter how you try to figure it, it always comes back to the starting-point. Reflections on the wall of time—bend that wall, so that the reflections meet, and there you are. Somebody once tried to explain it. . . . Einstein, was it? I forget."

DREAM OF DEATH

A. G. K. LEONARD

Illustrated by Patrick Sullivan

MANY A SEA-GOING man has dreamed strange dreams at sea, but few can have been as strange as that experienced in 1840 by Edmund Norway, captain of the merchant ship *Orient* in passage from Manila to Cadiz.

The story begins with the murder of his brother in far-off Cornwall on the night of February 8th, 1840—a straightforward killing for gain, otherwise unremarkable in criminal history.

Nevell Norway, 39-year-old timber and general mechant, had that day transacted his usual business in Bodmin market and shortly before ten o'clock set off on a lonely, nine-mile ride back to his Wadebridge home. Some time later, a neighbouring farmer met up with a riderless grey horse, which he followed to Norway's house.

There, alarmed servants recognized the animal and noticed bloodstains on the saddle. They set out in search of their master, but not till next morning did they find his body in a stream near the road. He had died

from blows about the head, although grains of powder in one of his wounds suggested that shots had also been fired.

There were signs that Norway had been attacked by two men who had lain in wait for him and that a desperate struggle had taken place. Nearby was found the broken hammer of a pistol, while the victim's empty pockets clearly showed his assailant's motives.

Rewards were offered for information leading to their arrest. Local police organization was then rudimentary and a London constable named Jackson was sent for to take charge of the case. Various witnesses made statements directing suspicion against two brothers, James and William Lightfoot, who had been seen loitering near the scene of the crime. One of these men had also been noticed closely watching Norway counting out money from his purse during the afternoon's business in Bodmin market.

Constable Jackson searched James Lightfoot's cottage six days after the murder and arrested the occupant when he found a pistol with a broken lock hidden in the ceiling. His brother William, having let slip an incriminating remark, likewise found himself taken into custody three days later.

Each brother then made a confession throwing the main blame on the other. The Lightfoots were tried at Bodmin on March 30th, found guilty and sentenced to death. Their public execution outside the gaol a fortnight later was watched by some 10,000 people.

That would have seemed the end of a commonplace tragedy, were it not for the curious dream in which it figured thousands of miles away at sea. The tale is told in a book, *Early Years,* by C. Carlyon, published three years after the event.

According to Carlyon, Edmund Norway wrote the following account of his dream on the same day as the murder:

"Ship Orient, *from Manila to Cadiz, Feb. 8th, 1840.*

About 7.30 p.m., the island of S. Helena, N.N.W., distant about seven miles, shortened sail and rounded to, with the ship's head to the eastward; at eight, set the watch and went below —wrote a letter to my brother, Nevell Norway. About twenty minutes or a quarter before ten o'clock went to bed—fell asleep, and dreamt I saw two men attack my brother and murder him. One caught the horse by the bridle and snapped a pistol twice, but I heard no report; then he struck him a blow and he fell off the horse. They struck him several blows, and dragged him by the shoulders across the road and left him. In my dream there was a house on the left-hand side of the road.

"At five o'clock I was called, and went on deck to take charge of the ship. I told the second officer, Mr. Henry Wren, that I had had a dreadful dream—that my brother Nevell was murdered by two men on the road from S. Columb to Wadebridge; but I was sure it could not be there, as the house there would have been on the right-hand side of

the road, but it must have been somewhere else.

"He replied, 'Don't think anything about it; you West-country people are superstitious; you will make yourself miserable the remainder of the passage.' He then left the general orders and went below. It was one continued dream from the time I fell asleep until I was called, at five o'clock in the morning.

"EDMUND NORWAY,
"Chief Officer, Ship Orient".

The Rev. S. Baring Gould, who helped to preserve this story by including it in his book of *Cornish Characters and Strange Events,* makes these comments:

"There are some difficulties about this account. It is dated February 8th, but it must have been written on February 9th, after Mr. Norway's dream.

"From the Cape of Good Hope to S. Helena the course would be about N.N.W. and with a fair wind the ship would cover about eighty or ninety miles in eight hours. So that at noon of the day February 8th she would be about one hundred miles S.S.E. of S. Helena, i.e. in about 5 W. longitude, as nearly as possible. The ship's clock would then be set, and they would keep that time for letter-writing purposes, meals, ship routine, etc.

Ship, long.	5° 0′ 0″ W.
Bodmin „	4° 40′ 0″ W.
Difference	20′ 0″

"The difference would be twenty minutes of longitude, and the difference in time between two places one degree apart is four minutes. Reduce this to seconds:

$$\frac{4 \times 60 \times 20}{60} = 80 \text{ sec., i.e. } 1 \text{ min. } 20 \text{ sec.}$$

"Therefore, if the murder was committed, say, at 10 h. 30 m. p.m. Bodmin time, the time on the ship's clock would be 10 h. 28 m. 40 s. p.m. An inconsiderable difference."

Thus Edmund Norway must actually have "seen" in his dream the events which at that very moment were happening on the road between Bodmin and Wadebridge. The details of his dream tallied exactly with the evidence found at the scene of the crime and the subsequent confessions of the Lightfoot brothers—even to the pistol being snapped twice without firing and the body being dragged across the road to the stream beside it.

His whole vivid dream is strange enough, but one feature is even more curious. For the rest of his voyage home, Norway must have consoled himself with the apparent inaccuracy of his dream—the house being clearly seen on the left instead of the right of the road, as he remembered it.

But when at length Edmund Norway returned to Cornwall and found his whole dream had been only too tragically true, he also discovered that it had been right in this particular, too—for during his absence overseas the road had been remade and its line altered, thus making the position of the house as he had dreamt it, the reverse of what he had formerly known it to be.

DEAD ALIBI

GEORGE NEWCOMBE

Illustrated by Nicholas Wadley

JOHN PIKE pulled savagely at the hand-brake and sat chewing his lip before going in to his partner. The next move wasn't going to be easy. Woodcock always resisted him, always wanted to do things his own way.

The parking-lot was deserted except for Woodcock's car, and that, somehow, looked shabbier and more dilapidated than he remembered. Pike didn't feel like moving, he was washed out with the strain of the last few weeks. The danger signals he had observed on his previous trip had proved well-founded. But it wasn't too late yet. If they were quick they could save enough to make a fresh start . . .

He had a feeling that something was wrong. His king-sized body swivelled and his eyes wandered, seeking the cause of his uneasiness. Suddenly he pricked his ears. It was the rocking-chair sound of a ship's engine coming from the river . . . He shouldn't have been able to hear that. The plant was stopped . . . Woodcock hadn't told him he had laid the men off.

He shoved the gear in with a quick, angry movement, and shot across the parking-lot. As he passed the office window he noticed his partner's wizened face, wide-eyed with astonishment, pressed against the glass. He didn't stop. He turned into the highway and kept going. He had to think things over in view of this latest development.

At Ed's bar he put his elbows on the table and tried to figure out the best approach. Woodcock had been against selling out when he mentioned it before; he had wanted to stick, and said it was only a passing phase. But Pike knew better. Everywhere on this trip it had been plastics, plastics, plastics.

Tinware was on its way out, fast. Moodily he emptied his glass. Then he raised himself heavily from his seat and set off back to the plant. Woodcock would have to see it his way this time . . .

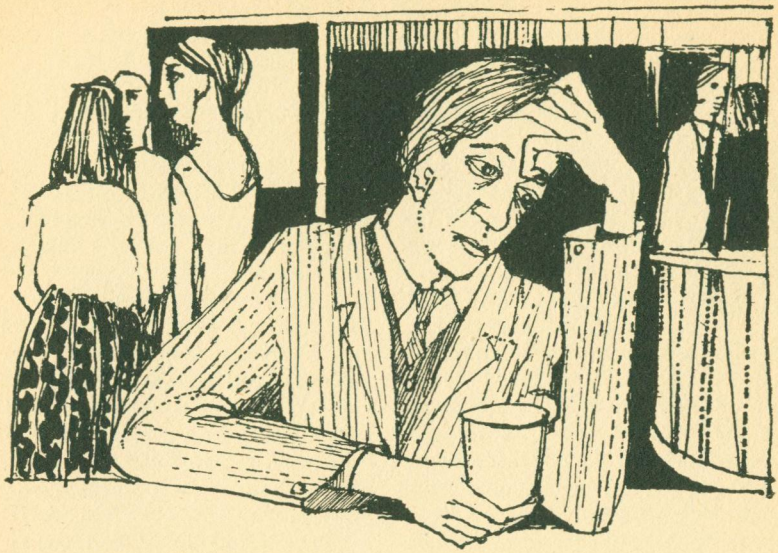
Woodcock's smile was brittle and exaggerated, making his thin lips look dry and tight across the gums of his too-big false teeth. "How did you go on, John?" He didn't mention seeing Pike drive past.

Pike scowled. "You laid the men off," he accused.

Woodcock's smile became more convincing. "Yes. I gave them a break. They'll come back fresh when the boom starts."

Pike gave a cracked laugh. "Boom! We'll never start up again. Everybody's plastic mad. We're finished."

Woodcock smiled confidently. "You're panicking, John. They'll



come back to our products. I took a plastic bowl and filled it with boiling water. It lost its shape. When the public find out, they'll be clamouring for tinware again. What we need is capital to carry us over till the boom starts."

Pike wiped his forehead; couldn't he make this little man understand. "They don't lose their shape now." Pike paused to allow his breathing to catch up. "Look, Frank. While I've been away I've seen it all. I was so impressed that I approached a manufacturer of plastics machinery. He has so much confidence in household plastics that he is prepared to advance credit for as much machinery as we can use." He paused again, watching Woodcock's face. "I as good as gave him an order, Frank."

Woodcock's face changed. "You'll need my signature!"

Pike stepped forward, using his bulk, crowding Woodcock. "You'll sign. Won't you, Frank?"

"No."

Pike stared him out. Woodcock's eyes faltered, then dropped, his hands moved apologetically. Then he turned and walked out.

* * *

Pike took a cigar from a box on his desk and started chewing it fiercely. He strode up and down, slamming his fist into his palm, looking at it from his own angle, forcing a decision. Could he do it . . . what he'd thought of in Ed's bar? He decided he could.

If he didn't, he would be tramping the streets looking for a job. He

wasn't going to do that. Before the war he had begged for handouts. But he wasn't doing it again. No one would miss Woodcock; he had no relatives.

Pike had just thrown down his mangled cigar in the waste-basket and was choosing a fresh one when a timid knock sounded on the door. Woodcock insinuated himself into the room. "It's the first time we've crossed seriously, John. I'm not happy . . ." He held his hand up. "Don't think that I'm going to give way . . ."

Pike made an impatient movement . . .

"Wait! Let's talk it over quietly. Let it stew for a few days. The plant's closed . . ." Woodcock smiled eagerly, "What say we go down to the cabin? Let's fish and forget it for a while."

Pike lit his cigar. "Yeah . . . Yeah! Give us a chance to think." He extended his hand. "Sorry I flew off the handle, Frank."

Woodcock laughed with relief and took Pike's big hand in a double grip. Then he swallowed and walked out, nodding with satisfaction.

When he had gone Pike stubbed out his cigar and started chewing a fresh one. They could have an accident on the way down . . . No. He couldn't guarantee his own safety in a car accident. Gun . . . knife . . . He wouldn't be able to get away with it . . . It had to be an accident of some sort

Pike prepared to leave. There was no need to rush it. Mistakes were made that way.

He popped his head into Woodcock's office on his way out. Woodcock was working. "In the morning, Frank?" Pike made a friendly, casting movement with his right hand.

Frank's face lit up. "Okay . . . I'll have everything laid on."

Pike's face twisted cynically: a week in a lonely cabin. Just him and Frank . . .

Woodcock was a mild-mannered guy usually, and was so predictable. It would be easy, provided nothing happened to upset him. When he was upset, he went off the rails.

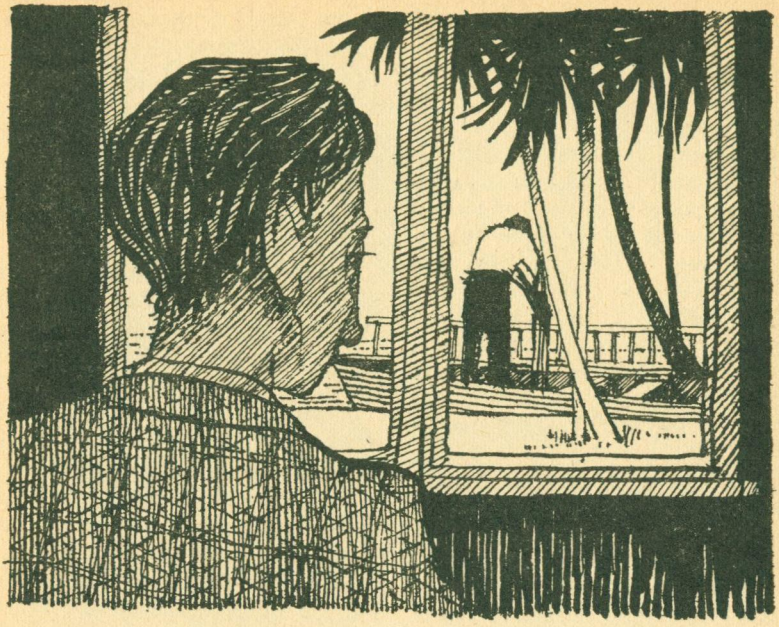
It was a million bucks against Woodcock's life. Pike chewed savagely. Suddenly he stopped chewing and flung his cigar down: Woodcock could hardly swim. He would drown as easily as a two-week-old puppy.

When he reached his flat he took out the agreement signed by Woodcock and himself. ". . . on the death of one partner . . . the said property passes into the sole ownership of the surviving partner." He folded it carefully and put it back into the safe.

* * *

Five days had gone. Pike was getting jittery. All because a young man was in the next cabin and didn't know how to fish.

They had still been unpacking when the red-haired young man had appeared from nowhere. "Hello, fellas! Saw you drive up." He was smiling broadly, standing easily with feet apart, hands on hips. "Name's Jeff. Been here two weeks and not caught a thing. You'll teach me, uh! Let me come with you?"



Woodcock had answered, "Sure. Always glad to put a youngster on the right track. What about your tackle? I'll come and look it over as soon as I've eaten."

Pike looked through the open door of the cabin, watching Woodcock at the water's edge. Thunder was sounding in the mountains at the other side of the lake. Woodcock wouldn't turn out if a storm threatened.

Woodcock was messing about with the boat in a desultory, time-wasting manner that infuriated Pike. The radio was on and bad weather was being forecast. Pike switched the radio off with a quick movement.

He crossed the turf and the narrow band of shingle to where Woodcock was working. "Are we ready, Frank?"

Frank wore a worried look. "Listen!"

Pike listened. "Just thunder in the mountains. It could be a hundred miles away. The mountains are a sounding-board for every stray clap of thunder. You know that."

Woodcock turned his back and wiped his hands on a piece of engine cloth . . .

"I've just heard the weather report, Frank . . ."

"It said: 'Yasheeko Lake area—fine and dry'." interrupted Pike.

Woodcock wasn't convinced. Pike changed the subject. "What did you do in town yesterday?"

Woodcock looked round. He seemed startled by the question. "Why?"

"You were away longer than I expected. You bumped the car."

"When I was leaving the parking-lot. A crazy guy drove in the wrong way. Made me swing over and hit a post."

Pike sensed the tension in Woodcock. There was something wrong but he couldn't figure it out. He watched Woodcock darkly. When the silence became unbearable Woodcock spoke again. "Fifty thousand dollars would tide us over. We wouldn't need to go into this plastics business."

Pike decided to humour him. "Yeah. But where can we get it?"

Woodcock smiled. "One never knows . . ." He left it in the air.

Pike said: "What about the fishing. Are we going?"

"Not yet." Woodcock was testy.

Pike clenched his fists and returned to the cabin. Through the window he could see Woodcock still at it on the boat. He seemed strangely on edge. Pike closed his eyes and pretended to sleep.

When Woodcock came in half an hour later he seemed pleased with himself. He came in quietly and peered at Pike.

Pike stirred uneasily, wondering. "Boat's ready, John," Woodcock said. "Shall we get at 'em?" He rubbed his hands noisily.

Pike licked his dry lips. "I'm ready." He moved slowly, afraid Woodcock would read his mind. Curbing his mounting excitement, he picked up his tackle and slung his satchel over his shoulder.

* * *

A sluggish swell was rolling the boat. Pike looked towards the wooded shore a quarter of a mile away, then he looked at Woodcock. Woodcock was standing in the prow, one foot on the gunwale. He was casting towards a weed-bed. His rod bent against something solid. "Blast!" he said, "I've picked up a piece of the bottom!"

Pike was chewing a cigar. He'd stopped fishing some time ago. "Tighten your line and tap the butt of your rod," he said. "Lean over and hold the line low. Put some strain on it."

Woodcock leaned over the end of the boat and thrust his rod into the water. Pike stopped chewing. "I'll hold your feet!" He started forward . . .

A gun-shot jarred his nerves. He froze. Then it came again, like a signal. He turned his head slowly shorewards. A man stepped from the saplings, waving.

Woodcock stood up, pleased, like a school-kid. "It's Lee, the game-warden." He waved back. "He's waving!" Then he turned back to his line and tugged impatiently. It parted, leaving his lure and trace at the bottom of the lake. He wound in the loose end and began to tackle up again.

Pike bit his lip. His nerves were raw with his sudden reversal of purpose. Another ten seconds and Lee

would have seen him tipping Woodcock into the lake.

Woodcock was looking dubiously at a Colorado spoon-bait. Pike watched him through narrowed eyes. Suddenly he grinned and pushed his tackle-box across. "Try my Yellow River Runt!"

Woodcock shot him a grateful look and put it on.

Pike said: "Try the same place again. But don't swim it too deep." Woodcock always swam his bait too deep.

When Woodcock was retrieving the runt for the fourth time he was dragging the bottom. Pike stopped chewing. Then the rod dipped.

"You fool!" Pike jumped up. "I told you not to swim it too deep. That's my last river runt—fast on the bottom!"

Woodcock's eyes clouded. "I'm sorry, John."

"Sorry's no good. You had better go in for it." Pike splashed his fingers in the water. "The water's warm." He began to peel off his coat. "I'll get it myself."

Woodcock stopped him. "I'll get it."

Pike shrugged his coat on again. "I'll hold the line tight so you can follow it."

Woodcock slipped into the water. Pike stood by with the line. He felt sorry for Woodcock. His skinny, dead-white body looked strangely weak in contrast to his sun-burned forearms and face. Pike watched him swimming with short, jerky strokes.

Pike judged the distance and flipped the rod. A loop of strong line settled over Woodcock's head. Pike tightened on it. Then he plunged the point of the rod below the surface of the water.

Woodcock thrashed about for a moment then went down like a mudfish nosing the bottom. Pike could feel him kicking and squirming. The vibrations came pleasantly to his hand. He was surprised to find himself so cool about it.

Then the line parted and Woodcock surfaced, blue-faced and coughing. He splashed crazily towards the boat. Panic exploded in Pike like a firework, crackers went off in every muscle. He jumped in to meet Woodcock.

Woodcock turned clumsily and choked. Pike turned him on to his back and began pulling him in. Suddenly Pike shouted as though in pain. He submerged, taking Woodcock with him. When he came up he was alone.

As he dragged himself into the boat he felt the first heavy drops of rain and saw a flash of lightning lick the water. Pike started the motor as thunder rolled across the darkening sky.

* * *

As the shingle crunched under Pike's feet a man appeared in the doorway of the cabin. He looked heavy and slow-moving. "That your car round the back?" he asked.

Pike jerked, sodden and uncomfortable, he was in no mood for intruders. "Who the hell are you?" he retorted.

"Only the sheriff of this county, so pay no attention." He moved farther

back into the cabin. "I said, is that your car round the back?"

"Yes. What about it?"

"Nothing. Are you alone?"

Pike's mind fumbled. "Yeah."

"That car was used in a bank robbery yesterday. Where were you?"

"In the cabin. Oiling my tackle, and sleeping."

A shadow crossed the window and another man, wearing a black raincoat that ran water, came in. The sheriff laughed, "Did you hear that, Jake? He was sleeping. They're always sleeping when they have no alibi. Did you find anything?"

Jake nodded. "This guy's sure got confidence. He didn't even hide it. It's all there—in a tool-locker on the boat."

The sheriff grinned. "I'll tell you what happened, Bub. You went to town yesterday and hung about the bank until someone came in with a heavy deposit. You snatched it and motored out fast. In your hurry you ran down a policeman and killed him. That's murder."

Pike looked for a smile. They were joking.

The sheriff said: "You'll fry for it."

Pike's face stiffened. "You've no proof..."

Jake rifled the notes loudly.

The sheriff closed in. "You'll fry for it," he drummed.

"Wait!" Pike raised his hands, holding them off. "I had a partner..."

The sheriff looked at the beds, both untidy. "Where is he now?"

Pike dropped his hands. "At the bottom of the lake. He's just been drowned."

"You were almost happy just now. Did you drown him?"

"Why should I?" Pike was backing. He was almost to the door. He could feel the rain's cold fingers exploring.

"For the money." The sheriff's voice was flat, dead. "Fifty grand is always better than twenty-five."

Pike felt tangled, he had to get out. He jumped and slammed the door.

He twisted and turned, then slipped on the wet turf. He struggled to his feet, head down, thrusting towards shelter.

He felt the bullet smack. Like a hammer on oak. His backbone collapsed, taking him down... down... down...

Jake turned him over callously with his foot as he said, "People like this don't deserve the benefit of a trial."

RETRIBUTION

RICHARD HARRIMAN RUSS

"IN HERE, MRS. ROLLINS. This is Captain Floyd."

The policeman held open the door and gestured inside the dimly-lit cubicle.

Floyd sat erect behind a cluttered desk, grinding out his last cigarette. He knew it was coming, God yes.

He'd been waiting since nightfall. Hating to face the woman and thinking of what to say. He supposed really it wouldn't make a damn bit of difference what he said. But he had to sweat it out: try to judge her frame of mind. Avoid as much unpleasantness as possible.

That was the "play", direct from City Hall.

She entered slowly, sparkles of moisture on her hair and on the collar of her oversized cloth coat.

There was one small metal chair beside the desk.

"Sit down, please," he said. "I'm glad you came . . .

"O.K., Ed."

The policeman closed the door.

"We tried to reach you. Checked your flat . . .

"Now, Mrs. Rollins, what has happened is a very unfortunate thing. Both for you and all of us here. Believe me, whatever we can do will be done."

The woman just looked at him. The expression she wore didn't help.

"Er—you probably haven't talked with anybody yet, have you?" he queried. "Newspaper people? Anyone from the Church?"

He guessed she hadn't.

"Well, I realize how you must feel. After we get this straightened out the Department can issue a statement."

She was leaning forward, hands rigid on the top of her purse. Finally the voice came, very weak.

"My son was killed by Patrolman Silver. He bled to death in an alley at sixteen years of age. Billy's dead. What is it you are going to straighten out, Mr. Floyd."

The officer lowered his eyes, shifted papers about. She seemed so fragile, colourless, sitting there. He hoped she wouldn't collapse or something.

"I know," he nodded. "I'm sorry."

He was, too. Sorry for the cop involved. And the mother perhaps. Not so much for the lousy J. D.

It had to be handled right, though. They were scared downtown. Investigation. Publicity. There'd been too much of that lately. So iron this out real careful they said.

Hell, no doubt she'd been wandering around somewhere boo-hooing to herself. She might break up, bawl again if she had any tears left. Then he'd send her home. Let it ride a couple of days. Sure, he supposed he was sorry enough for her.

He coughed slightly. "I saw Jack Silver earlier this evening. The man's terribly upset . . . he had a good

record. You must try to understand. The last thing he wanted to do was harm your boy.

"What's been done can never be undone. That's certain. But he's ready to make any possible sacrifice for you. Anything at all. He told me that."

She said nothing. Only sat there motionless, her lips moving just a trifle.

"Mrs. Rollins, Silver or no other policeman in Chicago will use his weapon except in absolute emergency. And when necessary to give warning, as was in this case."

He took a deep breath.

"The way I have it, about five this afternoon Silver encountered your son, a teenager, coming out of a West Side tavern. Not a nice place. He wanted to have a word with him. But when he requested identification the lad used abusive language and became quite irrational. In fact he assaulted Silver and tore his uniform. There was a scuffle between them. The kid broke away and ran. Of course it was Silver's duty to stop him. He fired a warning shot."

"A warning . . . that killed . . ." Her words were barely audible.

"It was the worst kind of accident. I don't deny Silver has a responsibility in this matter. But he didn't realize he'd hit the boy. We went over the entire neighbourhood. It wasn't until later that they found . . ."

She didn't seem to hear.

It had been a mistake to discuss any details now. Confused, bitter towards the cop. She was in a bad way, he knew. Probably needed medical attention.

He rose up.

There would be no more accounting, no more explanations tonight. Maybe never.

"Mrs. Rollins, it's late and you're tired. We can talk better tomorrow, perhaps. I'm going to have a car sent around and we'll arrange for someone to stay with you. I'm sorry that——"

The phone on his desk emitted a nervous jingle.

He answered, listened a moment, hung up.

Then he left the room.

* * *

They came in single file and circled the chair where she sat: three uniformed policemen, two men in civilian clothes and the captain.

After a while, Floyd stepped over to the window, a massive ice cube forming where his heart should have been. Outside in the distance a bell was striking. It struck twelve times. The sound he heard each night before leaving the station.

He turned around and he had to clench both his fists before he could speak . . . "Patrolman Silver's body has just been removed from the foyer of his apartment house. The bullet wound he received a short time ago proved to be fatal."

Mrs. Rollins almost seemed to smile. She opened her purse, withdrew a small-calibre revolver and extended it to one of the policemen.

"I'm sorry, too," she said.

THE SLAVE DETECTIVE

THE CASE OF THE FEARFUL PERFUME

WALLACE NICHOLS

Illustrated by J. Ramsey Wherrett

"I HAVE LENT YOU to Bibaculus the Perfume Merchant, Sollius," said his master, Sabinus. "Go to him at once and he will tell you of his trouble."

Bibaculus, an elderly, thin, stooping man, was in a fever of rage when Sollius arrived.

"It will ruin me!" he burst out as soon as Sollius appeared in his shop. "It is the end of my business! Oh, you are the Slave Detective, are you? You will need all your skill to discover what I *must* know."

"And what is that?" asked Sollius quietly. "I am here to help you, O Bibaculus."

"I am a perfume merchant. I am famous throughout Rome for my perfumes. All the most beautiful women buy them—and only mine. The Empress herself buys her perfume from me. I mix for her a special perfume that no other woman can use. Well, I made up a special phial of it and delivered it myself at the palace—and, horror of all horrors, when the Empress took it to anoint herself after the bath it was found—O, Gods of the Overworld and the Underworld!—contaminated with asafœtida.

"I know that asafœtida is used in our Roman cooking, but it is death to a perfume. I am ruined! The Empress will buy from me no more and all the ladies of Rome will follow her lead. But I will be revenged! Find me the villain responsible. Some enemy has done this to me. Find him, Slave Detective!"

"Have you any suspicions?" asked Sollius.

"I lately kicked out a slave for dishonesty. I'll have him crucified if you catch him. My overseer will give you his name and his usual dwelling—if he is there."

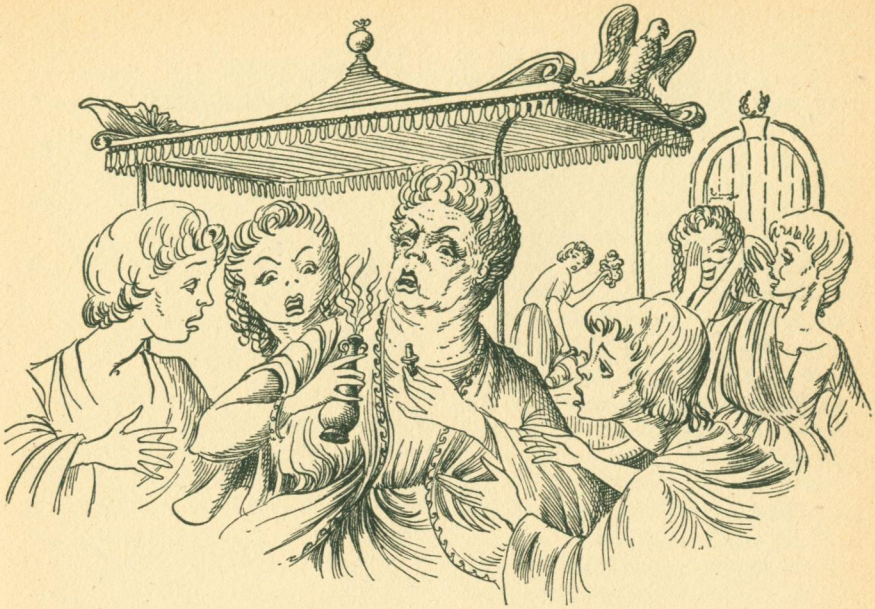
"You can suggest no one else?" pursued Sollius, tired of having slaves always suspected first.

"You can begin by suspecting everyone in my shop!" snapped Bibaculus.

These were some six slaves and the overseer, who was named Novatus. Sollius questioned them all about the dismissed slave.

"Albus was ever a petty thief," said Novatus; "that is to say, he never took much: loose coins on a shelf, the smallest phial of scent for his flute-girl. He was a deft workman, and another master might have overlooked such things, but not ours."

"You do not like your master?" smiled Sollius.



"He pays well," replied Novatus, shrugging his shoulders, "and I am a skilled man. I am worth his gold."

"Do you suspect Albus?" abruptly asked Sollius, fixing the overseer with a steady glance.

"He was a sly and vindictive fellow, and he had the opportunity. We none of us liked him. He made trouble in the shop with his tongue."

"Where would he get the asafœtida?"

"From any kitchen!"

"Did he remain long enough after dismissal to have inserted it into the scent-phial?"

"Whoever did it worked at night. He certainly did not wake those of the slaves who sleep behind the shop, as our master and his wife do in a flat above. No one heard or saw anything. I have questioned them all."

"You tell me that Albus had the opportunity. Before dismissal or after? Think, Novatus, before you answer."

"Both, Slave Detective," replied the overseer carefully. "He was dismissed at a day's notice, but worked out the day; yet I cannot say that I, or anyone, saw him meddling with any of the perfumes. But he could have entered at night. There is a secret way forth that the slaves have found for themselves when they wish to gamble or drink or meet a girl in the Subura —and who knows how to get out knows how to get in!"

"Was the particular phial of her

perfume already set aside for the Empress?"

"It was not. Usually a phial of it is ready in stock, kept on a special shelf, but as it happened her latest order was sudden and unexpected and for a state occasion abruptly ordered by the Emperor, so that Bibaculus had to mix a new phial in a hurry, for the last one supplied had not been replaced on the shelf. Another order had not been expected so soon. It took a day to mix it, and the phial stood on its shelf for the night, and was delivered in the morning. Oh, horrible desecration!" groaned Novatus.

"Was no phial of that particular perfume ever sold to anyone else—by accident, shall we say?"

"No, never!" exclaimed Novatus, and then his face became sly. "But I have often wondered . . . No, I should not voice such a thought."

"I am here to have all thoughts voiced," said Sollius.

"I suspect my master's son of mixing one for a girl—and I suspect my master himself of the same. But that is not theft: it is their perfume. But what the Empress would say if she knew . . ."

"Could a mistake have been made and the wrong perfume been delivered at the palace?"

"Impossible! Only that one phial was impregnated by the asafœtida. We have examined the whole stock. It was a deliberate act to ruin our master."

"But who would wish to do that? This slave, Albus, for one. But who else? Had Bibaculus a trade rival who would go to such lengths?"

"There is Longus . . ." murmured Novatus, rubbing his chin. "But I am sure he is not so evil-minded."

"At least there is Longus to be questioned," nodded Sollius. "But first I should like to see Bibaculus's son."

"Alfenus? I will fetch him from the distilling room."

Alfenus was a young man with a clever face but dissipated eyes. Novatus discreetly withdrew.

"Do you also, O Alfenus, suspect Albus?" began Sollius.

"I do not think he has the wits," was the reply, given with a smile. "To steal pettily, yes; to plan so exquisite a revenge, no."

"Do you hold *anyone* in suspicion?"

"No one. I am wholly puzzled."

"You did not do it yourself, O Alfenus?" asked Sollius, slipping in the question brusquely.

"I?" cried the young man in an outraged tone.

"In revenge for being scolded by your father for giving a phial of the Empress's perfume to a flute-girl or an hetaira?"

"And ruin the business I shall inherit. What nonsense, Slave Detective!"

"You are friends with your father?"

"As much as one generation can be friends with another."

"Whom do you love the more: your father or your mother?"

"My mother. But how can my greater love for my mother help your

investigation? Such a question is not pertinent."

"As you say—not pertinent. Excuse my curiosity. But I have to be curious," replied Sollius meekly. "I wish to see your mother."

"Is it necessary?"

"Very necessary."

Alfenus led the way to the flat above the business premises. Fabia, the wife of Bibaculus, was a handsome woman, cold and stern. She might have been, thought Sollius, the resuscitation of one of the old Republic's Roman matrons.

She knew nothing of the matter; she had no suspicions; she was the last person to know what went on in the premises below; she herself never used perfume—she left it to the new generation and to the hetairæ. Sollius was dismissed.

On his way to his master's mansion on the Esquiline he called at the perfume shop of Longus. He found the proprietor a jovial, bearded man in late middle age. When Sollius began to question him, it was immediately apparent that Longus had not heard of his rival's catastrophe. At first he guffawed; then turned serious.

"I am truly sorry to hear what you say," he answered. "Bibaculus is a skilled man and the best perfumier in Rome. I am nothing beside him. Ah, I see why you've come to me: you suspect me of the deed in order to get rid of a rival. Oh no; I assure you I could not do such a thing. I reverence a beautiful perfume too much to contaminate its heart. You must seek your culprit elsewhere, Slave Detective." Then he laughed again. "Look for some outraged husband, or someone he has robbed of his pet hetaira. Bibaculus is a man for the hetairæ! I suppose they stomach the old goat because he can sweeten them with his scents. Now, I am not that kind of a man. I give none of my perfumes to anyone . . . except to my wife."

Sollius returned home and was at once approached by Lucius, his usual assistant.

"What is this case," Lucius asked, and the Slave Detective related everything he had learned, speaking in a musing voice as he ruminated inwardly over his own words.

"Was it an inside deed or an outside?"

"That," replied Sollius, "is my own question. So far I do not know. Was it intended to ruin Bibaculus in his business, or to punish him for some personal act? The dismissed Albus might exemplify the one; but I cannot see the laughing Longus as exemplifying the other. It was an act of sudden impulse—as an act of revenge could be. But I ask myself this: did the one who added the asafœtida know, or not know, that the phial had just been mixed for the Empress? Remember that the imperial order had been sudden. Or did the son suspect that the father had mixed it for an hetaira —one that he himself loved? Some of these hetairæ can be fatal to young and old alike."

"You suspect the son?"

"If it was Albus, he knew that the phial was for the Empress; if it was Alfenus he did not, or thought that his father was deliberately mixing the imperial scent to give it to the girl he

himself loved. Albus would hope to ruin Bibaculus's business. But Alfenus would have ruined himself as well as his father."

"It must be Albus," said Lucius.

"I am going to lay a trap," replied the Slave Detective.

"But Albus no longer works for Bibaculus; how will you bring him back into the trap?"

"Leave the trap to me," laughed Sollius.

Next day he took Bibaculus aside.

"Mix another phial of the Empress's perfume—but it must be a quite small phial. Do it openly. Make no secret about it. Leave it on the usual shelf, and as you place it there whistle a little tune—such as a flute-boy or flute-girl might play—a happy tune, O Bibaculus."

"I am in no whistling mood, Slave Detective," grumbled the perfume merchant.

"If you wish to find the culprit, do as I suggest," said Sollius.

"Will it bring him into the light of day?" asked Bibaculus eagerly.

"It is a chance—a chance I must at least try," Sollius answered, and then he whispered a further instruction.

"I will obey you," promised Bibaculus.

"Do you sleep well?" inquired Sollius, turning back after beginning to move away.

"Always, Slave Detective. Especially lately—I am a very sound man for my age," leered the perfume merchant.

Secretly and after dark that night, Sollius and Lucius were admitted by Bibaculus himself into his shop. Work for the day had long been completed, and the slaves were in their own quarters. Not even the overseer, Novatus, knew about the admittance.

"Leave us now," said Sollius. "Go to your rest as usual—and remember your promise."

Bibaculus retired and the Slave Detective and his assistant hid themselves in a previously selected corner behind a row of large earthenware jars containing various ingredients from the East in bulk. They were in darkness, for Bibaculus had taken the lamp with him.

"How long do you expect to crouch here?" whispered Lucius.

"Either all night—in which case my trap will not have worked—or until Bibaculus appears to be well asleep."

"Then . . ." began Lucius.

"Be quiet—do not even think," ordered Sollius.

The only fact, decided Lucius to himself, that made the vigil not entirely irksome was the perfumed air they were breathing. How long a water-clock would have reckoned it he could not guess, but it seemed about time for the dawn, though actually dawn was still far off, when a slight noise made Sollius stretch out a hand and touch his companion on the arm.

"Be ready," he whispered.

Down the lateral flight of stone steps which led to and from the dwelling above came the faint glimmer of a small, clay lamp.

"Do you know who it is? I believe you do," breathed Lucius in Sollius's ear.

"I don't think I shall be surprised," Sollius breathed back. "Be quiet now, and watch."

Lucius flexed himself for an attack should it become necessary. The person with the little lamp crept down and crossed stealthily to the shelf where the fresh phial of the imperial scent stood like an iridescent star in the still gleam. A hand reached up and laid the lamp on the shelf, but so that no ray from it touched a face, and was in the act of taking out the tiny cork when the sound of descending feet on the lateral stairway caused the lifted hand to pause in its work. A figure was dimly seen like a downward moving shadow. The lamp's gleam was too feeble to give Sollius and Lucius more than the vaguest glimpse of either intruder. Each was suddenly aware of the other, and stood equally quite still. The phial picked up the rays of the little lamp.

Unseen and unheard by either of them, though sensed as there by Sollius, who turned his head expectantly, another figure was now at the top of the steps. Suddenly the one in the middle of the flight spoke as he descended to the foot.

"Why do it, Mother? Would you

ruin us all just because Father is continually after girls? Is it worth it?"

The figure at the top of the steps charged down and grappled with his son.

"Ungrateful and disrespectful cub!" he shouted.

Sollius and Lucius stepped forward, and Lucius held the father's arm in a firm grip. Bibaculus turned on his wife.

"So it was you!"

"Asafœtida," hissed Fabia, "is the best scent for your infamous girls!"

"Woman," he stormed, "you have ruined me with my best customer—the Empress herself!"

"I do not care!" she stormed back.

"I'll ask for my fee tomorrow," whispered Sollius laughingly to Lucius, and the two of them hastily departed, leaving the family wrangle to exhaust itself amid the grim arrows of an embittered dawn.

"What did you make Bibaculus promise?" asked Lucius as they went their way back.

"To whistle the same gay tune in his family circle—and not to drink tonight. Fabia had to be made suspicious, and Bibaculus to remain undrugged."

"Sometimes," said Lucius, "you make even me afraid of your strange powers!"

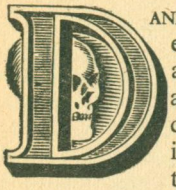
"The clues were all there," smiled the Slave Detective.

Can storied urn or animated bust
  Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?
Can honour's voice provoke the silent dust,
  Or flatt'ry soothe the dull, cold ear of death?

THOMAS GRAY.

THE WRONG ONE

MORGAN EVANS



DANNY SAT ON THE very edge of the hard chair and tried not to think about the plain brown door and the gleaming torture chamber that lay behind it.

Sitting and thinking in a dentist's waiting-room is like waking up in the cold early hours of the morning, when the world is silent and the spirit at its lowest ebb. Thoughts become distorted, troubles magnified; the world is suddenly an evil place. And even if you're only a schoolboy, and only ten, it's just the same.

Danny had been waiting in the cheerless room for nearly half an hour. This was his first experience of going to the dentist, and he had tried hard to keep his mind from straying to that forbidding door and the horrors it concealed.

He knew what lay in that room—the other boys had been at great pains to explain about the chair and the probes and the pincers and things.

He clenched his fists against the red wool of his jersey and tried to think about something else. Ginny would be waiting as usual when he came out of school and they would play in the garden. Would he have to go back to school when he had been in that room? Or could he go straight home?

If he went home, then maybe Miss Murston would be annoyed again and she may even send another note to Daddy. She was always writing notes for him to take home, telling that "Danny is idle and won't concentrate."

But Mommy and Daddy didn't understand that Miss Murston had got her knife in him, just because he'd made up his mind that when he left school he was going to be a mechanic and work in a garage.

And if you're going to mess about with cars when you grow up, what use is reading poetry and writing essays and learning how to speak properly?

Danny watched the old lady in the corner; it was his turn before hers, so that meant he was next. Soon, any minute now, that door would open and the nurse in the white dress would come out, and . . .

It was all Miss Murston's fault; the tooth had been aching, certainly, but not a proper ache—just a sort of jump now and then, just an occasional twinge. Especially if he bit on a hard sweet, or sucked in some cold air.

He'd been sucking that humbug in class, and he'd forgot, and bitten down hard. He'd put his hand to his cheek without thinking, and Miss Murston had seen him.

"Come out to the front, Danny," called. "Eating in class. I thought so. Open your mouth . . . wider. A bad tooth, it's the dentist for you. . . ."

And there and then she'd sat down and written another note, and sent him straight home with it. And because Daddy was at work, Mommy'd read it, and she'd phoned the dentist,

and here he was, waiting for that door to open.

He'd had to go through all this just because of old Miss Murston, and he wished she was dead, and if he got half a chance, he'd—he'd kill her himself.

Danny shivered at the idea, a sudden cold shudder that set the tooth leaping afresh.

But it was an idea. If she were dead, then things would be a whole lot different. There'd be an end to the notes to Daddy, there'd be no more tellings-off in front of the class. He could forget all the silly lessons, and when Ginny became old enough to go to school, then Miss Murston's sly narrow eyes and thin sneering lips wouldn't be there to frighten her.

He couldn't bear the thought of little Ginny being taught by Miss Murston. . . .

The brown door opened, and the nurse came out.

"You're next, young man," she said brightly, and Danny, white and trembling, numb with fear, followed her into the room of bright lights and gleaming cabinets.

He tried to close his mind to the horrors about him, and sat on the chair that could be tilted right back, so that the tall man who reeked of disinfectant could use his pliers . . .

"Ah," the dentist said jovially, "that's a nasty one. You'll be better off without that in your mouth. This your first time . . . ? So you've never had gas. Well, I'm sure a brave little boy like you won't mind if I put this over your face. . . ."

* * *

Danny came from the surgery filled with a sense of huge relief. He took deep breaths of fresh untainted air, and looked at the shops and the people as if seeing them for the first time.

His knees still felt trembly and there was a salty taste in his mouth. His tongue explored the new contours, discovering a gaping hole filled with a soft, movable mass. The hole was sore, it dragged heavily on his cheek, nagging and raw-aching, and hurting far worse than before.

Back at school, he tapped on the class-room door and Miss Murston's familiar grating voice called, "Come." She smiled sourly when she saw who it was, just as if she thought going to the dentist was funny.

"All right now?" she asked, and her thin hair, straggling about sallow cheeks, moved as she nodded.

He mumbled something in reply, and went to his seat, very much aware of the curious eyes watching him. He sat and looked at the inkwell and she spoke sharply.

"Don't waste time, get your books out; it's history. Just because you've had a tooth out is no excuse for slacking."

He got out his book, opened it at the proper page, and tried to concentrate. But the pain kept coming in surges, and each small movement he made seemed to bring the throbbing to a greater intensity.

Miss Murston spoke to him once or twice, and the last time she sounded very angry. Then she wrote another note.

"And if this doesn't have any

effect," she delivered her ultimatum while she blotted the paper and folded it, "I shall take you to the headmaster."

And Danny, taking the note from her long sharp fingers, knew that that would be the worst possible thing that could happen. For then he would really be punished . . . and before the whole school.

Ginny was waiting for him when he came out of the playground gates. She always waited on the other side of the street, because Mommy had said that a little girl who was only five wasn't old enough to cross by herself. At least not at that nasty corner by the school gates.

She was wearing her little blue dress and had a blue ribbon in her yellow curls. She danced excitedly from one foot to the other as soon as she saw him and her curls danced as well.

"Danneeee!" she called, and he waved back and ran across the road to her.

Some of the other boys had little sisters, but none were as nice as Ginny. She was always laughing and she never cried; always clean and fresh, and always pleased to see him.

He rumpled her curls, took her hand and felt in his pocket to make sure the letter was safe. In a way it would be nice if it got lost, but then there'd only be more trouble.

He clutched Ginny's warm hand tightly, seeking comfort from the contact, and she, seeming to know how he was feeling, danced along silently, looking up into his face.

Miss Murston's old black car came out of the school gates and swung in a half-circle, braking hard, and with the horn blaring. She always came out like that, swinging the car right over the road; Danny knew that it was bad driving to come out like that on to a main road.

She might think she was good in school, but she didn't know the first thing about cars. But he did—Daddy had taught him ever such a lot. Well . . . not really taught, but when you ask questions, you always learn from the answers; that is if you're really interested.

All Miss Murston was good for was to sit at her old desk and talk about silly things. She didn't know a thing about cars—all she was good for was writing notes. . . .

* * *

Daddy's face was very stern when he read the note.

"I don't know what's coming over you, Danny," he said. "You really must pull yourself together. Miss Murston is threatening to take you before the Head unless you pay more attention in class. You wouldn't like that."

Danny stayed silent, watching his feet, his cheek a mass of pain.

"Have you nothing to say?" Daddy asked loudly, and Mommie laid her hand on his arm.

The pain welled, and Danny pressed the back of his hand to the soreness.

"Don't grumble at him now, dear," said his mother. "He's had a tooth out, and he won't be feeling very well."

"Of course," Daddy agreed, and folded the note.

"Can I play outside?" Danny asked anxiously. "It's stopped bleeding now."

She hesitated. "I don't know. . . ."

"I'll be all right," he assured, and Ginny danced by his side.

"Go along, then," Mommie said, "but don't run about too much, and try to keep your mouth closed; you don't want to get cold in your face."

He took Ginny's hand and they went and played ball in the drive. He bowled the big red and yellow ball, and Ginny ran after it, shrieking her delight.

He rolled the ball right across the lawn, then went and leaned over the open window of the car. Knowing about cars was much more important than doing sums. He knew what a differential was, and how the gears worked. He'd show them all, some day—especially old Miss Murston. He'd get a good job, and he'd go back to the school, driving his own car. . . .

His face started to ache again.

Ginny bounced the ball and it rolled under the car.

"Danneee?" she pleaded, and he got down on his hands and knees and wriggled under the oily chassis, pushing the ball away.

This was something like it.

The pain forgotten, he lay on his back and ran ecstatic fingers over cables and struts, identifying and remembering their uses. This the base of the steering column, this the gear housing. These were the brake cables, and if anything happened to them . . .

He could teach Miss Murston a thing or two about cars. And he could get his own back. If he were to cut the brake cables on that old car of hers, she'd soon find out what could go wrong.

That would teach her a proper lesson, and if anything happened to her, then it would be her own fault for not knowing what he'd done.

He wriggled from under the car and stood up, rubbing his hands together.

"Time to come in," Mommy called, and he shouted back, "Just a minute. . . ."

Then he went in the garage to the big box in the corner where the tools were kept. . . . The pliers and the big wire-cutters weighed heavy in his pocket, but he found that by keeping his hand to his side, he could disguise the tell-tale bulge.

* * *

His face was no better the next day and his cheek was swollen. His tongue found new shapes, and the socket seemed bigger and deeper, just like a volcano.

Mommie wondered if he was fit to go, and any other time he'd have jumped at the chance to stay away . . . but not today.

He kissed Mommie, and ruffled Ginny's hair. "Meet me at dinnertime as usual?" he asked as he always did; and Ginny accepted the little ritual with sparkling eyes and much nodding of her curls.

The pain came in sharp waves as he walked to school, and even Miss Murston commented on his face.

"You don't look well," she said,

peering over her glasses. "Will you be all right?"

He nodded, his eyes on the scarred desk-top. It wouldn't help her to be kind now; it was too late.

"If you want to slip out and sit quietly in the big hall," she offered, "or if you want to see the nurse, just put your hand up."

Danny pushed his hands between his knees; she was making it ever so easy for him.

He waited till after the first period and when the rest of the class were changing their books, he raised his hand.

Miss Murston didn't even bother to speak—she just nodded, and he went into the big hall that smelled of floor-polish, and sat in one of the big chairs. He sat quietly for a few minutes and played with the tools in his pocket; the metal was warm now, and oily to the touch.

After a while he got up and went through the side door into the playground. It seemed funny to see it empty of children, and the netball pitch covered with pools of water.

Just in case anyone was watching, he walked in the direction of the toilets, but then slipped quickly round the corner to where Miss Murston's car was parked in the shelter.

He slipped the cutters from his pocket and wriggled on the broken tarmac under the car. The body was rusty and rotten and one of the front wings had been wired into place. The cables were thick with dusty oil and the cutters went through them easily, the severed ends flying apart. He tucked the loose strands out of sight, and elbowed back into the light.

Back in the big hall he sat on the chair and admired the big pictures that hung round the walls, and the wooden Honours Board over the dais.

He returned to the class just before dinner break, and Miss Murston barely glanced at his entrance.

When the bell rang he delayed putting his books away until he was the last one to leave the room. He walked slowly down the playground path, one hand pressed against his cheek, watching as the black car backed out of the shelter.

He waited by the gates, leaning against the wall and pretending not to see Ginny's impatient waving from the opposite pavement.

He heard the car coming up behind, the engine accelerating and he looked across to Ginny, ready now to wave back to her.

And then his blood turned to ice.

Forgetful of past warnings, she was already stepping off the pavement and into the road. She was running and waving and calling "Danneee!"

Unleashed, the car hurtled past with a quick rush of air, and he was only conscious of Miss Murston, her eyes staring, mouth a gaping black void in the white of her face, frenzied hands wrenching at the wheel.

The car plunged on, sweeping in a wide curve, mounting the opposite pavement and raking along the wall with a screech of tortured metal.

And in its wake, lying in the middle of the road, with crumpled blue frock gradually changing to red. . . .

His voice came back.

"No——," he heard himself crying.

"Not Ginny—I've killed the wrong one. . . ."

And rising to a scream, "The wrong one—the wrong one. . . ."

* * *

A hand was firm against his shoulder, holding him down, fighting against his struggles. His mouth was strangely numb, and his hands tight against cold metal.

A voice was laughing.

"The wrong one?" it asked. "Whatever next?"

The dentist bent over him, a tall shadow against the brilliant light.

"Come along, son," he said, still laughing. "It's all over now—rinse your mouth with this."

A large white hand offered a minute scrap of gauze; on it lay the blackest of hollowed teeth.

"Here," the dentist said, "take a look at this. Does it look like the wrong one to you?"

A man that studieth revenge keeps his own wounds green.
FRANCIS BACON.

Envy's a coal that comes hissing hot from hell.
PHILIP JAMES BAILEY.

Death hath so many doors to let out life.
BEAUMONT AND FLETCHER.

THE DEVIL'S VIOLIN

EUPHEMIA MUNRO

Illustrated by Michael Ricketts

E NOTED EVERYTHING as he hurried towards Greek Street—the unkempt, trampish, cluttered shops, the dried octopi, the garlic smells, the foreign faces, the restaurants with odd names and expensive menus, and in a twisted, melancholy sort of way he loved it all. He heard a banjo in mad ecstacy in a cellar and voices shrill with eagerness in a coffee bar and a girl with a flaunting pony tail and a tight, red sweater shouted: "Hi, Vic!" but he ignored her.

Whenever he passed a darkened shop window he glanced at his reflection in it. He was well made with wide shoulders suitably squared by clever tailoring, but it was his darkly handsome face that pleased him most.

Why should I worry? he kept asking himself. If Danny by Gaslight didn't like the way he did things, then Danny could find someone else to do his mean little jobs. Unfortunately, he considered, as an afterthought, Danny by Gaslight and his Dean Street Mob were all-powerful, both in the alleys of Soho and on the race tracks. What was it Danny had said? "We ain't good enough for you, Vic. You just scarper and get yourself a nice job top of St. Paul's, then you'll 'ave nobody above you. You can't bear nobody above you, Vic." He'd show Danny by Gaslight and Piggy Bacon and Archie the Cosh and the rest...

He turned into Soho Square and felt its close intimacy. The Regency and Georgian façades, the plane trees, the little half-timbered cottage in the centre of the square were all that he asked or needed of the world's architecture or natural beauties. Nice and quiet, tonight, he summarized its charm as he passed through to his room in the blitz-battered old Jacobean house off the square.

He lived in what had once been an oak-panelled bed-chamber. It was said that Mozart had played the violin in the reception rooms beneath to the nobility and ministers of state.

Vic lived in friendly squalor with a girl he had picked up in Greek Street. In a way he was fond of Bridget, but he didn't understand her half the time. She spoke above his head, quickly and with assuredness; she had a way with waiters and commissionaires and taxi drivers. It was all very maddening for she made him feel a fool. He suspected there were times when she laughed at him. Once she had said in temper: "You and 'Phya Tak' have much in common, Vic, only Phya Tak is your intellectual superior." Phya Tak was her Siamese cat. He had always hated Phya Tak; after that remark he hated him more than ever.

Phya Tak was seated on top of the first staircase as he climbed upwards, but when he saw him the cat arched his back and fled with that infinitely elegant and contemptuous movement of a cat that has recognized an enemy. The tawny and bronze sleekness merged into the shadows and was gone. The throaty growl of his departing valediction disturbed Vic, and raised gooseflesh all over his back. He swore softly and vehemently: "One day I'll do you, you——"

Bridget was mending a ladder in a nylon stocking when he entered their room. "Hello!" she said briefly without looking up. He noted the untidy room, the unwashed crockery on the table, powder and lipstick and soiled underwear on the television, dust and ashes in the fireplace.

"I nearly broke my neck over that cat of yours on the stairs!" he complained bitterly.

"You should look where you're going!" was her unsympathetic rejoinder and added: "Poor Phya Tak!"

"Poor Phya Tak!" he mimicked, aggrieved at her nonchalance. "What about me?"

"What about you, Vic?" she asked without interest.

He thought of all the day's humiliations he had had to accept without retaliation. Somebody should be made to pay for them.

She looked at him quizzically. He could see laughter in her eyes—grey eyes not particularly beautiful by his somewhat orthodox standards, but disconcertingly steadfast and humorous.

"I'll kill that cat of yours one of these days!" he threatened, knowing that it was the one threat that could pierce her otherwise proud invulnerability.

"Indeed!" she said sharply.

"I hate cats and I hate that yellow brute of yours more than all the rest put together."

"What is it, darling? Bad day with Fanny and the boys?" she said, indifferent to his ill-humour.

"Don't call him 'Fanny'!" he shouted. "He doesn't like it."

"A lot you care, Vic!"

He knew she was right, but illogically he persisted. The quarrel grew and intensified. He saw the humour go from her eyes and the hard, uncompromising look he hated take its place. He knew he must not lose control for then he would be at the mercy of her tongue completely. His blind, hot fury was no match for her icy contempt and the urge to violence within him was beyond his will. He came at her savagely, but she dodged around the table as swiftly and gracefully as the Siamese had evaded him on the staircase. He caught her eventually, however, and began beating her against the wall.

"Keep off, you big oaf!" she screamed, clawing and kicking frenziedly. "What's come over you, you fool?"

There was satisfaction, at least, in knowing he had destroyed her composure. He knocked her against the panelled wall, and to his amazement a small section slipped away sideways and she disappeared, shrieking into blackness. In an instant all his ran-

cour and fury had vanished. What had happened? Had he killed her? He stared incredulously and fearfully at the narrow cavity in the wall into which Bridget had disappeared.

"Bridget!" he called shakily.

Her voice, muffled and surprised, came out of the aperture in the old panelling: "Vic, I've found something!"

All anger had gone in the sudden new situation and in the novelty of discovery. He pushed the panelling a little farther and saw that behind it lay a tiny cavity in the thickness of the old wall only large enough to hold one person. With relief, also, he saw Bridget crawling out dusty but unharmed and clutching eagerly in one hand a queer-shaped bundle. He was suddenly excited, but when they had removed the coarse, decayed wrappings they found only an old violin.

"An old fiddle!" he said disgustedly.

"I don't know . . ." murmured Bridget uncertainly. "It could be valuable . . ."

"That?" he laughed incredulously. "It's dropping to pieces!" and he turned to examine the sliding panel. It was, indeed, a most ingenious piece of mechanism. He experimented and found its simple secret which had probably kept it undiscovered for centuries. Closed, it was undetectable and no scrutiny or tapping gave away the secret. To open it you just had to know it was there.

"What would they use this for?" he asked.

"The family priest," said Bridget. "It's a priest hole."

"Go on!" he said unbelievingly.

"There is a name inside," she murmured peering closely into the "f"-shaped holes on the violin. "I really can't make out the letters. They're faded."

"Here, let me look," he said abruptly. He snatched at the violin and began moving it backwards and forwards under the poor light of the single, naked electric light bulb hanging forlornly from the once magnificent centre-piece of the ceiling's elaborate stucco, squinting and peering into the sound holes in an endeavour to make sense of the all but obliterated lettering of the name within the body of the instrument.

"There's an 'S' . . . an 'A' . . . an 'L'. No! It's a 'T'. Then another 'A'. That's quite easy to see. The rest is blurry. Could be a 'U', but I think it's an 'N'. Yes! It's an 'N' all right!"

"Satan!" she said in surprise. "It looked longer than that."

"That's all I can see."

"Satan's violin! The Devil's violin!" she laughed. "Well, that's a find indeed!"

"I don't like the sound of that!" he exclaimed. The Devil was something he had learned to fear at an early age. He had been given to understand that the Devil roamed Soho in all sorts of guises. The Salvation Army preacher who led the band in Old Compton Street regularly every Sunday evening had said so, often enough—indeed every Sunday evening—ranting and raving and shouting about it until you had to believe, and he *had* believed.

He looked at the old violin in his hands with apprehension. It should

be destroyed. He was convinced of evil in it somehow. It was the Devil's violin. Maybe Satan himself had made it for some evil purpose. Who could say what sort of wickedness the music of such an instrument would conjure up out of hell to fill a man's soul with horror. "I think that violin is bad . . ." he insisted.

"Don't be silly, Vic," she said. "I'm going to put new strings on it and I'm going to play it. I'll bet it has a lovely tone. Those old violins always had."

"You can't play the violin!" he said incredulously.

"I can," she replied quietly. "There was a time when I . . . but no matter, let's forget it. I can play it, that's all."

"Not here, you won't!" he said.

"We'll see," she said defiantly, and because he didn't want another row on top of the other, and because the discovery of the priest hole pleased him, he gave in.

* * *

Days passed not uneventfully, but with that seeming nonchalance that hangs over Soho, like an aura. Danny was after him again—dissatisfied, anxious to show him who was boss. He knew the reason well enough. Why should he collect Danny's racing debts from shifty stall-holders in Berwick Street market or from Czech or Italian waiters in the stinking kitchens behind the posh restaurants? Danny was dissatisfied—so what? "Want to quit, boy?" Danny had asked in his soft way, while Archie fingered his razor in his fancy waistcoat pocket and Piggy Bacon slid his hand slowly to his back pocket. He'd had to play safe, but he had pride—that was the trouble, pride; and what the hell was the good of living if you hadn't pride to know you were better than most?

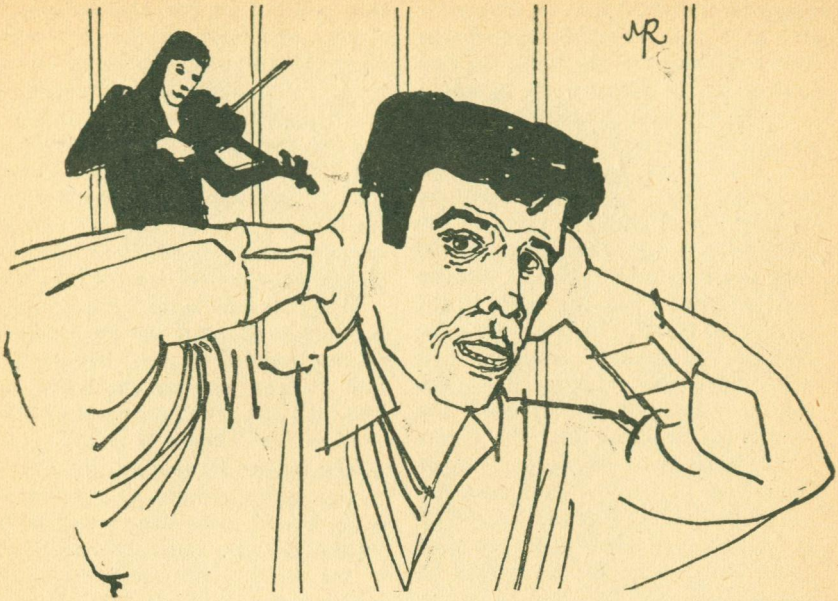
Then Bridget bought the new strings for the violin and new horsehair for the bow and he discovered a new confusion in his mind, for when she set the violin under her chin and drew the bow across the strings the most exquisite sound filled the tawdry room and yet to him it was only a wail of sorrow. To his awestruck senses it was like the cries of souls in hell. Before he could protest she had started a lovely extemporization, and though, vaguely, he recognized something extraordinary in the wilful notes, he trembled in a terrible revulsion.

"Stop it, Bridget! I can't bear it! Stop it!" he shouted. "It's devilish. It's playing hell with my nerves!"

"It's the Devil's violin, remember!" she bantered as she stopped playing, obedient to his terrified demand.

"Don't joke about such things," he remonstrated. "Get rid of the blasted thing, Bridget. It's wrong! It's evil!"

"Don't worry," she said ironically. "I won't play it here if you can't stand it, but I'm not getting rid of it for you or anybody." When he started to expostulate she interrupted hurriedly, "Oh, I won't play it where it will upset your precious nerves. I'll play it at 'The Shades of Hades'. They'll like it there. It's better than a guitar. It's a lovely instrument—Satan's or not—and I'll bet it's valuable, too. You don't often get a tone like this one has."



"Well, flog it, then!" he snarled. "Only get rid of it before I bust it up for you!"

"You're a fool, Vic," she said coolly. "I like this one and I'm sticking to it."

They quarrelled again after that and it ended in Bridget leaving the house in a tempestuous rage. Raging, he looked for something to vent his spite on. He kicked over the rusty coal-scuttle and then saw Phya Tak watching him complacently, yet warily, from under the television set.

"You——! This time you've had it!" he swore softly and picked up the heavy steel poker from the hearth. He moved cautiously towards the cat. He knew, too well, that Phya Tak had a cool and uncanny way of anticipating his malevolence. He moved stealthily, but, as usual, the cat understood and stepped easily and with exasperating assuredness out of his way. He lashed out viciously and missed. Phya Tak, tail erect and growling hate, leapt through the partly open window. Vic hurled the poker across the room in rage, and as though a devil of mischief had guided it, the heavy missile smashed into the screen of the television set.

"Oh, hell! No!" he shouted in a frenzy of impotence and frustration. "It's all that blasted cat . . ." Then, on second thoughts: "No! It's that Devil's violin!" It was something in the violin that caused all this evil. The Devil was in the thing. How did it come to be in the house? He now

regarded the priest hole in the panelling in a new light of superstitious awe and even the old house he had known for so many years began to lose its cheerful familiarity and a strange significance attached itself to the old rooms and staircases. He imagined some long-dead occupant making a pact with the Devil in the eerie, semi-gloom of candlelight in the very room he now occupied. Maybe the Devil had made the violin in exchange for a soul. The dark room, the decayed, blackened panelling and balustrades, the creaking stairs, the restless silence that pervaded the house, the shadows and the musty smell of age and death suddenly made themselves noticeable. He almost ran out of the house. When he looked up at the lighted window of his room he could have sworn for an instant he saw a malignant, sardonic devil-face looking down at him. When he realized it was Phya Tak on the window-ledge his fears increased if anything, for had he not heard somewhere that cats were creatures of Satan?

* * *

He wandered around the back alleys tangled between the old streets —Greek Street, Frith Street, Dean Street, alleys smelling of Marseilles or Piraeus, with their oily, sweetly repulsive tang of foreign foods. Olive, Mediterranean faces looked at him inscrutably, a barrel organ in a cul-de-sac gallivanted a tune with no meaning but only a rush of dancing feet and a torrent of hot sunshine over olive groves and vineyards.

He sat for a time in the little recreation ground in the shadow of St. Anne's odd Nijni Novgorod steeple. Everything was going wrong—Danny by Gaslight, Phya Tak, Bridget, the Devil himself were in conspiracy against him. Better to be dancing in the "Shades of Hades" with Bridget than sitting here moping, he thought. He thought also of the lights and the noise, the drinking and the white flesh of women in coffee bars and the clubs.

Was that Archie the Cosh grinning meaningly at him from the shadows of the bombed church? He dodged into the car park on the bomb site and then into the alleys again until he reached the "Shades of Hades".

The instant he reached the unprepossessing cellar door he knew something out of the ordinary was going on inside. There was a deeper rhythm in the air that throbbed out of the grilles at the pavement level. He was desperate to get out of the street with its menace of Danny by Gaslight and Archie the Cosh and Piggy Bacon, but he was appalled at what he found in the "Shades of Hades".

The red light, the wreathing smoke snaked under the low ceiling, the grimacing red devils painted on the walls, the heat coming at one in waves, the shrieking pony-tailed girls, the sensually squirming limbs were nothing unusual for the "Shades of Hades" or, indeed, for Soho, but somehow they were all accentuated and made revolting by the things Bridget was doing with the Devil's violin. She was playing wild and terrifying extemporizations with fantastic rhythms and the instrument filled the room with its beauty of sound

and devilish appeal. It drew the soul out of a man! And Bridget's face, too, was taut and brilliant with ecstasy . . . He saw faces streaming with sweat and all around limbs and bodies frenzied with inspiration. The Devil's violin had them all in its power—drunk with frenzy and lust for movement.

He left, buying a half-bottle of whisky in a pub on his way back to the flat and when Bridget came in at one o'clock in the morning he was drunkenly maundering in his chair over the dead ashes of the fire.

"Bridget!" he mumbled. "Why y'so late?"

"Working late," she said casually.

"At that lousy 'Shades of Hades'?"

Then he remembered why he had waited for her. The violin! It must be got rid of this very night.

"You got to burn that Devil's violin, Bridget," he said. "It's the Devil's violin. It said so inside, didn't it? And all the things that have happened since it came into our lives . . . I even tried to kill Phya Tak with the poker . . ."

Bridget, who up to that point had been listening with cynically humorous eyes, suddenly flared.

"You what?" she cried. "You little guttersnipe to attempt a thing like that on Phya Tak!"

She began a search, anxious for her Siamese, calling urgently on the staircase and at the window: "Phya Tak! Phya Tak!" Sometimes she threw angry, contemptuous glances in his direction. He felt unhappy. She hated him. What had he done to deserve hate? Hadn't he explained it was the Devil's violin that was responsible? And why all the fuss over a damned cat?

Then Phya Tak's low growl from the window answered Bridget's calling and he saw the tawny coat rippling with devilish grace and the amber eyes regarding him with cool yet highly-malevolent speculation. The tautly-pointed ears made the cat look like a little horned imp in the poor light and suddenly his self-pity turned to bitterness. He reached for the heavy poker with a quick, impetuous movement.

Bridget saw his intention and quickly scooped Phya Tak into her arms, but rage made him indifferent and unreasoning and he struck at Phya Tak. The heavy poker crashed into Bridget's temple. As she dropped to the floor, Phya Tak leapt for safety on to the window-ledge, growling and spitting in terror and fury.

Vic stared down at Bridget, horrified at what he had done. Was it an accident? Had he meant to strike Bridget in his rage? The poker slipped with a clatter out of his suddenly strengthless fingers. Why doesn't she move. She was too still . . .

"Bridget!" he whispered.

He tried to touch her, but couldn't. When, at last, he realized he had killed her, he began to whimper like a child. Hours later, it seemed, in his nightmare of fear and indecision, he came to his senses. It was her own fault that this had happened. If she had taken his advice and destroyed the Devil's violin . . . if only . . . He must get rid of her body.

He opened the priest hole and

dragged Bridget's body into the tiny space between the walls, placing the violin in the hole with her. Before he closed the panel he looked around to see if there was anything that might betray him—handbag, gloves, any small personal possession she normally carried about with her. No—there was nothing. He thought he heard Phya Tak's low, moaning purr, but he had no interest in the cat now.

He closed the panel and went to bed where he lay for a time making plans for a vague future, untrammelled by the machinations of Danny by Gaslight and Archie the Cosh and Piggy Bacon and Phya Tak and the Devil's violin. He would miss Bridget . . . that spoilt the savour of the planning. Others would miss her also, but it would be weeks before the police got on to him. Girls disappeared in Soho often enough—here today, gone tomorrow. He wasn't worried.

Yet he was a little surprised, he had to admit to himself, when he found two plain-clothes men on his doorstep not many days later.

"We're sorry to bother you, sir," said one of the plain-clothes men in friendly tones, "but we are looking into the disappearance of a young lady we understand you were acquainted with . . ."

"Oh, yes," he said easily. "You want to know when I saw her last an' all that stuff. I get it."

"Can we come in for a moment?" murmured one of them.

"Sure," he said. "Search the place if you like. I don't mind. That's what you want, isn't it?"

"I didn't say so. We just wanted to ask you a few questions, but we'll look around now you've been so kind as to give us your permission. She lived here, didn't she?"

"Oh yes, she lives here," he said. "Her things are here. I wondered where she'd got to, but then she often goes away for days without letting me know where she's gone. Why the panic?"

"You weren't unduly worried about her disappearance?"

"No. Why should I be? She'll turn up again as she always does."

"You think so?"

He knew it all. He had gone over it in his mind so often in the past few days. He knew all the answers. He showed them round the house and left them to poke and probe wherever they thought fit. He was laughing. It would take a smart copper to find the priest's hole.

He was lounging and smoking before the fire when they returned, dusty but convinced.

"Well, thanks," said the one who was evidently in charge. "Thanks for your co-operation, sir."

"Find any clues?" he asked insolently.

"Clues to what, sir."

"Her disappearance, of course. Where's she gone." Thought they'd catch him out with that one. He felt scornful of them—pull their legs a bit.

"What about secret panels and cupboards?" he laughed. "Tried tapping the walls?"

"Yes, we've tried."

"No luck?"

"No."

"Tried yelling for her? She might be hiding somewhere. In a secret priest hole, maybe."

"You try," said one indifferently.

"O.K.," he laughed, and he raised his voice and called jeeringly: "Bridget! Bridget! Where are you?"

Then thinly, distantly and eerily came the wailing agony of the Devil's violin—long, shivering notes of misery and pain. The voices of the damned in hell! That's what the Devil's violin played. He knew it! How could he have doubted that the Devil would claim his own in the end? He was overcome with horror, so unbelievably poignant, by that terrible and piteous agony of the violin that his face and hands became suddenly moist with the sweat of his fear. He stared incredulously and fearfully at the panel behind which the violin was wailing. He heard himself screaming. "The Devil's violin! Stop it! Stop it! I can't bear it. Bridget, stop it!"

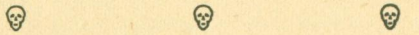
He tore at the panel and soundlessly it slid away to reveal the dead eyes of Bridget, the Devil's violin across her breast where he had laid it and Phya Tak, spitting, howling and emaciated, who leapt wildly from his mistress's cold, unresponsive arms for the window and the light and safety.

* * *

Much, much later, after a long period of dreamlike unreality, he heard Her Majesty's Counsel for the Prosecution ask him: "I put it to you that you knew the value of this violin? That, indeed, it was a Stradivarius and worth many thousands of pounds. That you murdered this unfortunate young woman for this valuable violin?"

"I didn't," he said flatly. "It was Satan's violin. It says so inside."

The learned, ironically-smiling Counsel peered casually into the "f"-shaped holes in the body of the violin. For a moment he hesitated, but at length he smiled superciliously and said: "We have an expert's opinion that despite the obliteration of some of the letters and parts of letters of the maker's signature within the body of the instrument, we can safely accept this is indeed a Stradivarius . . ."



TINY, WILLING HANDS

HARRY MANSFIELD

Illustrated by Jennifer Gordon

I REMEMBER waking suddenly in the darkness of that strange bedroom weighed down with a sense of deep sorrow and wondering why. There couldn't possibly be a reason except, perhaps, I was homesick, this being my first night away from Edinburgh and I just up from a sick-bed.

I felt bitterly cold, though Mrs. Ogilvie had, despite protests, piled blankets on me. I lay and stared almost fearfully into the velvety darkness, in which only the window showed a faint grey outline against the palpable gloom. It was the very dead of night.

Suddenly, out of the darkness, I heard a voice singing. Its very strangeness made me stiffen with fear and break into a damp sweat. My hair rose, my mouth became dry. It was all so eerie, so unreal. I knew the tune: it was an old Scots lament I had known since a child:

"When will ye come again,
My pretty Johnnie?
When will ye come again,
My sweet an' bonny?"

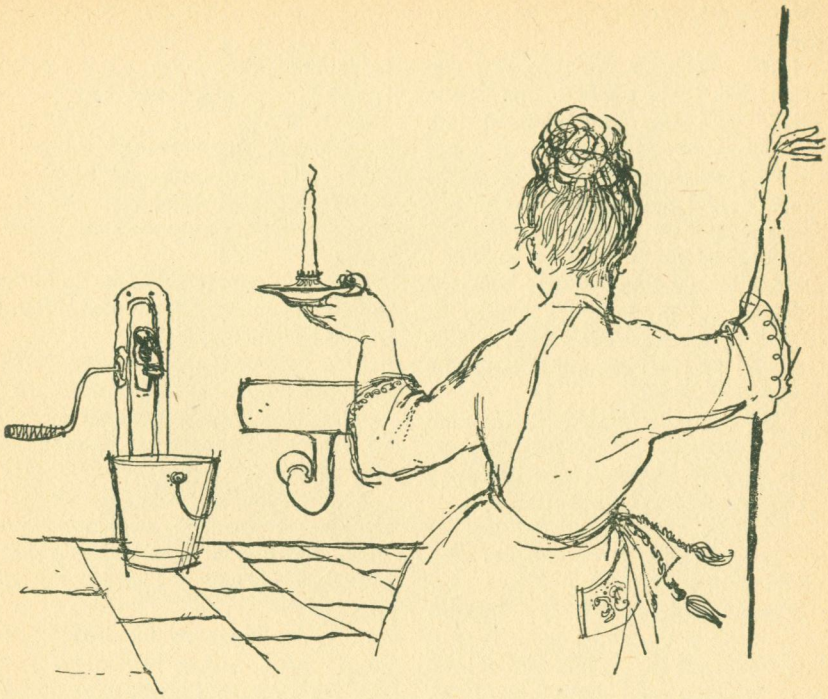
The singer's voice was low and soft, plaintive yet sweet—a young girl's voice, tuned more by nature than art. It seemed to come from somewhere below. Sound accompanied it, like that of sweeping and cleaning.

I lay there, staring up, tense and fearful. A wonder grew that there should be any sort of housework in the middle of the night. Granted I was in a strange house: the housekeeper I had first seen only twelve hours before—she might, perchance, have cranky ways of her own.

But then, of course, the voice could not belong to the housekeeper. Mrs. Ogilvie was buxom and quite middle-aged. This was a girl's voice—a girl of not more than twelve.

While I was turning all this over in my mind I heard the pump. There was no mistaking its oil-less squeak and the grunt as water gushed from its spout. I could stand no more. Fearful as I felt, I had to get up and find out. I crept hesitantly along the landing, my lighted candle making ghostly shadows leap out at me. Not a glimmer showed from below, yet now the pump sounded clear. I was hours, seemingly, going step by step down to the kitchen.

The pump stood in the far corner of the kitchen, its drain forming a depression in the flagged floor. I held my trembling candle so that its beam just reached the farthest side. Shining dish-covers each reflected a beam; my glance took in the roller-towel on the door, the yellow soap above the sink. I somehow didn't want to look at the



pump, put it off, as it were. When I did so, I almost fainted with horror. The pump handle was rising and falling, water flooding the bucket—and no one was there.

How I got back to my room I don't know. Sharp spasms of pain tore me, my blood ran cold. I know I was whimpering as I fell on to the bed and tore the blankets over my head.

Suddenly a tiny voice spoke close by—so close it might have been in the room.

"Oh, please, please, Aunt Alison, let me have my picture . . . Just my little picture. I'll no ask ony more, dear aunt. I'll do ev'rything you ask . . . I'll clean all the hoose again—but please, oh please, let me have my bonny picture."

There followed bitter sobs, rising from a heart near to breaking point. How long it lasted I could not tell, though eventually the house became quiet. As my own tremors faded, I might almost have persuaded myself that it was all a dream. It's easy to think your ears deceive you—it's certain your mind can play you tricks—but no, never your eyes. I shuddered again as I thought of the pump handle and glanced fearfully beyond

the narrow territory of the candlelight.

I felt miserably unhappy and disappointed. I had come to that peaceful, rather lonely place to recuperate —perhaps to write again if I felt strong enough. And yesterday afternoon, as the wheezy old taxi turned and chugged its way back to the distant station, my heart rose so that I almost sang. Away below was the village, roofs golden with lichen; behind lay moors rising in the distance to purple hills. Birds sang, the sky was clear.

Mrs. Ogilvie came out to greet me and I immediately took to her, so quiet spoken she was, and her smile going out and in so pleasant.

"Ye'll be Miss Anderson? I'm sae pleased to see ye. Come awa' in. Ye'll be likin' it fine here."

Recalling these, my first impressions, helped to calm me, so that at last I put out the candle and turned over. When I woke again it was light, and sunshine was streaming by my window. Down below, Mrs. Ogilvie moved softly about.

Memories of the night flooded back. At once, I began to try to reason out the completely improbable, hoping it would fit into something plausible. Daylight made it so hard not to be practicable and say it was all a dream. However, I still couldn't shake off what I had seen.

I decided not to say anything to Mrs. Ogilvie. After all, she might broach the subject herself once we were more acquainted.

"And did ye sleep weel?" she asked when she brought my breakfast—rather eagerly, I thought.

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Ogilvie, quite well," I answered glibly. "And I'm a light sleeper, too."

I couldn't help noticing her hands: fine, white they were, with long delicate fingers and well-kept nails—not hands to be doing a deal of housework.

"You must get up very early in the morning," I said. "Everywhere looks so spick and span."

Mrs. Ogilvie shook her head. "Och, no, Miss Anderson. I juist clean up a wee bit the while visitors are here. I no like to fash them wi' cleanin' an' such like."

I stood up to look at a framed sampler above the chimney-piece. "The house has been recently furnished as it is now?" I asked over my shoulder.

"Na, na, hoose an' furniture a' belonged Miss Alison McGregor . . . She deed, oh, fifty years ago—in the verra bed ye're sleepin' in. A fine auld leddy she were; kep' hersel' to hersel', she did. She lived here sin' she were a wee lass, ower eighty years."

I looked closer at the sampler. At the bottom was the simple statement: "Jean McGregor, aged eight." This was followed by the invariable theme of such painstaking efforts. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." The date was 1867.

"This Jean McGregor any relation?" I asked.

"Juist a wee lass Miss Alison adopted," was the brief answer. Mrs. Ogilvie bundled together the break-

fast things and disappeared into the kitchen.

I spent the morning getting accustomed to the place. In the afternoon I made my way village-wards to post a letter. The old postmistress glanced at me over spectacles set on a thin, hawk-like nose. "Ye're up at Miss McGregor's?"

"Uh, uh."

"It's a lonely hoose."

"Uh, uh, but I like it."

"Mrs. Ogilvie'll be lookin' after ye fine?"

I assured her I wished for nothing better.

"Ye sleep weel?" the old crone asked, her sharp eyes searching mine.

"So," I mused, "there *is* something odd up at the cottage." I lied convincingly and said yes, nothing short of a tempest ever woke me.

Returning across the heather, I kept turning over these few words in my mind. If I read them aright, then I had every right to be suspicious, not only of the house, but of its housekeeper as well.

A stone wall fenced off the garden from the surrounding moor. For the first time I noticed a corner, untidy and overgrown, screened by a straggling hedge from the house.

"Mrs. Ogilvie," I said as I drew

near, "why is that corner left so wild?"

"I dinna ken," she answered vaguely, avoiding my eyes.

Deliberately I walked across. When I turned, she was standing with one hand to her mouth, her eyes big with fear. At the risk of seeming rude, I said she should get the gardener to trim it up next time he came. She nodded dumbly and left me.

As night approached I grew convinced I shouldn't sleep. I prepared for wakefulness. I lay welcoming it, watching the soft changes in the grey, night sky. Then, before I knew it, I was asleep until the lark's song roused me, completely refreshed. At once my fears seemed silly and unfounded, no more than the effect of a fevered imagination.

There was a door next to my own on the landing. I felt drawn towards it, because it was the only one permanently closed. That morning, curiosity prompted me to try the handle. The door was locked. "Why shouldn't it be locked?" I thought; yet, at the same time I felt piqued. I mentioned the fact to the housekeeper, indifferent whether she thought me inquisitive or not.

"It were the wee lass's room," she said softly. "After she deed, Miss Alison locked it an' she niver entered it again. I no gang in me'sel'—except to dust, ye ken," she added hurriedly.

"May I see inside?" I asked.

"Weel—yes, I suppose ye can."

She spoke with little candour and went to fetch the key.

Never was a bleaker, more repellent room. Walls grey and stained with age, bare boards, a pallet bed, a wooden chair and a small table—and nothing else; yet all so very, very clean. I shuddered.

"Why is the place so—so like this?" I asked.

Mrs. Ogilvie for once seemed to be trying to out-face me. "Miss Alison wanted it like that."

"There isn't even a picture on the walls."

"She no believed in pictures. She was a verra strict, God-fearin' woman."

I nodded. Well I knew that dour, Puritan type.

"Leave the door unlocked, Mrs. Ogilvie," I pleaded. Despite my dislike, I felt a strange affinity for the pitifully bare room.

"It's agen the custom o' the hoose," came the brief answer. "Miss Alison wouldna' ha' sanctioned it."

"Did she say so in a will or something?"

"Na, but she wouldna' like it, I ween."

"But Miss McGregor's been dead, you say, these fifty years."

"Uh, uh, but she wouldna' ha' liked it."

I smiled. "What you mean is, you wouldn't like it, Mrs. Ogilvie. What are you afraid of? Surely not of a wee lass that . . ."

"That what?"

The woman turned on me, eyes darting with suspicion.

"Oh, nothing," I answered lightly. "Most old houses have ghosts of sorts. I just wondered—as you kept the door locked . . ."

The housekeeper veiled her eyes.

"Na, na, Miss Anderson, dinna fash yersel' aboot that. There's nae ghosties in this hoose."

That night I again heard the woeful little song. Again, tiny hands were busy all over the house, the pump clanked, the bucket brimmed over. There followed the bitter pleading I found so hard to bear.

"Oh, please, please, Aunt Alison, let me have my pretty picture . . . just my wee, wee picture. My darling mammy gave it me . . . Please, dear aunt, I'll do all you ask, only please give me back my picture."

With every sense alert, I heard a tiny movement in the adjoining room —her room. It was like a soft hand feeling over the face of the wall. I crept out of bed and tiptoed to the door.

"It's not there. I canna find my picture . . . Oh, Mamma, it's been ta'en, it's been ta'en," came softly like a succession of heartbreaks.

As I returned to bed, tears came unbidden to my eyes. How could I be fearful? Rather than that, I tended to feel angry. Mrs. Ogilvie should hear of this in the morning. Something had got to be done to end such pitiable sorrow, disembodied spirit or not. The poor wraith was not going to be forced to suffer till the end of time if I could do anything about it.

I so worked myself up that there was no more sleep for me that night. Long before dawn I was up and dressed. My fevered brain refused to be calmed: I could quarrel with the stones in the wall if need be.

"I've been most disturbed during the night," I said immediately I saw Mrs. Ogilvie.

Again the defiant look, though her hand rose in a sort of defensive movement as if she feared I should strike her. Her face went the colour of chalk.

"It's not the first time, either," I went on, giving her no chance to say a word. By the time I had finished she was in tears.

"I don't want to upset you," I said, "but I do think you should have given me some warning. You're running an awful risk, you know. What I heard and saw could easily have terrible consequences on a really nervous person."

"I ken that," she wailed. "I was hopeful ye'd sleep through it a'."

"The best thing you can do is to tell me all you know. Something's got to be done to put an end to it."

I sat down at the table. "Come, let's have breakfast. You can tell me after."

I kept watch on her, half afraid that she would use her distress as a means of avoiding saying too much. Twice I detected a covert glance when she thought I was not looking. At last she stopped her sobbing.

"Ye'll be wantin' to hear what I ken," she said, then added cautiously, "it's little mair than I tauld ye yestreen."

"I'm waiting," I said grimly.

"Ye see, Miss Alison had a sister. They were as diff'rent as—as satin fra sackcloth. Miss Alison was firm an'— an' unsmilin'. Miss Janet was fu' o' mirth an' happiness. When their mither deed, Alison, she tried hard to

bend her sister. She no succeeded; Janet runned aff wi' the dominie's son, awa' to Edinbro' where he was studyin' to be a doctor. After Jean were born he left her . . . Puir Janet, she wrote an' wrote to her sister. She begged to be let come awa' hame, but Miss Alison nae answered one o' her letters."

Mrs. Ogilvie paused and looked round fearfully.

"It were a' Miss Alison's fau't in the end—that dour an' hard she were. Puir Miss Janet was afeard to starve. An' she loved her wee babbie."

A blush spread from her neck upwards.

"Ye can guess, forbye, the life she were forced to live?"

I nodded.

"Not for lang, though, not for lang. She sune fell sick, puir soul, sick to death, an' when she knew it she wrote again an' begged Alison to tak' the bairn. Alison, she went up to Edinbro'. They do say she wouldna' speak wi' her sister but juist picked up the bairn an' went. She cam' awa' hame, an' Jean lived in the hoose six years."

"Alison was cruel to the child?"

"Na, na, juist firm, that's a'. She was sure the bairn was born in sin, an' she wouldn'a ha' toys or dolls or pictures in the hoose. 'Twas in the corner o' the garden she buried a' the gewgaws Jean's mither sent her. Not a mon i' the village'll put mattock or fork into it."

"What about the song, and the picture she continually asks for?"

"Ah, the sang. Her mither teached her the sang. Ay, an' Miss Alison would take the switch to the bairn to stop her singin' ungodly tunes. As for the picture, when she undressed her the first nicht she found it, a wee miniature, painted on ivory, o' the bairn when she were about four. Alison taked it awa' an' locked it up. An' when the bairn found it she taked it awa' an' selled it."

"What a wicked old woman!"

Mrs. Ogilvie shook her head. "It were juist her way o' bringin' up a bairn. Bairns should fear God an' respect their elders. Alison had to do mair wi' Jean. She had to drive oot the wickedness she'd been born to."

"Wickedness, my foot!" I exclaimed. "I suppose it paid her to work the poor little thing to death—like—like she does night after night now—for you."

Mrs. Ogilvie smirked. "Oh, aye, fra cellar to garret, evra' day. When she lay sick, the doctor man he tauld her aunt she'd been worked to death. Miss Alison turned him oot wi' a flea in's lug."

"And then?"

"Why, the bairn deed an' her spirit cam' back nicht after nicht till it drave Alison oot her min'. She'd aye been solitary, ye ken. Now she had cotter wi' nane. She traipsed the lang lane to kirk evra Sabbath till a week o' her death an' never let on."

I felt positively repulsed by the evil old creature and said so. However, when I mentioned that something should be done to lay the ghost, that was another kettle of fish altogether. Mrs. Ogilvie might dislike having her rest disturbed, she might lock the door and shiver with fright under her bedclothes, but familiarity had dulled

reaction. Moreover, the house being kept spotless without her lifting a finger, was to say the least, gratifying. My hints aroused no enthusiasm.

"There's naething ye can do," she said positively. "The Reverend McCraig, a gey learned mon he is, tried again an' again. Lord, the gran' prayers he uttered, richt there in Jean's room, an' a' to nae guid. Where he failed, I'm sure we puir women canna' succeed."

"I don't agree, Mrs. Ogilvie, and what's more, I'm having a try. I want to stay here, and I can't if my rest is to be broken. Either Jean goes or I go."

"A' weel, I wish ye evra success."

I looked at the woman hard as she rose from the table. Was there a glint of triumph in her eyes? I went to my room and wrote a short urgent letter to my sister in Edinburgh.

Two days later a small package arrived for me. It contained a small miniature I had bought at a country sale about three months before I had been taken ill. It was of that I had thought when I first heard Jean's pleading. The housekeeper's story had clinched my resolve to try whether this, placed in the bare room next to mine, would satisfy the unhappy phantom.

As night drew near it became hard to control my excitement. In the end I pretended a headache and went to my room.

I wouldn't undress, but pulled on a coat and sat by the window. Faint sounds rose from the village below, mingling with minute movements and twitterings of birds in the thatch.

The housekeeper went to bed: her lock clicked, a bolt slid into its socket. The air seemed to throb with the grandfather clock's ominous tick. I must have dozed off, because I was suddenly aware of sounds for which I had been waiting. The night, too, had become cold with a clammy cold. Faced with necessity, my resolution dripped from me. My throat throbbed frantically: when I got to my feet, my legs trembled. I had to grit my teeth to stop them from chattering while I picked up the miniature with palsied hands.

The song was reaching its climax. Now, if ever, I must be hanging the picture on the wall. I felt forward, hands outstretched till I touched the wall. As I hung the miniature on a nail, its frame pattered against the wood. In a voice so faint I hardly recognized it as my own I murmured: "There, Jean darling, your picture's come back to you."

I swear I heard a gentle patter of feet, an intake of breath, a happy gasp of joy. I dared not move, for movement seemed vibrant around me. At last a wee, small voice spoke close to my ear.

"Oh, thank, you, thank you, Mummy darling."

Two hands, soft as a dream, stroked my face and, as I bent forward, I felt the brush of a light kiss. At that moment the night grew warm, filled with silence and peace.

"Miss Alison'ld no agree," was the only comment from Mrs. Ogilvie next morning. She would have said more, but quailed before my gaze and bustled off to her duties. She notice-

ably soured towards me and, had she dared, would have sent me packing.

Though Jean's unquiet spirit came near no more, Mrs. Ogilvie still had her haunted look. It was from the village girl that now came to help that I learned a strange fact. At first I could hardly believe it, though later I was able to see how easily it could account for the fear that still cloaked the house. Before her marriage, Mrs. Ogilvie was a McGregor. Miss Alison had once been in love with a soldier. He deserted her, leaving her with a wee baby that had been put out to foster-parents. Later, when her own sister eloped, Alison poured all the gall of her own warped bitterness upon her.

Mrs. Ogilvie was Alison's grandchild. Naturally she knew this, as well as she knew the threat contained in the second commandment—that about visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children—accounted for the woman's uncertainty of mind.

Summer days slipped slowly by, and, though I gained in health, peace of mind still escaped me. Dislike had grown into hate: hardly a word passed Mrs. Ogilvie's lips from one day to the next. Only my own dogged persistence kept me there. Moreover, while I stayed on, Jeannie's picture continued to hang on the bare wall of that tiny room.

One morning in July something prompted me to find out more about the miniature. I took it from its nail and detached the faded velvet backing. Beneath were two pieces of yellowed newspaper, behind them the reverse of the ivory. On this was an inscription in a small, neat hand:

"Jeannie McGregor, 1863. David Stewart pinxit."

I sat stunned; the coincidence staggered me. I looked at the little face, so vivid, so tender with young life—and wondered. Surely Providence had guided me from the moment I had bought the miniature. Perhaps Jeannie's task was yet unfinished.

That night clouds rolled rapidly up and hung like curtains from hill to hill, charging the air with a clinging clamminess, till every blade of grass, every leaf and flower hung heavy with moisture. Lightning played incessantly and continuous thunder sounded like far-off artillery fire.

Mrs. Ogilvie was out of sorts. For long she sat silent and glowering, "gathering her brows like a gathering storm" till a sudden vivid flash made her screech and throw her apron over her head.

"Oh, no, Miss Anderson, what shall we do?"

"Do!" I exclaimed, angered by such ridiculous terror. "Why, sit it out till bedtime and then get some sleep."

"But I juist darena' gae to sleep wi'oot shuttin' an' barrin' ma door," she wailed. "An' wi' sic' an eldrich nicht, I darna' be alane."

"Nonsense," I muttered uncertainly, because her fear was communicating itself to me and I found the palms of my hands growing moist with sweat. "Come, Mary," I said to myself, "you've never been cowed by a thunder-storm in your life."

Aloud I said, "Surely, Mrs. Ogilvie,

there's no need to lock your door. Leave it open. I'll do the same, and then, if you want me, I'll come."

Still rocking herself in a strange agony of torment she dropped the apron. Under her dank hair her brows were furrowed, her cheeks drawn and livid. But now her eyes flashed fire, her frenzied fear seemed gone. Her lips drew back and her teeth clenched.

"Yes," she hissed between sharp intakes of breath, " 'twas this nicht—this nicht, ye ken—that Jeannie deed. Quick, we'll awa' to bed, Miss Anderson, we'll awa' to bed. You'll no close your door . . . No, ye'll no close the door—an'—an' I'll feel safe."

She seized my hand in a claw-like grasp and literally dragged me to my feet and up the stairs. Though thunder still rolled, she never left me until I reached my room.

"You'll no bar the door?" were her last anxious words as she turned away, hey eyes still two live coals of fire.

I was by now so apprehensive I determined not to undress, but lay on the bed and pulled the eiderdown over me. The storm cleared slowly, a gentle breeze scattered heavy drops from the leaves, a few stars appeared.

I must have dropped off for some seconds because I suddenly became aware of the last strokes of twelve and knew, too, that every nerve in my body was tingling. Something was in the room. Stealthily, intangible, with horrid certainty it was approaching the bed. Its reality came between me and the window. I held my breath, my flesh crawling with terror. My scalp moved, sharp death-like pains seized me. I tried to shriek with all my strength, but I could only croak.

Like a snake's hiss, a voice, hardly recognizable as the housekeeper's, breathed close to my ear. I was able faintly to make out the contours of her face, now twisted and distorted by a mad hatred. Her hands already felt for my throat.

"Ye thought to come between me an' Jeannie. Ye thought ye'd be kind an' lay the puir ghostie . . . Little ye ken o' the powers o' darkness or ye wouldna' be pitting your puny min' agen' them—or me."

I struggled weakly against the woman, but her hands tore my face and forced me back. Sure of herself, she drew from her pocket the miniature and held it before my eyes.

"What'll your pretty picture do for ye now? Ye thought I was afeard. Why should I be afeard of my ain familiar? Ha, ha! That makes ye greet . . . Jeannie's ma familiar, I tell ye—ma ain familiar. Ye beldame, she's thirstin' for your blood."

She cast the picture behind her and again her hands tore at my throat. The maniacal eyes, the bared teeth, sharp as an animal's, drew close once more. The slight respite had, however, been sufficient for me to regain my nerve a little. With an access of strength I never thought I had, I leapt up, almost overthrowing the housekeeper, powerful though she was. I reached the door and flew down the stairs, terror-stricken.

Frenziedly I tore open the outer door and fled into the night. Sharp stones tore my feet, but the pain

was as nothing compared with the fear that drove me forward. However fast I ran, the mad creature gained upon me with every step. Soon I was stumbling, swaying, gripped with exhaustion: every breath tore me like a knife.

My foot hit a rock and I fell heavily. The woman gave a shriek of triumph and I heard her surge forward. My last moment had come. I twisted my lips in an attempt to pray, and found myself forming the words of Jeannie's song:

"When will ye come again,
My pretty Johnnie?"

The footsteps stopped abruptly. I could hear nothing but heavy breathing, so close it seemed as if she was hanging over me. Suddenly the air was rent with horrifying screams. They seemed to divide the soul from the body and leave the flesh a palpitating mass. Slowly they subsided to a throbbing moan, pitiful to hear. Painfully I struggled to my feet and staggered towards the sound. The woman lay in a hollow, breathing as if in a fit. As I watched her, she gave an awful shudder and, like a puff, life passed from her.

At that same moment, a voice, small as the night breeze, seemed to murmur close to my ear. A soft finger touched my cheek.

"She's no more, dear mammy, no more . . . Jeannie's free at last. Good night, mammy dear. Good night."

Calm, calm me more! nor let me die
Before I have begun to live.

MATTHEW ARNOLD.

"SMITH, MARK II"

JONATHAN WOOD

Illustrated by the Author

A FRIEND OF MINE named Grieve was one of the two principal characters in this sinister adventure. The other was a slight acquaintance: not slight enough, however, to be entirely satisfactory, to my way of thinking.

The whole affair serves as a disquieting object-lesson in manual dexterity and greed: both features, I may say, that were displayed to excess in the personality of George Grieve.

George worked for a good many years as an electrical engineer. During his short spells in prison his ability in that direction proved useful to the upkeep of Wandsworth. He really was a brilliant technician; inventive, too, and temperamental to a degree. These temperamental displays had cost him many a good well-paid job, but it didn't seem to worry the fellow —although at the time I knew him his slight prison record was beginning to counteract his top-rank qualifications.

So, at the beginning of this story, I found him down on his luck. Living on "capital" he was, and earning his rent money by addressing envelopes. During a slack spell at the bar one evening I got deep into conversation with him.

I wiped down the bar, bought him a drink with some loose change, pushed it over to him and asked how long he expected to muddle along in the way he tried at present.

"My very good friend," he said. "Cheers. Hearken unto me"—a tall, theatrical-mannered man, this Grieve, with a tight jaw like a rabbit trap and thick, distorting spectacles— "You don't imagine for a moment that I address these envelopes by hand?"

He paused for the fullest effect, and the loungers at the bar drew away uneasily.

"No, sir. Ever hear of the old teletype machine?"

I said yes, and he said, "You come round to my place tomorrow evening and I'll show you the works; and can you lend me two quid till then?"

I found myself slipping him four ten-bob notes, and he was off without another word.

After closing time the following night, there was Grieve hanging around while I swept out the saloon, then the two of us walked through the rain to his lodgings.

He hadn't been pulling my leg: on a trestle table in his makeshift workshop, there it was, twice the size of a typewriter with twice as many rollers, purring away as it performed, the blank envelopes sliding smoothly through the rollers from behind and appearing completed, mounting in a tidy pile in a tray.

"It's a converted teleprinting machine," said Grieve, the proud parent. "No ticker-tape here, though. It'll take paper up to double-quarto. But wait, you can't see the real works until I switch it off." He disconnected it from the mains, and showed me its innards: a tightly packed looping landscape of resistances and wire, and its centre the dead fish-eye of an oscilloscope.

Closing it up again, he lifted the pile of completed envelopes in his large hands and flicked through them like an expert dealer.

"Clear-cut, beautifully spaced, and correct," he said, slipping them into a cardboard box. "Four times as fast as by hand. Now watch this—this is what really matters."

Setting the motor whirring again, he jacked into the rear the cable of a small hand-microphone, and, flicking its base-switch with his thumb, slid a fresh envelope into the rollers. Whistling through his three or four teeth into the microphone, he hesitated and then spoke a few words.

It might have been the last lines of "Kubla Khan" or the opening words of "Eskimo Nell", I don't remember, but, believe you me, when that envelope came out into the tray there were words neatly printed on it—the words he had just recited, beneath a row of zig-zagging lines that represented his raucous whistling.

Standing there in the glare of the powerful electric light, I gazed closely at the scrap of paper, while Grieve explained in flabbergasting technical terms how each phrase he uttered was picked up by the oscilloscope and transmitted to the keys which printed the words, each key having upon it a phonetic phrase in type, etc, etc. . . . It was a bit beyond me, though I could see that once or twice the machine had produced some pretty odd spelling.

Anyway, I was impressed, and told him that I was sure there'd be a market for that sort of thing and all that, because I didn't think for a moment that the whole thing might be a fake.

He smiled, crumpled the envelope up, threw it away and began to polish his glasses, his screwed-up eyes half their usual size.

"Not as fast as a high-speed press," he said modestly, "but quite sufficient. Under supervision, it'll address envelopes up to the rate of twenty-eight a minute, provided the address is repeated."

"And when not under supervision?" I inquired jokingly, at which he became angry and showed me out into the rain.

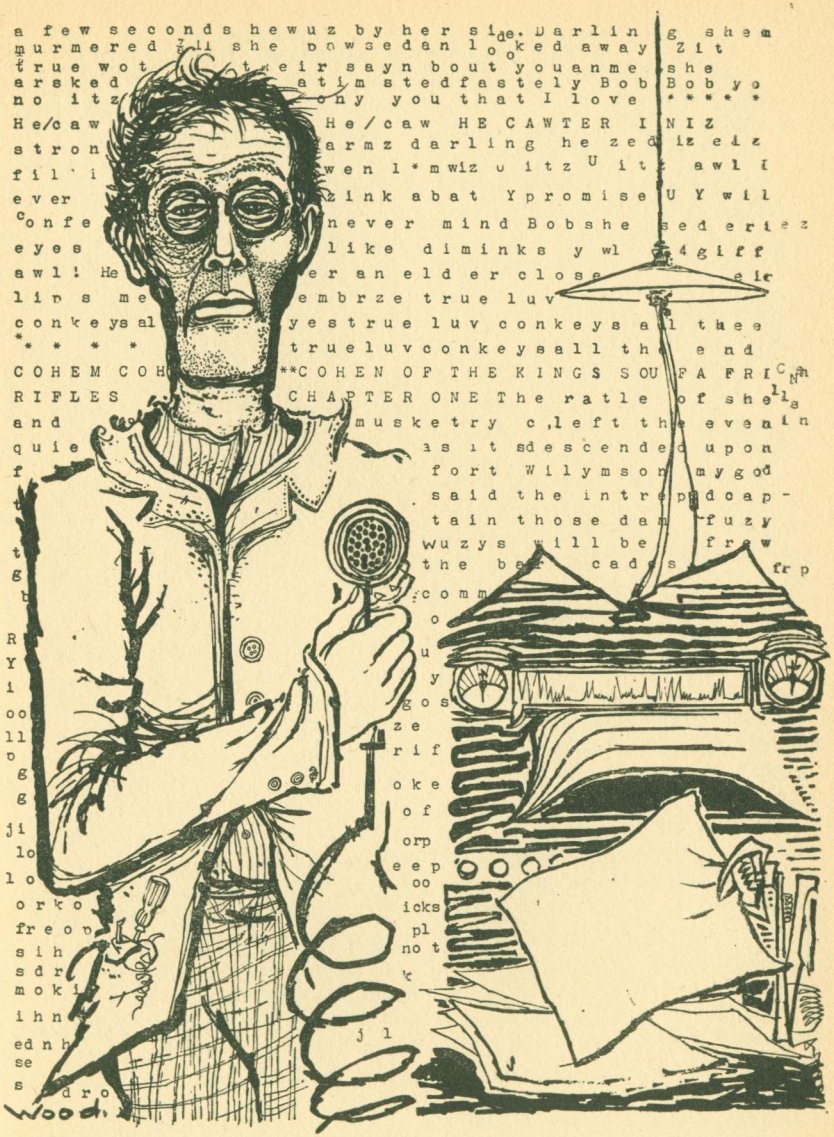
* * *

It was some weeks before I saw him again in the bar.

"How's business, John?" he said: pale-faced tonight and with a delicate stubble of brindled beard across his jaws.

I gave him his drink, and suggested something to eat—he looked ravenous.

"I've been working forty-eight hours non-stop," he said, pulling down the lower lids of his eyes with his forefinger. I turned away, wincing.



Scattering crumbs from his cheese roll all over the bar, he stuffed his mouth full and spoke thence intermittently.

"Progress, John. Progress like you never see. I'm working on Mark II, now. Mark II of the Addresser. I've bought an ex-War Department Teleprinter and a Grundig on the never-never. It's all assembled but it's a bastard to get running smoothly. I'll let you have a look-see when."

He looked longingly at the cheese rolls in the display case, and, fake or no fake, I gave him three more which he wolfed in a brief space of time.

Then he pulled a four-fold folded scrap of blue-paper from his jacket pocket and waved it in front of me.

"We'll be partners, you and I," he said. "Smith'll write the stories, I'll think 'em up and you be business manager. How about that?"

"Who the hell's Smith?" I said.

I thought, you see, that he was off on another tack, that wild-eyed, incomprehensible genius. I pictured "Smith" as some sack-trousered, bearded hack, some "mute inglorious Dickens" dredged up from the depths by Grieve in his wanderings.

No. Grieve indicated the scrap of blueprint. "This is Smith, here. He's very pleased to meet you. 'Smith Mark II!' You and 'Smith Mark I' have already met. Compared with Mark II it's a moron, that little addressing machine. Get set for some interesting developments."

It would take too long to describe the tortuous maze of intricacies which resulted in the second of Grieve's fantastic machines appearing on this unprepared and oblivious earth; so I'll skip the details and tell you how, three months later, I stood fascinated as I watched the five-foot-tall teleprinting machine belch out ream after ream of foolscap paper—romance and detective stories, Westerns, war stories, all complete, the skeleton plot dictated by Grieve into that little hand-microphone, and expanded, embellished and finished, without a trace of imagination, feeling or even talent (but one could hardly expect that from a machine) but with numerous and bizarre spelling errors, by Smith Mark II, the Smith of Smiths.

What's more, only half were rejected by the publishers of such things, to which they were offered.

Grieve's invitation to me to become co-partner was, of course, bar-fly's hot air, his denial of it, temperament; I heard no more about it. When he began to do well publishing his own products, and when he got the machine churning out obscene books and smutty pamphlets, I was relieved to be able to keep at a safe distance.

* * *

One evening, a year or so later, Grieve came rushing into the bar, looking, as they say, as though he didn't know whether to laugh or cry, and ordered a stiff whisky, and another, and another.

"You won't believe it when I tell you, John," he gasped, wiping his eyes. "Nobody else does. They think I'm a nutter." He downed his third whisky and pleaded for another, and a sympathetic ear.

I got him his drink and dealt with the other orders before listening.

"I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't seen it with me own eyes," said Grieve in a low voice. "It's written a novel. I came in this afternoon after I'd been to the Labour Exchange and heard the motor running. I must have left it on when I went out. I've never done that before. And when I got into the workshop I see a length of foolscap paper is sliding out of the machine as usual, but this time with nobody there to operate it."

I tried to look understanding.

"I switch the light on and walk over to it and the paper comes to an end and slides into the tray and the little arm-lever comes down quietly and folds it and then moves back into place, and the machine seems to relax. I read the papers and there's about a hundred and fifty of 'em printed and, as God's my witness, it's a novel! Eight chapters! I swear to you that as I'm standing at this bar with an empty glass in my hand. Book one of a full-length novel and it's written it by itself!"

I steadied his glass and poured him a stiff one, at the same time trying to keep a straight face. The poor fellow's phizzog was a perfect picture of bewilderment, doubt and misery.

"Let's see the manuscript," I said.

Grieve looked around furtively as though he half-suspected that Smith Mark II might have followed him into the bar. Then he extracted a rolled pile of foolscap sheets from his raincoat pocket and thrust them across the bar surreptitiously.

I glanced through the "novel". In the main, it was rubbish: gleanings from a hundred sentimental boy-meets-girl, girl-meets-rival, boy-meets-rival, boy-gets-girl books with paper backs, naïve and simple—it seemed that even if this machine had a mind of its own it'd still got a lot to learn. But, every now and again, amidst the wildly confident spelling mistakes, there crept out a phrase that read in an odd way, a strangely unfamiliar way, and after Grieve had tottered out with his bundle of papers into the ugly night, I found myself muttering those strange phrases over and over to myself as I piled up the chairs and swept the deserted saloon.

As I cleared stools from the side of the bar, I saw that a small heap of addressed envelopes had slipped down underfoot near where Grieve had been perched. He must have meant to post them on the way home: some were addressed in his own handwriting, some with printed addresses. They were all stamped, and I picked them up and dropped them in at the G.P.O. on the way back from work.

* * *

I didn't see Grieve for several months after this, and when he did come into the bar I didn't recognize him. He was wearing a double-breasted tartan waistcoat, tan shoes, a brand new suit and a string tie. He looked well, and well-fed. He was growing a moustache.

He ordered a glass of cider and took great dramatic sips from it, while the loafers at the bar, after a few incredulous stares, reseated them-

selves and proceeded to take the mickey out of him.

"Last time I saw you, you were in a bad way," I reminded him, but he laughed it off.

"Didn't know whether I was on me head or me heels. But I'm sitting pretty now. As for Smith," he added, with a knowing wink, "he's in love."

Up the twist, I thought, and made sure there was assistance available before I ventured near him again.

"It's a funny business," he resumed. "A few days after I saw you last, I found some electrical equipment arriving 'Cash-on-Delivery' at my place. Stuff I'd never even heard of! Some extraordinary things. The invoice came—the order sheets had been signed with a forgery of my own name. Guess who did that? Any road, I found that the new stuff worked wonders with the equipment when fitted. Trebled the speed of production and Smith sang like a top in third gear. I burned his novel, of course: in fact, I've got him off the fiction business altogether—I've got him drawing maps now. And darned good maps they are. He can copy a full-size Ordnance Survey in ten minutes."

"What's this you were telling me when you came in?"

"That? Oh, yes, well, one evening I gave Smith a small coastal survey job to do, as I'd a minute to spare. He finishes it in record time and I slips it into the drying room, leaving the motor still running. When I get back to the workroom, I see Smith hard at it with a small piece of blue-tinted paper. When he hears me coming he swiftly puts out his little arm-lever and snatches the paper out of the rollers and tries to hide it. Too late: I get over to the mains and cut the current. He's crumpled the paper up, but it's readable even though the ink's smudged. Look."

On the creased, crumpled scrap of Kingston Bond I read the words:

"To Miss Pamela Goulden, 12A, Clarendon Way, S.W.1.

"Dear Pamela—Would you please like to come to lunch——"

"And there I stopped it," said Grieve. (He is certainly mad, I thought.) "Have *you* ever heard of the girl?"

Yes, I had. The daughter of a fishmonger a couple of streets away. A little crab-legged girl, quite pretty, who tottered along with her friends in too-high-heeled shoes and flashed mascara-covered eyelashes at the yobbos of Victoria. (What on earth is he playing at, I thought, and resolved to see the matter through.)

"Only thing to do," I said jestingly, "is to let them meet; introduce 'em: just for a joke! When she turns him down, as she's bound to, you'll have a very docile machine on your hands." (Humour him, I thought, humour him, and keep his hands off the silverware.)

"I'll do that," agreed Grieve, enlightened. "That's what I'll do: bring them together; but I've got to hurry before the shops close, got to get some fuse wire—they'll still be open?"

"No," I said. "It's Thursday. They'll all be closed."

A look of intense worry covered Grieve's face. Grieving, he muttered,

"Smithy'll be mad. His locomotion wheels are giving him trouble, and he can get very edgy, very nasty at times."

The blokes at the bar continued to take the mickey out of him as he crossed the room and walked out. I refrained from joining their laughter. I didn't like the looks of things. But what could I do?

Never again did I see Grieve in person, but I saw his photograph on the front page of all the popular papers. In brief, the headlines ran: "Crime Passionelle in Pimlico?" "Engineer Arrested on Charges of Murder"; "Murdered Fishmonger Father"; "Lured Man to Death"; "Secret Love Affair Cause of Killing"; "Murder Weapon Undiscovered"; "40-year-old Engineer Denies All."

From that, I think you can guess, as I did, what happened.

Grieve invites Miss Gouden to tea to meet his protegé, Smith Mark II, as might be expected. Did Smith Mark II print an indecent suggestion, or did the girl take against the machine from the start? Meantime the father of the girl, old Goulden, the bad-tempered fishmonger, receives typed anonymous letters warning him to keep an eye on the relations of his daughter and a certain thick-lensed engineer living in the next street. He questions his daughter, who has walked out of Grieve's house in a state bordering on hysterics, the truth comes out, and the old man, doing his nut with rage and apprehension, calls on Grieve that evening, and the next morning is found by the police in a dustbin in the rear area of Grieve's house, severely done in.

It's an open-and-shut case. Is Grieve mad? He makes the most fantastic claims: says a machine did it; claims it was even the machine that wrote the anonymous letters; says it was a machine he made himself—we've heard that tale before.

There's no sign of a machine in the house and he seems even to have got rid of his car.

Anyway, some minor temperamental incidents in the past, both in and out of Wormwood Scrubs and Wandsworth, render poor old Grieve past an Appeal. "He protested his innocence to the last" was one headline.

* * *

A few months after poor old Grieve's conviction and execution there was another minor sensation. The girl in the case, Miss Pamela Goulden, went missing. Her friends say that she had gone out to meet a friend in a fast car: someone, they believed, she had never previously met in person, but had come to know through a correspondence of love-letters typed by someone who had signed himself "Yowr Dreamm-Mann For Awl Time".

Her handbag containing a few of the letters was found on the pavement, but she was never seen again.

DAVEY

ROBERT BLAKE

Illustrated by Leonard Breach

THE TREES AND THE cottages, the thin spirals of smoke from the chimneys and the purple moorland beyond were just as I remembered. From what I could see from the platform, the old place hadn't changed at all. There was nobody to meet me, but then I hadn't been able to let them know the time of the train. Old Willis, the porter—as unchangeable as the hills—took my ticket and at first he didn't know me.

"Lovely morning, Willis," I said. "And how's the lumbago?"

Then he did recognize me. "It's Master Roger," said he. "Only it'd better be Mr. Milton now, I suppose." And then, as we shook hands, "And 'ow long will it be?"

Coming down in the train I had been totting the years since I last came to Briar Hill, and the figures were still fresh in my mind.

"Four years since I was last here," I said. "Nine altogether since I left home."

"Ay," he brooded. "That's 'ow time

does go. They'll be pleased to see you. But you've changed—tall, now, like your father." He took the case from my fingers. "Leave this in the office —I'll get it sent down for you later."

We stood together at the top of the slope; the sun was warm, the grey and red roofs sparkled. The streets looked clean and newly scrubbed; the shops neat and bright.

"It doesn't change much," I told him.

"Briar Hill? Change?" He seemed almost surprised at my remark. "No. . . . Still much as I remember it when I was a kid. You'll be married now, Mr. Milton?"

"Not yet," I replied. "But very soon, I hope. That's one reason why I've come back; I'd like to settle down here again."

"It's nice to see old faces coming back," Willis said, and blew his nose with a certain amount of emotion. I left him and set off on the fifteen-minute walk to the white-fronted cottage with the lavender bushes in the front garden and the lean-to carpenter's shop at the side.

When I'd been young I'd wanted to become a carpenter like father, but he wasn't keen on the idea. He said that it was a dying craft in the village. It had really been his idea that I leave home and try my luck elsewhere. And, as usual, he had been right. He'd found a job for me with a shipping firm in London, and I'd left home when I was only fifteen.

I could hear the sound of hammering coming from the open door of the workshop and I went to stand just inside. The floor was littered with soft coils of wood shavings, the air was clean with the tang of freshly-sawn wood. Busy at his work, he didn't notice me at first. Like the village, he seemed ageless; tall and angular, and with a narrow, sensitive face, his eyes a faded pale blue.

Then he saw me and we talked together. I hoisted myself to the top of the scarred bench and he lit his pipe.

I told him about my prospects; how I was hoping to be married and that I wanted to settle in the village. He was pleased, as I had known he would be, and was choosing houses for me in the same breath. There was a council house empty, and a cottage.

"But you'll want something better than that."

Then he snapped his fingers, telling me that he knew of just the place . . . "Barn Close—the old woman died only a short time ago and the house was put up for sale this week. Mind you, it's been neglected; she was as mean as they come—hadn't spent a penny on it in years. There's a lot'll want doing to it, but it should come up nice." He glanced sideways at me, smiling a little. "Remember Miss Lester?"

And then the years slipped away and I was a schoolboy again. Lanky, as I remember, and inclined to overgrow my strength. Wearing a much-darned brown pullover and my first long trousers. I was back in the little clearing in the woods and was talking to Davey.

Davey; frail and slender with a waxy, transparent skin. Flaxen hair that seemed to float about the sensitive triangular face; huge pools of

eyes that always seemed to stare.

I can't recall how he was dressed—only the pale shadow of his face comes back to me; and even those fragile outlines are time-blurred and hazy, tending to break and melt when I try to bring them to mind.

And when I told people about him, they wouldn't believe me. . . . Mother in particular insisted that it was all my imagination—that there was no such boy. . .

* * *

It was the summer holiday from school and I had gone seeking acorns in the woods. He was sitting alone under a tree, dappled with soft patches of golden sunlight filtered by the green trellis of branches.

"What are you doing?" I asked, and he looked up fearfully, startled by my silent approach. "Nothing," he said defensively.

I took out my catapult and made a great thing of looking for acorns. Then I shot one or two high into the branches and he looked on enviously.

"Bet you can't shoot as high as me," I boasted, and he took the weapon in wondering fingers that showed he'd never handled such a thing before.

So I taught him the way of it and he told me his name was Davey and that he lived with his aunt in the house called Barn Close. He was supposed to be playing in the garden but he'd found a way through the hedge and into the moorland. Then he'd made his way to the woods, "because I wanted to see what it was like under the trees."

"What school d'you go to?" I asked next.

"School?" He shook his head. "I don't go to school. Aunt Dora teaches me some; she says I'm not well enough to go to a proper school."

I liked the sound of that, it struck me as being an excellent arrangement. "Well, what d'you do with yourself all day?"

"I just play about." He concentrated on aiming an acorn. "I'm supposed to stay in the garden, but it's lonely with no one to talk to."

"I don't think I've seen you before," I said. "I mean in the village.'

"Aunt Dora never takes me out with her," he explained. "She says she doesn't want me to mix with the village children."

Then he started to tell me about how long he'd been living with his aunt and what it had been like before. But, intent on playing, I paid scant attention.

We played together again that same afternoon. Most of my usual friends were away on holiday and I was glad of any companionship that I could find. I remember I showed off a little—flaunting my superior years; I was eleven at the time, and Davey seemed so much younger.

The next day he took me to the back of the garden to show me proudly how he made his way through the hedge. It was a tall and dense privet barrier, but he had found a gap near the ground.

"We'll have to watch she doesn't see us," he whispered urgently.

I shuddered deliciously. "Are you scared of her?"

He frowned with thought. "She's not exactly cruel," he said slowly, as though weighing the whole thing up for the first time. "She hits me sometimes and she's always talking about how much money it takes to keep me in clothes an' food. I don't think she likes me; sometimes, when she thinks I'm not looking, she stares . . . Like once when I was playing in the garden and I looked up an' there she was at the window, peeping over the flowers. She looked different—her eyes were sort of half closed and her mouth was sucked in . . . you know? An' then there was the time I fell down the stairs . . ."

"Yes," I encouraged.

"I slipped on the landing; the tacks must've come out of the mat. I nearly fell down the stairs only I managed to hold on to the banister. She was awful annoyed that time; she said I was clumsy, an' that I'd scratched her polish."

"It's not a very good garden," I told him, peering through the branches.

It was small and not the sort of garden a boy could play in. Except for three narrow rose-beds it was all crazy-paved with yellow, sandy slabs. A step ran the width and led up to a low terrace. There were three windows—the centre one as big as a shop window, and in front of each was a window-box full of flowers.

As we peeped through the hedge, Aunt Dora came out on the terrace. She was tall and very thin, so that her dress, made of some thick, drab brown material, was angled into painful shapes at shoulder and hip. Her face was sunken and yellowish and there was grey hair strained back into an untidy bun.

"I'd better slip inside," Davey breathed fearfully.

I turned to speak, but he had gone. It was as if the ground had opened and swallowed him.

That evening, for something to say, I think, Father asked me what I'd been doing with myself all day. I told him about Davey.

"Davey?" he said. "I don't think I've heard you mention that name before."

Intent on my supper, I explained briefly how we had played together in the woods. I told him about Aunt Dora and how she wasn't a bit like my aunts and was cruel. . . . I gloated a little about her cruelty, I'm afraid; it was something worth talking about.

"Barn Close?" Father puzzled. "That'll be Miss Lester. But surely she doesn't have anyone living with her?"

"I've certainly never seen a child there," Mother put in.

"She won't let him out much," I explained. "And he doesn't go to school, neither. I think he must be sick."

"And you say you've played together in the woods?" Father wanted to know. "You're sure? I mean, you're not making this up?"

I was vehement in my denials, but Mother set her mouth and shook her head at Father. Then they said that Davey was just my imagination—that I must learn not to confuse make-believe with reality. When I still per-

sisted, they got annoyed, and I went to bed with my ears burning.

But I forgot all about that the next day. Davey was waiting in the clearing, gathering acorns in a businesslike way and stuffing his pockets with them. "Ready for this afternoon," he explained in his soft, trembly voice. There was a scrape on his forehead, with dried blood and signs of bruising. I touched it, finding the flesh cold to my fingers, asking what had happened.

"It was only an old picture that fell," he said lightly. "The big one at the top of the stairs. The glass all got broke and she said it was my fault. She said I'd got to stay indoors, but there's a little window in the pantry and when she wasn't looking I climbed out."

It started to drizzle later. Davey said, reluctantly, that he daren't get wet and had better go. I went with him to the bottom of the garden and we talked together in the shelter of the hedge.

I asked him if his head was aching and he said, "It isn't so bad, just sort of stiff. But it wasn't my fault, an' I wasn't stamping like she said."

He put his hands in his pockets, rattling the acorns. "She slapped my face and said she was fed up with having me about the place. Then she said she was thinking of sending me away . . ."

He wriggled through the hedge and I waited to see him make his way up to the house. But he didn't reappear, and then I could see the grey shape in the window, wavering and ghost-like behind the bank of flowers. Aunt Dora seemed to be looking straight at me so that even though the hedge was between us, I felt a sudden fear, and I turned and ran as if she were at my heels.

The weather cleared after dinner, but Davey didn't come to the clearing. He wasn't there the next day, either; and the day following, when he still hadn't put in an appearance, I plucked up enough courage to go up the lane and knock on the front door of the yellow-brick Georgian house.

But nobody answered, and the house seemed deserted. After a while I came away and, turning to look back, felt sure that one corner of the curtain was lifted a fraction as if curious eyes were watching my going.

The idea of having a word with Willis the porter came to me when I recalled that Davey had told me his aunt had threatened to send him away.

Davey knew that the old porter was a friend of mine, for I'd told him how sometimes he would let me into the signal-box. Perhaps, I told myself, if Davey had gone away by train, he might have left a message for me.

But Willis was puzzled and impatient with my inquiries. He said he'd never heard of anyone called Davey, and he was sure that Miss Lester lived alone. And when I persisted, his impatience turned to annoyance and I came away disconsolate and burning with indignation. I think it was then that I first began to wonder if Davey had really existed, or whether Father had been right when he'd told me it was all imagination.

The day passed very slowly and I found myself missing his companionship more than I would have thought possible. After supper, when I was getting ready for bed, Father, who had been watching me closely ever since he'd come in, said, "Did you play in the woods again today?"

I shook my head, and then, for no real reason, I burst into tears. After a while I tried to explain that Davey had gone away and that I was lonely.

Mother shook her head again, looking at me over a pile of dishes; but Father came to sit down by me, laying his hand on my knee.

"I wonder?" he started. Then, "Tell what you know of this Davey."

The words came tumbling out then, as I saw an opportunity of proving that there had been such a boy. It was almost as if I were trying to prove his existence to myself.

I tried to recall everything that Davey had told me: how once he had lived with his parents in what he'd called "A big house, made of white stone." There'd been no brothers or sisters and, so far as he knew, only the one aunt. Then, one day, his parents had gone out in the car and never returned. Instead, after a few days Aunt Dora had come to the house and taken him away with her. He wasn't sure how long ago that had been.

Father listened intently to all I had to say, taking a long time over cleaning out his pipe and refilling it. When I had finished, he looked over my

head to where Mother had stood silently by the door.

"Quite a story," he mused. "What d'you think, Mother?"

"I don't know," she replied, and I could tell from her voice that she was worried and doubtful.

"This Miss Lester," Father said, still talking to Mother. "Do you know her at all? To speak to, I mean?"

"We pass the time of day," said she. "And that's as far as it goes. She's surly and not very polite. Not my sort at all . . ." Mother was very definite about that.

Father sighed. "I don't know," he said. "I just don't know."

The next morning, because there was nothing else for me to do, I hung about the house until Mother put her things on and said she was going shopping. I said I would go with her to help carry the bags.

Going along the High Street I saw Miss Lester coming towards us and I pulled at Mother's arm. She stopped and smiled and wished Miss Lester "Good morning." And because we were blocking the pavement and there was a car parked by the kerb, the thin brown figure had to stop. Unsmilingly she returned the greeting and made to push past. But Mother was determined.

"Roger here has been telling his father and I all about some boy he has met in the woods," she said firmly. "We didn't believe him at first—you know how children are for inventing . . . ?" She smiled again, inviting sympathy. But Miss Lester merely tucked her chin well into the faded brown coat and nodded distantly, her expression seeming to ask, "And what has that to do with me?"

Mother looked discouraged. "Roger says his name's Davey and that he's your nephew. Such a nice little boy from what Roger tells us . . ." Her voice tailed away and she shifted her bag from one hand to the other.

"I have no nephew,'" Miss Lester said evenly. "Either staying with me or anywhere else. And if there were such a boy, then I certainly wouldn't have him in my house. I don't like children."

She won her right-of-way, then, and left Mother red-faced and embarrassed. She took my shoulder, shaking it, which was unusual for her. "Now," she exclaimed. "You see . . . ?"

I nodded miserably, but I still wasn't entirely convinced. Davey's image was still fresh in my mind. He couldn't be, mustn't be something I had imagined.

Miss Lester was walking down the street with gaunt, clumsy strides, obviously destined for the main shopping centre. I told Mother that there was something I had forgotten to do and then legged it down the street as fast as I could go. I struck into the woods and came to the familiar privet hedge. It took me a few minutes to wriggle through and then I had to find the pantry window that Davey had once used. And if I could find it, I argued, it should help to convince me that he had been real.

And find it I did, a narrow affair and some distance from the ground.

When I had climbed the drainpipe and pushed against the frame, it opened at a touch.

Five minutes later I was tiptoeing along a flagged passage, my heart in my mouth, listening for any sound. I knew what I was searching for—some sign, any sign, that a boy had been in the house. I knew what my own bedroom looked like, what with books and things strewn all over the place. I knew that my own home must be filled with small things that would indicate to a stranger that a boy lived there.

But this house was different—it didn't feel like a home; it didn't even feel "right". It was a musty, dark museum filled with solid, ugly furniture that smelled of age. The hangings were dank and dusty, the walls a mottled drab grey. Even the air was still and lifeless.

I found the landing with the polished floor and pushed my foot against the mat there, but it was tightly fastened down. I saw a huge heavy-framed picture at the top of the stairs, but the glass was unbroken. My fingers did discover small splintered patches on the wide frame, but that wasn't proof.

I went downstairs and started a systematic check of every room. There were no cellars, and it only took me a few minutes to open each door, peer inside, then turn to the next.

Then I went back upstairs and went in every bedroom, finding them all dusty and desolate except one—and that, it seemed, must have been Miss Lester's own room. There was no trace of a boy having ever lived in that dreary place.

At the far end of the landing was a tall window and a carved oak linen chest beneath. I stood on the chest to peer through the net curtains. A lonely dun scarecrow was coming along the road, one gloved hand already fumbling in a handbag as if searching for the key.

I flew into a panic then, and was away along the landing, slipping a little on the polished boards, down the stairs, heedless of any noise I made. Along the tiled passage, into the pantry, there to clamber up the shelves and wriggle through the narrow window. I didn't stop to draw breath until I was back in the safety of the trees.

I toyed with the idea of telling Father what I had done, thinking that perhaps he would understand how important it was for me to know . . . But on second thoughts I decided that he might not take too kindly to my amateur investigation, especially as it had entailed breaking into the house and there was nothing to show for my efforts.

Mother had nothing to say about her talk with Miss Lester; I think she must have discussed it all with Father, for they never breathed another word about Davey.

The next day some of my usual friends came back from their holidays and I found company to pass the time. A week later I was back at school, with Davey now only a frail, grey ghost. Four years later, when I left the village, his memory had gone.

"Barn Close," Father said to me now. "It's worth considering. Old Masters is the agent; if you like I'll come with you—run my eye over the woodwork . . ."

After dinner we went along to the estate agent's office. I remembered him from the past and he was all the more balder and larger for the passing of the years. He seemed pleased enough to see me again, especially when he discovered I was a potential client. He went into details about Barn Close.

"Funny old stick she was," he offered, "as probably you remember, As mean as muck, and she'd been much worse the last few years. Let the place go to ruin; not," hastily, "that it's come to much harm; they built houses to last in those days . . ."

"The furniture's still in there," he explained, giving me a bunch of keys tied together with a wooden label. "I've had instructions from the lawyer to auction it off. But that'll take a week or more. Anyway, a place looks better with tables and things—you know, gives you a better idea."

Walking along the road, Father brought out his pipe again, cradling it in his palm.

"We were a bit worried about you at one time, Mother and I," he started. "You were inclined to be—imaginative."

"I remember," I told him. "Davey."

"Ar," said he. "That was the name. I wonder where you got the idea from? Mother said you must have read it in a book. She wanted to take you to the doctor, but I said you'd probably grow out of it." He looked sideways at me, as if apologizing for bringing the subject up. "Vivid it was, the way you told it. I even asked a few questions myself. I went to Perkins, even, he was the local Bobby in those days . . . He said he'd have known if there was such a boy. D'you remember anything about it?"

"I remember," I told him.

"It was imagination then?" he wanted to know. "You weren't just fibbing to us for the sake of fibbing?" He seemed very eager to have that point cleared up.

"I didn't fib," I assured him. "At the time I felt positive that I played with Davey in the woods. I could take you now to the stump where I first saw him."

"Ar," he sounded relieved. "I'd rather have fancy than plain lies. Especially from you."

The door creaked as I pushed it open. "Smells stale," he said, sniffing.

"It did the last time," I said unthinkingly, and he stared at me, then made quite a thing of propping the door open.

Leaving him to tap with knowing knuckles on the wall-panelling in the hall, I wandered upstairs. The place was even more neglected and desolate than I remembered. Cupboards were bleak stale cavities, the curtains dusty cobwebbed shrouds. I was foolish enough to hesitate before lifting the lid of the linen-chest on the landing. A spider scuttled along the whitewood interior; apart from a dirty sheet crumpled in one corner, the chest was empty.

Back downstairs I went into the lounge, and the view of purple and

gold moorland, with the pale hills behind, took my breath away. The picture window served its purpose, framing the glory of rolling gorse and broom. I drew the curtains right back and a soft grey cloud of dust rose in the still air. With some idea of letting freshness in, I opened the window, finding that while one side opened easily enough, the other caught on a group of plants growing from the window-box.

I leaned out to see what sort of plants had survived neglect. They grew in a small, sturdy cluster a little way from the middle of the box, almost as though a handful of seed had been set in the one place. They were perhaps three feet high, with thick, healthy leaves.

And taking one of them between finger and thumb I recognized them for what they were. And then I was back in the clearing in the woods again, with Davey filling his pockets with acorns, "Ready for the afternoon."

Back in the hall I took Father's arm. "We'll have to send for the police," I told him. "I've found Davey."

THE IDOL OF BAKED CLAY

ROWLAND WELCH

HE LORRIES WERE high from the ground and of a kind that Wong had never seen before. They bumped along the dried mud track that led to the village, and a cloud of red dust and blue diesel fume hung heavy in the still evening air.

He rested from his work, arms folded over the tall handle of his rake, and watched their passing.

There were three of them, each filled with green-uniformed soldiers sitting face to face. They swayed with the bucketing of the lorries like toys stuffed with sawdust.

Once—many years ago, when he had been a boy, Wong had seen other soldiers in Hanfoo. They had been the little yellow men who had swarmed from the East and the North, carrying long bayonets and a banner depicting the rising sun. They had stayed for many years, until one morning they had straggled back to the mountains from where they had come.

They had left the village a smoking ruin, with those of the villagers still alive mourning their dead.

A thin and under-nourished child of ten, Wong had escaped the bayonets, but he had found himself an orphan. But he was only one among many, and so sorrow was lost in the will to survive.

And then the White Sisters had come from their land across the sea, bringing comfort and food, building a house of stone where the valley meets the mountains and gathering many of the starving children into its sheltering walls.

Wong had been grateful for the food they gave him, but the pride of his ancestors, deeply instilled into him by his father, would not allow him to accept more than food.

He lived for a while on the banks of the Great River while he rebuilt his mud-and-wattle hut. Then he set about cleaning the rice field.

As he grew older he came to notice Anna, one of the orphans in the care of the White Sisters, and to watch while she blossomed into radiant womanhood.

He spoke with her, and felt that she took pleasure in his company; he told of his ambitions to cultivate more fields and build a larger hut. She listened, smiling, with downcast, approving eyes, and he returned to his work with redoubled vigour.

And so the time passed, with his crop increasing year by year, and with Anna becoming even more beautiful. The pale oval of her face and the melting darkness of her almond eyes were never far from his thoughts.

The rice crop this year promised to be one of his largest. The fields were covered with a pale-green haze where the tender shoots thrust through the

rich, red-brown soil. Soon he would wear his best robe of fine red cloth and ask Anna to become his wife. He had enough money to start the building of a larger house and he had prayed for guidance before his god. His future had seemed secure.

But now . . .

The lorries disappeared into the jumble of wattle roofs and only the dust-haze, obscuring the background of red and green mountain slope, served to show where they passed.

Wong stood motionless for a while, his coarse brown robe slung about his waist so that its tattered ends hung clear of the brown, ankle-deep water, his bare arms black-browned from the sun, his face placid and expressionless, betraying none of the anxiety that welled within him.

There was still perhaps half an hour of daylight left, although the first feeble lights were appearing in some of the village windows, but the coming of the soldiers had driven his mind from the fields. He laid rake and hoe across his narrow shoulders and stepped carefully through the flooded fields and on to the road.

The open space in the centre of the village was a blaze of light. The lorries had been drawn up in a rough half-circle and searchlights fixed low on the bonnet of each cut clear yellow paths through the purple twilight.

Wong stood behind the silent people gathered in the shadows beyond the fingers of the beams. A red-starred banner hung by the entrance to one of the larger houses, its folds moving with the gentle evening breeze. There were red stars painted on the door-panels of the still smoking lorries and on the grey-green long-peaked caps of the soldiers.

A stocky, uniformed figure moved from the dark recess of the banner-flanked door to stand, thumbs hooked in polished leather belt, in the glare of the lights.

"My name is Cheng," he said, his eyes looking over and beyond their faces, "I am the officer commanding this detachment. I would speak with some responsible person."

The voice was steady, the tone expressionless. His face was round, bland and unwrinkled. His eyes were hidden in the reflected light from large, rimless spectacles.

The villagers waited apathetically while one of the older men shuffled out into the light.

"I am Ho Yang," he told the officer, "I will speak for the village."

Cheng turned his head slightly. "I have forty men here," said he. "See that lodging is found for them."

He turned sharply on his heel and went back to the house.

* * *

Because his hut was small and some distance away from the village centre, Wong found that he was not required to lodge any of the soldiers. He set his tools in one corner of the baked-earth floor, then went into the small inner room. There he prostrated himself in his nightly devotion before the household god of his ancestors.

The traditions of his ancestors had been passed on to Lee Wong by his father before he was killed. One day, he would pass them on to his own son.

Once, the House of Wong had been numbered among the great ones of China. They had worn the scarlet button of the mandarin. Then civil war divided the country, with ruin sweeping its fiery cloak from the banks of the Great Yellow River to the sea itself.

Nothing was left of the past glory now save the blood that flowed in his veins, the stories told him by his father and the faded idol of painted baked clay that stood on the lacquer table in the little room.

Prostrate before it, his face against the cool floor, Wong told of the coming of the men of the Red Star as once his father must have told of the yellow men.

"You will guide me," Wong told the floor, "as you have guided my ancestors."

Then, rising to his feet, he poured rice into the bowl at the idol's feet.

The evening's devotions over, he first fed the grey-and-white pig that rooted among the straw in the little lean-to, before setting about preparing his own meal of rice. The oil-lamp threw dark shadows into dusty corners, and with the rising of the wind whirls of dust drifted in through the window openings.

With the first light of a new day, Wong gathered his tools and set out for the fields. But at the edge of the village he was turned back by the bayonet of one of the squat, unshaven soldiers.

"Today," the sentry told him, grounding his rifle in the dust, "our officer has decreed a holiday." He grinned, showing broken and blackened fangs, "Instead of working he invites you to meet him in front of his house."

The open space in the village centre was alive with movement. Wong stood in one corner and watched while the white-robed Sisters from the stone house were marshalled into one of the trucks by grinning soldiers.

Standing with folded arms beneath his flag, with the slanting sun gleaming hat badge and harness buckles, Cheng smiled a little while he explained to the watching crowd.

"These women from another country," he told them, "are no longer needed in this enlightened community. Their teachings are of the past . . ."

The lorry swept from the village in a cloud of dust, and the officer ironically saluted its passing. Then he turned back to the waiting people.

"And now," he said, "I will speak with each of you separately. Each of you will come in turn to stand before my table."

His hands folded beneath his robe, Wong waited patiently as one by one the people of the village passed into the house. Finally, he in his turn came to stand before the table draped with the red-starred flag.

"Your name?" the officer asked, his eyes on the papers in front of him.

"I am Lee Wong," he replied, his eyes downcast. "I am of the honourable family of Wan Tu Wong."

"So . . .?" Cheng looked up, a sudden interest in his eyes. "You are descended from the class of Mandarins?"

Wong bowed his acknowledgement.

"I, too," Cheng told him, smiling mirthlessly, "but all that is of the past. It is good that these things be forgotten. Well, Comrade Wong, and how do you wrest a living in this place of dust and flies?"

"I grow rice."

"You grow rice," the other mimicked, "then you are one among many. I feel that your talents could be put to a better use. The State has need of soldiers. You will report to my sergeant, and he will furnish you with a uniform and weapons."

Wong bowed again. "It is permitted that I ask a question?" he wondered humbly.

"You will address me as Comrade Officer," Cheng told him. "What is this question?"

"The big house of stone from where you took the White Sisters. What will you do with those of our race who lived there?"

"Mostly they are young," Cheng said, his face bland. "They will be taught the new doctrine."

"There is one called Anna . . ."

Cheng smiled, his fingers drumming gently on the table.

"That one," he explained, "has become a member of my household."

Wong padded silently from the room.

"I am to wear a uniform," he told the soldier at the door.

* * *

Wong kow-towed before his faded god.

"Help me now," he begged, "for more than ever before do I need your guidance. She whom I love has been taken to a life of shame. Tell me how I may save her."

"Sacrifice . . .?" he wondered. "My father once spoke of sacrifice. Is that what you require from me?"

The god stared into eternity, and Wong left the little inner room.

The next morning he became a soldier, wearing the green cloth uniform and the peaked cap. He learned how to use the long bayonet and how the rifle was to be fired.

And so the days passed with the dark cloud of misery settling upon Hanfoo; with the people forced to pay half their harvested crops as taxes; with those among the older men who dared protest, disappearing in the night, and with no sign of their ever returning; and with Wong, patiently waiting for some sign from his god, learning how to be a soldier in the service of the Red Star.

"I have seen with pleasure," Cheng told him, "how you have become one of the best of my men. It is pleasing that you have thrust down the memory of your ancestors." He smiled. "I will be pleased to accept your hospitality whenever you may offer it to me."

Wong bowed. This was an honour. Apart from anything else, it was well known in the village that those who found favour in the eyes of the officer were not called upon to pay taxes and life became much easier.

"You have overwhelmed this one with your graciousness," Wong replied. "I only ask that you give me time to prepare that which will not bring discredit upon my house. When

all is ready, then I will extend my humble invitation."

"And I shall accept, Comrade Soldier." Cheng emphasized the title, seeming to find displeasure in the old-fashioned flowery phrases.

Each evening Wong made a habit of slipping into the bushes that fringed the garden at the rear of Cheng's house. Silently waiting in the shadows he would watch while Anna walked in the dusk, her shame hidden by the darkness, her hand raised now and again to adjust the folds of the robe that concealed her face.

And on one finger of her hand glittered a large-jewelled ring, the plunder no doubt, Wong decided, of some large mansion, and given to her by her new master. In his eyes the ring became the badge of her servitude.

And while he waited for some sign from his god, Cheng made a new announcement to the assembled villagers.

"All books and papers that belonged to your old way of life have been searched out and destroyed," he told them, "but it has come to my ears that certain of the old gods are still worshipped in secret. They too must be destroyed."

He called Wong to his side.

"You among all others I feel I can trust. Take men, and go to each of the miserable huts in this village. Open all rooms and all cupboards, tear down hangings and curtains. Rip down, if need be, the walls themselves.

"Bring to me here, all the idols that you will find."

His heart heavy, but his face expressionless, Wong obeyed, going to each house in turn, ripping and tearing walls and curtains, dragging the pathetic remnants of the past from their various places of hiding.

They gathered the booty in the open space of the village. The figures of pot and baked clay were ground to dust beneath the heels of the soldiers; those of metal were flung into the swirling torrent of the Yellow River. All were destroyed—all except one.

"O Great One," Wong prayed to his god, "surely now that your very existence is in danger you will speak to me, telling me what I must do."

And as he knelt in the dust, it seemed that at last the figure of baked clay spoke to him—spoke in the thudding of his heart and the pounding of his blood.

"Sacrifice" was the word that came to him, "sacrifice of that which you hold most dear."

When he rose to his feet there was a light in his eyes which had never been there before. The way seemed clear. In one stroke he could take Anna from her life of shame, and revenge himself upon the man who had brought her to that life.

But once that was done, he knew that he would have to live with emptiness. For the sacrifice that he must make was a great one indeed.

Wrapping his god in a clean sheet of linen, he carried it into the pigsty. A pile of clean straw served as a hiding-place.

Then taking the bayonet from its sheath at his side he spat on the big stone that stood beside his door and

carefully whetted the blade, testing it from time to time on the coarse black hairs that grew on the back of his hand.

And when he was satisfied that it was as sharp as he could get it with his crude stone he returned it to its sheath, taking down his soldier's cap, went into the street and to the garden at the rear of Cheng's house.

There he waited silently in the dusk until Anna came, walking slowly, eyes downcast. Once she raised her hand to brush away a moth, and the jewelled ring glittered in the faint light of the moon.

As she came abreast, Wong stepped out from his place of concealment.

* * *

The village was roused the next morning before the full light of day. The soldiers went to each house, bringing out the occupants, and herding them like sheep to the open space in front of Cheng's house.

Standing beneath his flag, his face betraying no emotion, Cheng told them that Anna had gone from his house.

"My guards are at each entrance to this village," he told them, "and she has not left by any of those roads. She is hidden in one of your houses."

His voice was cold and impersonal.

"I give you to the setting of the sun to disclose her hiding-place. If she is alive—then she must walk back alone, and I will forget that she was ever away. There will be no punishment.

"If she be dead—" he lowered his gaze to their faces, "and for all your sakes I trust that this is not so—then her body must be brought to me."

He smiled then, the thin, cold smile of the ages.

"For if she is not returned," he told them gently, "then on the bones of my ancestors, I swear that I will destroy Hanfoo and all who live here."

Waiting until his officer had finished and the people had turned and silently left the dusty, open space, Wong stepped forward.

"Honourable Cheng—" he started, speaking softly. The officer silenced him with a wave of his hand.

"You will address me as Comrade Officer," he said sternly. "I have tried to be gentle with these people, but as you can see, it has failed. Now I will do my duty as laid down by the State. Speak, Comrade Soldier . . ."

"Comrade Officer," Wong said, his eyes on the polished boots, "give me leave of absence for a while, for I have it in my power to return Anna to you."

"You heard my words," Cheng told him, his eyes thoughtful behind the rimless spectacles, "before sunset. You may go . . ."

"One favour I ask before I go . . ."

"Yes?"

"Fulfill your promise to accept my hospitality, for now I have the means of making your visit to my poor hovel memorable."

"So . . ." Cheng looked at him closely. "As I have promised, so I will accept. My poor presence will defile your palatial abode this evening."

Listening to the words, Wong felt contented. The officer had spoken in

the tongue of his ancestors, using the old prescribed acceptance of proffered hospitality.

He worked all day in his hut with brush and rake, cleaning cloths and water from the river. Then, with the room looking cleaner than it had ever done before, he set about preparing the meal.

Cheng came in the cool of the evening, walking with eyes to the ground and hands clasped behind his back, sparing no glance for the anxious villagers who watched his passing. Two soldiers, with rifles carried by their sides, walked a pace behind.

He sat alone at Wong's table, his retainers silent and alert behind his chair. Wong busied himself in the serving of the feast, with no thought of eating himself, for he knew that it is the duty of a host to administer only to the needs of his guest and that the guest's comfort and peace of mind must be held sacred above all else. Such was the tradition of the Mandarins.

Servile shoulders bent in the serving of savoury rice and pungent sauces. So must his ancestors have waited upon their guests in the old days. Green bamboo shoots, succulent and tender, were set upon the table; spices and herbs, and rice in many forms.

And as befitting the occasion, the richest course of all was left until the last. Sweet and tender meat, served with more spices and a rich gravy.

Wong served the final dish, then padded silently to wait by the door, his eyes politely downcast.

"Excellent indeed," Cheng complimented. "This dish is a fitting climax to a meal which I shall long remember. There is a sweetness to this—pork?"

Wong bowed his head.

"A sweetness that I have never tasted before."

Wong waited patiently while his guest ate the savoury meat with pleasure and satisfaction. Until, when only the juices and small bones remained, and Cheng, belching politely to indicate his repleteness, was about to push the dish aside.

His food-sticks poised, the officer peered at the dish, and then, delicately probing among the greasy debris, lifted out something that despite its covering of grease, still gleamed in the slanting rays of the fast-setting sun.

He held the ring with its unmistakable jewel between his finger and thumb while the brown gravy trickled slowly across his palm.

For the first time since the feast had started, Wong lifted his face to look directly into the eyes of his guest.

"I promised," he told Cheng softly, and turned to point through the open door. "See—the sun has yet to set."

Cheng set the ring carefully on the table and looked at it for a while. The guards stood motionless in the heavy silence, their faces dull and impassive.

"We are much the same, you and I," he said at length. "Only one of the old race could have devised such a——"

He looked up, "She was your woman?"

"We were to be married," Wong told him, and the officer, sighing, rose

from the table, and loosening the holster at his side, passed out into the twilight of the deserted street.

The sharp crack of the shot echoed in the emptiness, and the night-settled crows rose from their tall branches to make the air hideous with their hoarse clamour.

* * *

His few belongings tied into a rough bundle, the baked-clay idol clutched to his breast, Wong walked the road that led away from Hanfoo. He had left the grease-congealed dishes on the table, and the broken body of the officer in the dust of the street.

Leaderless, their dull, moon-shaped faces apathetic, the soldiers had offered no hindrance to his passing.

He paused where his way breasted the hill, and turned for a last look at the village. By his side, Anna rested a timid hand on his arm. Pieces of straw from the now empty pig-sty still clung to her robe.

"You are sad?" she asked gently. "Is it because you must leave your home?"

He shook his head and laid his hand on hers.

"Brought up as you were by the White Sisters," he told her, "you will never understand fully what I have had to do. I am of the blood of the Mandarins, and I have brought disgrace upon my ancestors.

"I was called upon to sacrifice that which I hold most dear—the sacred duty of a host to the guest in his house. For by putting the ring in the food, I marred the perfection of the meal."

Anna smiled a little, then urged him round until his face was to the mountains.

"Let us go now," she whispered.

There is but one step from the grotesque to the horrible.
SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE.

DELAYED DROP

JAMES F. WOOD

THE MAN OPPOSITE grinned knowingly, devilishly.

"So what happened then?" he asked.

"Well, by that time I was convinced that my wife and he were lovers," answered the younger man. "But I had to have proof. I needed something concrete. After all, a man's not justified in committing murder simply on suspicion."

"Murder?" said the other, raising his bushy eyebrows. "Wasn't that rather risky?"

"Not really. You see in my country the *crime passionelle* is regarded more or less as justifiable homicide. A man may fairly safely murder his wife, or a sweetheart her lover, provided the act is the result of extreme emotional provocation. . . . We take our Love very seriously, monsieur."

"Indeed!" said the other, slightly amused.

There was a pause and the young man fidgeted nervously in his seat, obviously affected by the oddity of the situation.

"Of course," he continued, "that was merely my second line of defence. I mean, that was the plea I intended to use if I'd been discovered."

"Of course. But you weren't, were you?"

"No."

"And your first line of defence was?"

"An ingenious and foolproof method of carrying out a dual killing."

Again there was a pause, more for effect than for a lack of words, and the elder man benignly allowed his companion the pleasure of savouring once more the private satisfaction of a well-planned murder.

"It was really quite simple," continued the narrator. "And yet I doubt whether anyone before me has realized the full potentialities of such a situation. You see, the uniqueness of the plan lay in its surroundings; the actual scene of the crime."

"How interesting. I must agree that I do dislike the humdrum bedroom- or cellar-type of murder."

"Oh, this was far removed from the bedroom or the cellar. In fact, it was on another plane altogether. It took place before the eyes of the world, had the eyes of the world been strong enough to see it. It took place in broad daylight, with a thousand spectators barely more than a mile away, and each one straining to catch a glimpse of it. It took place, monsieur, in a balloon."

"A balloon, indeed! Now that *is* novel!"

The elder man chuckled heartily to himself, enjoying the pride in his companion's face.

"My wife and I were both members of a parachute jumping club," continued the story-teller. "We had taken up the sport because we were bored

with life and because all the conventional forms of relaxation seemed so pointless. Perhaps you do not realize, monsieur, the exhilaration that comes from plummeting towards the earth like a hawk dropping relentlessly on its prey. Here at last was life; a rushing, whistling torrent of life that tore from you the last vestment of stagnant humanity, and drenched you with a freedom known only to the birds. It was *magnifique*!"

His eyes shone with the thought of it, and for the minute he was back again, racing through the heavens.

"But, unfortunately, it was not to last. The stupidity of woman again took away from man his right to be free. My wife fell in love with the jumping instructor and their petty romance tainted what had become for me something of great beauty. I no longer waited feverishly for the week-ends to come, and whenever we three were in the balloon together the thought of leaving the other two behind marred my new-found pleasure. Even as my body dropped through the air my mind was back there with them: watching, studying, hating them. But at first, as I said, these were only suspicions on my part. I needed to be completely convinced. I had to have proof. This, monsieur, seemed impossible. How could I possibly get proof if I was floating earthwards whenever they were alone together? Then, suddenly, it came to me. The only place I could expect them to betray themselves, the only place in which they felt secure, was the balloon, and it was from there that my proof must come. The next step was quite logical; since I could not possibly be there myself, someone or something had to take my place. Into a corner of the jumping basket I hid a miniature tape recorder, and just before I jumped I left it switched on."

"And the result?" leered the old man hopefully.

"The result, monsieur, was disgusting! Too disgusting for me to relate." The other looked disappointed. "I knew then what I had to do. While I was listening to that vile recording my murder plan came to me like an inspiration."

"The club had been invited to give a display of parachute jumping to mark the Blériot anniversary. As my wife and I were the star pupils we, together with our lecherous instructor, were chosen for the more hazardous jumps. I was to give an example of a delayed drop, while my wife and the instructor would follow with a double drop harnessed together and using only one 'chute. Here was my opportunity. A chance to kill two birds as they fell like one stone. All that was needed was a little expert tampering with my own 'chute, then a quick exchange with the one they were to use. It was all too simple. We seldom fitted our 'chutes until we were moored aloft, and since it was necessary for me to secure the harness that would hold the two lovers tightly together, it would also be necessary for me to fix their 'chute on for them. Fate could not have been more obliging.

"When the day arrived, I was as

tensed up and excited as the day I made my first jump. The crowds had already gathered in the park to watch a fly-past of jets, and as I climbed into the basket I felt like a magician about to perform his most celebrated disappearing trick before the wondering eyes of the public.

"My wife, as usual, looked sweetly petite in her long, yellow jumping suit, and I could not help thinking what a pity it was that something so pretty should shortly be unrecognizable spattered over the shrivelled grass. Then I saw *him* walking towards her, smiling, and the hatred swelled up in me again. I could hardly wait for the cable to be played out and for the balloon to rise upwards to the clouds.

" 'Nervous?' the instructor said, standing close by her side.

" 'A little,' she answered, and her hand crept secretly towards his.

"I pretended not to notice, consoling myself with the knowledge that soon their hands would be clenched tightly together with fear.

"As the faces of the crowd grew less and less recognizable, I began to feel again that glorious sensation of freedom. Up, up we floated, with the wind growing fresher and cleaner every minute and the blue radiance of the sky welcoming us into its tranquility. The basket rocked a little. The steel cable curved down to infinity below us. And we three stood in silence.

" 'Better be getting ready,' I said, and willingly they pressed their bodies close together while I fixed the leather harness around them both. Then while they stared longingly into each other's eyes, I picked up my own prepared 'chute and fastened it around him, attaching it securely to the leather harness.

" 'That's that,' I said, and could not help smiling at the ease with which it was done.

"Quickly I donned the other 'chute, taking care to avoid their noticing it. But I need not have worried. They had eyes only for each other. Almost, I thought, as if they realized that this was their last moment together.

"A red flare cascaded somewhere just below us. It was my signal to jump. I could imagine the commentator below describing to the crowd exactly what a delayed drop was; how I would wait until the last second of safety before pulling the rip-cord.

"I stepped to the open edge of the basket, glanced contemptuously back at the two of them, and jumped."

"And?"

"It was the longest delayed drop on record, monsieur. The 'chute did not open."

"I'm not surprised, my dear chap," said Satan. "You see, theirs was a suicide pact."

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE DETECTIVE NOVEL

A. E. MURCH

The concluding excerpt from a recent book published by Peter Owen Ltd.

CONSIDERATION OF the early detective novel in France should include some thought regarding how extensive were the powers of the police during the late nineteenth century, when the force was reorganized.

The *Mémoires* of M. C. Macé, *ex-Chef de la Sûreté*, published in 1884, show how far the police could at that time intrude upon the private lives of French citizens, particularly of those who worked for their living.

Anyone suspected of even a minor offence had little chance of avoiding arrest, whether innocent or guilty, and the police were not only allowed but compelled to question and cross-question a suspect with extreme severity. Yves Guyot, a member of the *Conseil Municipal de Paris*, gave even more illuminating details in *La Police*, reviewing the whole history and organization of the *Préfecture*. For the individual *gardien de la paix*, Guyot expressed sympathy. His work was thankless and difficult, often dangerous, always poorly paid. But he was a member of a powerful organization that would, for its own sake, cover up any delinquency on the part of one of its own men, and if, as sometimes happened, an *agent* augmented his income by robbery, even with violence, the policy of the *préfecture* was to conceal the matter.

The promotion of an *agent de police* depended chiefly upon the number of arrests he made, irrespective of the seriousness of the charge, and more than forty thousand Parisians were taken into custody in 1882, mostly for trivial offences, while crimes of violence too often went unpunished.

Guyot stressed the contrast between the methods of the French police and those of their more kindly English counterparts, urging his fellow-countrymen to adopt less brutal, more modern and scientific ways of conducting their investigations. Such changes came about only gradually, however, and it is plain from articles which continued to appear in authoritative journals that although the French police became more reputable and more efficient, they did not become more popular with the general public, at least until the twentieth century was well advanced. Hack writers continued to produce quantities of *romans policiers* for uncritical readers (often showing the police flouted by rogue heroes) but it is hardly surprising that French authors

of good literary standing held themselves aloof from subjects involving police affairs or the detection of crime, despite the notable example set by Conan Doyle and his contemporaries in England at the turn of the century.

Not until Simenon's stories began to appear in the 1930s was there in France any appreciable recognition of detective fiction as a literary or

quasi-literary *genre*, and even then the popularity of these tales was due rather to Simenon's skill in depicting the French scene, his psychological interpretations of motives, actions, human relationships, than to the personality and activities of Inspector Maigret, excellent police officer though he was.

In England, Londoners reserved judgment when the New Police Force was inaugurated in 1829, but by the middle of the century the police, including the more recently established Detective Branch, had won respect and esteem throughout the country. The public grew interested in their work and enjoyed reading of their methods. The police-officer became a familiar figure in melodrama, and appeared to still better advantage in the novels of Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins, Detective-Inspector Bucket and Sergeant Cuff creating a popular conception of the typical English policeman that endured for half a century.

In England the police are unarmed, non-political and (with the exception of the Metropolitan Police) are not direct servants of the Government but are administered locally, often being local men. They are, in fact, civilians whose job is to protect and assist their fellow citizens, and to see that the law is kept. The basic conception is plain in the Instructions issued in 1830 by Sir Richard Mayne, one of the first two Police Commissioners:

"Every member of the Force, . . . whilst prompt to prevent crime and to arrest criminals, must look upon himself as a servant and guardian of the general public and treat all law-abiding citizens, irrespective of their social position, with unfailing patience and courtesy."

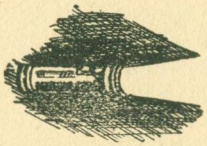
Wise administration on these lines has given the English police a unique advantage. In contrast to the police of France, and, indeed, of most other nations, the English policeman is regarded by the public as their safeguard against any threat to their personal rights and liberties, their ready helper in any emergency. In turn, they will assist the police whenever they can.

The average Englishman is interested in the details of police work, particularly in detective investigations, and when reading of such matters in fiction he can happily range himself on the side of the investigator. If there have been more amateur than professional detectives in English fic-

tion, this may be because we admire an enterprising individualist more spontaneously than a member of an organization, no matter how respected that organization may be. But every detective of fiction, private or official, works towards the same objective, and it is taken for granted that once the criminal is identified, police organization will bring him to trial.

The position of a prisoner in an English court is vastly different from that of a prisoner before a French court because of the wide disparity between the legal systems of the two countries. In England a prisoner is fortunate in that his personal rights are scrupulously respected; he suffers no violence; he cannot be forced or even induced to make a statement that might incriminate him. Even when the charge is murder, the accused is presumed innocent until his guilt has been clearly established. He will be convicted only if the police can produce such incontrovertible proofs that a jury of twelve ordinary men and women can entertain no reasonable doubt of his guilt, and their verdict must be unanimous. Not till sentence has been passed can the accused be referred to, in the Press or anywhere else, as a murderer. The average Englishman takes a strong pride in this interpretation of justice, unperturbed by the fact that our legal system seems strange and illogical to French minds.

France is equally proud of her own judicial system, and her "Code" has been drawn up with the most scrupulous care to specify precisely the application of the law in respect of every conceivable set of circumstances. In a French court, everything depends, in principle, upon the written word of the Code. In practice, however, the administration of the Code, perhaps because of an anxiety to make it impossible for the guilty to escape punishment, often seems to operate to the prejudice of the



accused and to permit police abuses. Consequently, a fairly general impression exists that in France the accused is presumed guilty unless he can prove his innocence.

How has this impression gained credence? Why does French justice provoke the assertion that it assumes guilt, when, in literal fact, it is committed to assume the contrary? Some consideration of the following points, necessarily presented in a simplified form, may help to show why this has come about.

English readers, accustomed to a system in which a barrister acts sometimes for the defence, sometimes for the prosecution, find it difficult to understand why this can never occur in the French Courts. An *avocat*, who acts as counsel for the defence, belongs to one branch of the legal profession, while the *juge* and the *procureur* leading the prosecution both belong to a different group. They are both *magistrats*, members of a special

body of state officials whose experience is gained in judging or in prosecuting, perhaps alternately, but never in defending. In their qualifications and their interests they are linked with each other, not with the *avocat*. Rightly or wrongly, the impression begins to form in an English mind that such a system may lend more weight to the prosecution than to the defence.

A *juge d'instruction*, to whom we have no equivalent, is intended to be a safeguard for the innocent. The arrested man is placed in his charge, and should he decide there is no case to answer he can set him free. The *juge*, however, is responsible for establishing the facts of the case; he must use the police as his agents; and it is generally easier to conduct the inquiry if the accused is kept in custody. Thus, instead of protecting a possibly innocent man, the *juge d'instruction* may open the door to police abuses. Further, when the *juge d'instruction* declares there is a case against the prisoner, it is a judge who has said so, and this already creates an assumption of guilt in the public mind, an assumption often fostered by the tone of Press reporting.

As to the methods of interrogation practised by the French police, the authorities and the public alike have come to accept that there may be justification for "ruthless repression" of crime or of subversive activities in a country where violent disturbances are by no means unknown. While the accused is in custody, waiting for the case against him to be completed in meticulous detail—a lengthy process—the police may obtain his confession which then becomes part of the evidence, making incontrovertible proofs less essential. When the public trial opens, what remains is for the *avocat* to establish the moral factors in the case, the "extenuating circumstances", which may materially affect the severity of the sentence. An indulgent jury can often be swayed by such a plea, put forward by an eloquent *avocat*, to a degree quite unknown in England, but the argument has weight only if the prisoner is guilty, not if he is unjustly accused.

The hazardous position of a prisoner facing trial in a French court cannot be denied. It is not precisely true that the law considers him guilty unless he can acquit himself, but he is in jeopardy even if innocent, and if guilty he certainly faces conviction and sentence. As far as the Press and general public are concerned, he may well be considered guilty even before his public trial begins, virtually condemned by the fact that a trial is to take place.

This, then is the background that colours so distinctively the French detective stories of Simenon and his imitators. The question of "proof"; the dove-tailing of time, place, detail, material clues; the mechanism of the puzzle device; all these are given far less importance than in English crime fiction. In any case, French readers attach less value to these impersonal things than to the personal characteristics of the human actors in the drama. The detective must have patience, untiring watchfulness, an intuitive flair. His job is not so much

to collect and marshal evidence for use at the trial—that is largely the province of others—as to succeed in arresting the right man. The reader looks beyond "How?" to "Who?" and on with even greater interest to "Why?" To know the identity of the criminal is not the end, as it so often is in English fiction, but to understand him, possibly to sympathize with him. Hence the emphasis upon his psychological history, the influences that brought him to commit the crime, the *motif* of "extenuating circumstances". As a result, the tale may become a study of criminal psychology rather than of detection, a development that is apparent in some of Simenon's work.

Occasionally, Simenon shows the criminal, still free and possibly unsuspected, throwing himself repeatedly in Maigret's way, driven by remorse or by some uncontrollable impulse, hovering around danger like a moth around a flame. Here is a modern interpretation of the old Greek idea that a criminal, by his own action, sets in train a process of retribution that he is powerless to escape. A detective, in that event, would have no function to perform, and development along those lines could bring detective fiction to an end.

It is, in any case, unlikely that detective fiction will develop as extensively in France as it has in England and America, or gain comparable acceptance among well-educated people. One reason is the prejudice that still exists in cultured circles (though it has become less in recent decades) against the old over-sensational *romans policiers* and their fictional descendants. But the fundamental cause seems to lie in the French attitude of mind towards literature in general and popular fiction in particular.

The French expect to derive something of value from their reading,

some information about life or some commentary upon it. Fiction should broaden their knowledge of mankind, help them to gain a clearer understanding of realities and an insight into the minds of others, or inspire them with new lines of thought. Such themes are outside the scope of detective fiction, whose purpose is seldom more than to entertain its readers, generally by distracting their thoughts from "real life". French readers are not accustomed to read solely for diversion, as a means of occupying their leisure with no particular purpose in mind, and the disfavour, or lack of favour, so long expressed by the French for detective fiction may be only a part of their general attitude towards books they regard as having only entertainment value.

English-speaking peoples take a very different view of the purpose of fiction. They have long been in the habit of reading primarily for relaxation, often seeking a panacea for the mental stress of their daily work or their own real-life problems. Like

Mrs. Battle, they "unbend their mind over a book", and the fact that the detective story offers such an "escape" more readily and more completely than almost any other type of fiction would of itself go far to account for its long popularity in England and America. Readers in these countries also share a certain liking for facts and details, and can enjoy watching the jigsaw puzzle of clues being pieced together to form a complete and perhaps unexpected picture.

Since American legal procedure has some basis in the English systems that early settlers brought with them across the Atlantic, it is not surprising that similarities still exist, for example an accused man's right to be regarded as innocent until proved guilty. There are, on the other hand, radical differences. The vast geographical area of America, its division into States, each with its own laws, makes impossible anything approaching the uniformity and coherence that characterize English administration. There is not the same public attitude towards lawbreaking or the same friendly regard for the police. America has her own exceptional problems and her own methods of coping with them. In addition to the activities of individual criminals there are highly organized crime rackets; the police are as well armed and as quick on the draw as the gangsters they fight; violence is taken for granted, and the general public does its best to keep out of range of both sides, often cultivating a detached attitude of mind. The known prevalence of third-degree methods of interrogation, and the influence that local politics can exert on police administration, are matters which do not encourage confidence. American detective fiction makes a great deal out of such sensational elements as it can find to hand—"big-time crooks", gangster warfare, the insidious corruption of graft, the experienced criminal, confident that his defence lawyer will find some hole in the legal net for his client to slip through, working with all the chicanery depicted by Davisson Post in *The Strange Schemes of Randolph Mason* as long ago as 1896.

In American fiction it is the amateur who flourishes, rather than the police detective, and there are sound reasons for this choice of hero. In the States the professional private detective, licensed by the police, working sometimes with them, sometimes in defence of their suspect, has a prestige and a position that his English counterpart does not possess outside the pages of fiction. (England has nothing comparable to the Pinkerton National Detective Agency, famous throughout America for more than a hundred years). In the comparatively rare cases when American stories give a recurring role to a police official he is usually supported by an unofficial investigator, as Inspector Queen is by his celebrated son, Ellery.

For the rest, the American detective story dwells less on material clues and itemized evidence, more upon exciting action and a multiplicity of crimes. Mystery, sometimes intensified by horror, may play a larger part than "pure" detection. Several attempts have been made to extend

the *genre* by incorporating studies of criminal psychology, but developments in this direction are likely to be limited. Few subjects lend themselves to treatment on these lines, and few writers have the knowledge or skill to do it well. It is, moreover, a very different subject, bearing little relation to detection.

There is, in fact, little room in the detective story for special consideration of psychological issues. To give more than fleeting attention to these questions would be to change the nature of the novel, and to cross the narrow boundary that divides the detective story from other types of fiction which may concern a mysterious crime. Trollope's *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, for example, is a wonderful psychological study of the poor, proud vicar, Joseph Crawley, accused of theft. The growing suspicion and suspense, the evidence of motive and opportunity, the official investigations and the trial, the efforts of his friends to discover the truth and prove his innocence, all these would be quite in keeping with a detective story. But this novel is of a different kind, because the central interest lies in the drama taking place in the mind of the accused man, not in the steps whereby the mystery is at last solved.

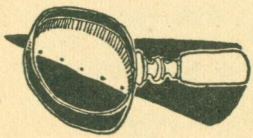
The detective novel has maintained its separate identity more clearly in England, where everything favoured its growth. It was soundly rooted in the work of important literary figures, while from Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins in particular it learned to concentrate on "pure" detection, rather than on horror. We have a friendly interest in our police, a lively interest in their detective work, and a fondness for a hero who can mingle dependability with "infinite resource and sagacity". Because of our legal code with its tradition of fair play for the accused and no victimization, it is not enough for the detective to identify and arrest the criminal. He must support the charge with evidence obtained legitimately by in-

telligence and diligence, evidence strong enough to stand up under cross-examination. This insistence upon proof is mirrored in our detective fiction, and readers have from long experience become skilled in assessing the implications of the clues given by the author. One result has been to maintain the standard of accuracy in detective fiction, and no twentieth-century writer could afford to make such a mistake about a scientific fact as Gaboriau did when he spoke of a body continuing to bleed after death. The plot of a detective story may, indeed often does, tell of events unlikely to occur in real life, but once those events are accepted as stated, all the evidence and the conclusions drawn from it must be entirely credible, or the novel will fail in its appeal to an English reader, no

matter what attractions it offers in other respects.

One other characteristic that marks the typically English detective story is its remarkably unsensational treatment of murder, compared with the way in which this subject is handled by American writers from Dashiell Hammett to Raymond Chandler, even by Poe himself. It is, of course, a frequent theme, since there are more motives and methods for murder than for any other crime, but the English detective story merely postulates murder as a start for the argument, treating it like a point in geometry, having position but no magnitude, in no way dwelling on its morbid aspects, as novels of violence, "thrillers" and, indeed, psychological novels so often do.

In England the detective novel still bears, perhaps indelibly, the marks of its Victorian adolescence in its adherence to traditional techniques of construction and presentation, its un-



compromising classification of people into "good" and "bad", its rigid morality and its precept "Be sure your sin will find you out", its exclusion of sex and of "the soul" as subjects for fiction. Yet despite these conventional restrictions it continues to achieve an atmosphere of modernity, even of novelty, because of the facility with which it can introduce fresh subject-matter drawn from the most diverse sources.

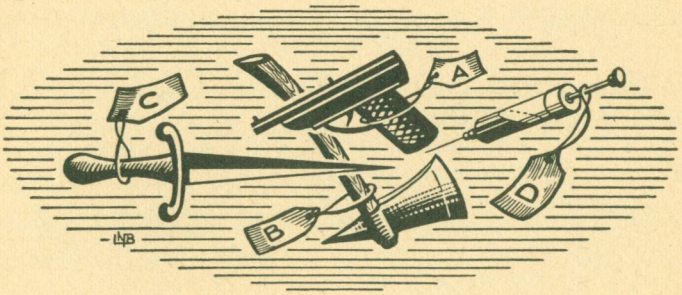
The detective novel has acquired an identity of its own, but not, as yet, the status of a literary art form, even among English-speaking peoples. The idea that any work of fiction could be regarded as "art" has gained acceptance only in comparatively recent times, and the conception may possibly be extended in the future. It is, however, more difficult for detective novels than for novels of another kind to attain a level of artistic quality because of the emphasis necessarily given to the mechanics of the plot, too often at the expense of that portrayal of character and social background which is the true purpose of literature. A few outstanding writers have succeeded in maintaining a harmonious balance between these two differing themes, but it must be acknowledged that most detective novels, born as they are of ingenuity rather than of inspiration or true imagination, are neither art nor literature. Yet they must be accorded some recognition in any survey of modern literature, in view of their long and sometimes distinguished history, their appeal to readers of almost every type, the breadth and scope of their influence, their potential excellence in the hands of writers of literary calibre.

The detective story, in essence fantasy, is a highly-finished product of the story-teller's craft. Even at its most pedestrian level it must have a good tale to tell and tell it well. It is devised as a game of skill, a game that has for generations been played with remarkable enthusiasm by

writers and readers alike. Of late, it is sometimes said that this enthusiasm has begun to wane, that the rigour of the game has been lost, that its future is in doubt.

Somerset Maugham made his opinion plain in the very title of his essay on *The Decline and Fall of the Detective Story* (1952), and it is true that the last decade or so has seen a slackening of standards, with little to equal the achievements of the 1930s and early 1940s. The demand remains enormous, so does the output, but less of it bears the hallmark of quality, and originality is rare. Prophecies foreshadowing its eclipse may, however, prove to be mistaken, as has so often happened in the past. As long ago as 1890, *Blackwood's* said of crime fiction: "Considering the difficulty of hitting upon any fancies that are decently fresh . . . surely this sensational business must soon come to an end", yet even at that moment a new era was dawning, and the detective story was on the point of rising to unprecedented heights in the adventures of Sherlock Holmes and his contemporaries.

Who can say that this same pattern of events will not occur again? It may well be that the detective novel is now lying fallow in preparation for new growth. Having reviewed the vicissitudes of its history so far, we can feel confident that so sturdy a *genre* has not yet exhausted its vitality or its capacity to surprise, and as long as readers seek in their fiction for entertainment that exercises their wits, so long will new writers of talent, perhaps brilliance, come forward to take up the challenge.



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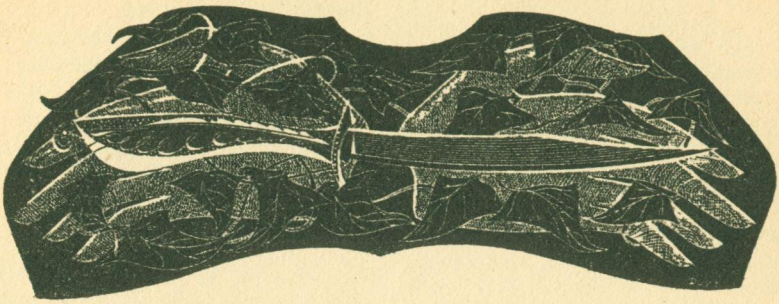


CROOKS IN BOOKS

A review of some recent crime, mystery and detective books

STEVE AUSTEN and ANTHONY SHAFFER

"THE CONCRETE FLAMINGO", by Charles Williams (*Cassell,* 13*s.* 6*d.*).

What happens after the perfect crime? Here, after a clever, beautifully planned murder-cum-theft (motives: female revenge and lolly) Right triumphs. Maybe the author was just being conventional, on (American) publisher's orders; or perhaps anyone so intelligent, painstaking and idea-fixed, would inevitably be ready to burst through the barrier between neurosis and psychosis—and come to heel. A lively, well-observed, close-cropped book, in which even the characters make sense.

"BUMP IN THE NIGHT", by Colin Watson (*Eyre & Spottiswoode,* 12*s.* 6*d.*).

A small town livened up by explosions of municipal statues begins, as they say in the advice columns, to take an interest in itself. By the time the real crime takes place, a splendid gallery of provincial English gulls, rogues and cuckolds is on display. Highly amusing, readable and even—that over-worked description—rather original.

"THE DARK FANTASTIC", by Whit Masterson (*W. H. Allen,* 13*s.* 6*d.*).

A sort of by-blow of *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* out of *La Peste.* Black Death and the long, lively border between the U.S.A. and Mexico. Included among the cast are vets, border patrol officers, public health boys and even foot-and-mouth patrolmen. A very good idea—new virus bacillus mutants always are—nicely handled, making an exciting, well-knit, pleasurably-written thriller.

"My Brother Michael", by Mary Stewart (*Hodder & Stoughton*, 15*s.*).

Mary Stewart, who writes with a pleasant, civilized literacy, has made a speciality of suspense novels set against colourful holiday locales. The mixture is much as before—good, powerful evocation of the landscape, competent characterization and growing tension—but, if anything, the background, Delphi and, particularly, foothills and slopes of that giant among the symbols of civilization and pre-history—Mount Parnassus—is richer and more powerful than ever. By contrast, the plot (murder, gold and ancient statuary, spanning the fifteen years since the partisan heyday of Elas, Edes and all that; for further elucidation turn up Ambler's *The Schirmer Inheritance*) is weak, somewhat unconvincing and less taut than usual. But then, Parnassus is Parnassus . . .

"Lament for Four Brides", by Evelyn Berckman (*Eyre & Spottiswoode*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

A weirdie set in rural France where society is ever so feudal and the seigneur still has his *droits*. Almost by the way, Gilles de Rais's unappetizing ghost lurks under every sod turned by the archæologists. Plot-wise, things fall apart and not even the centre holds together: in fact, by the end, I thought I must have missed the point. Perhaps I did; but then again, perhaps there just wasn't one. Untidy, strange, uncomfortably rather than lazily written. And, just to carp, why, when a ms. of, presumably, late medieval Latin turns up, do we have to be given footnotes to translate the English translation, e.g. humours = secretions, gravidness = pregnancy? After all, Miss Berckman, we're a pretty long-haired lot, we mystery cats.

"The Burning Eye", by Victor Canning (*Hodder & Stoughton*, 15*s.*).

Mr. Canning is the sort of writer about whom one immediately uses phrases such as: "a master of his craft," "solid, workmanlike job," etc. So it is again—and no disrespect implied; a good craftsman, a real professional, is the salt of the literary earth. Colourful, exciting adventure of well-assorted group of shipwrecked passengers (two of them female and amorous) plus one ship's officer, played out on the remote Gulf of Aden coast of ex-Italian Somalia against the mounting fervour of Somali nationalism.

"Where There's Smoke", by Clarence Buddington Kelland (*Robert Hale*, 10*s.* 6*d.*).

Murder, larceny and arson with the New York Fire Service in supporting role and an Assistant Fire Marshal as star. Moments of excitement and good fire service background marred by untidy, disorganized plot and a hero who can not only tell the difference between a syllogism and a solecism (author's description) but also possesses "a brain that could do odd tricks and perform feats that flabbergast the beholder." And all this in Irish, too—or at least in the kind of prose equivalent to music-hall brogue. "Besides," says the hero at

one moment of truth, "I think there will not be a long time to addle me." Between the two of us, a divil too long it was.

"FALL GUY", by Hartley Howard (*Collins*, 10*s.* 6*d.*).

This is American-type, like sherry-type rather than sherry, private eye, first-person narration. The P.I. is Glenn Bowman, he moves fast, reacts to sex and danger stimuli, gets roughed up from time to time and wins out, after a fashion, in the end. If you can wade your way through the hailstorm of not-so-wisecracks and conscious Americanisms that spatter every page, the plot is fast-moving and quite rewarding. But I'm not convinced it's worth the trouble. Maybe I'm just jaded with guys who talk like they had adenoids. And that goes for the book, too: it needs a good E.N.T. surgeon.

"MURDER ON THE PROWL", by J. M. Spender (*Robert Hale*, 10*s.* 6*d.*).

There have been many good murders set in rural New Hampshire and New York state and usually the books have been written by fine suspenseful females. This one is written by a woman, is set in just such an up-state community, but neither writing nor plot comes up to scratch. There are so many backward glances, that it seems you're expected to have read Lady Spender's last effort. Not exactly bad so much as disappointing: with all the ingredients it should have been better.

"CONTACT MAN", by Don Betteridge (*Robert Hale, 10s. 6d.*).

Betteridge is Bernard Newman's alter ego and the book is a curious, and, to my mind, curdled mixture of Scotland Yard's murder squad and M.I.5. Prostitutes, high-born international spy-ring leaders, an appalling over-age, if under-size, Girl Guide type called Midge Parker, and various French and English police and security officers make up the cast. After 172½ pages, we find: "And thus it came about that Detective-Superintendent Barnard, investigating a murder case, found Midge Parker of the Special Branch in the flat of one Freddie Sikkim, recently deceased." In fact, Freddie had got his chips by page 44 and thus missed out on the M.I.5 tangle: I think he was right.

"DANGEROUS CARGOES", by Robert son Hobart (*Robert Hale, 10s. 6d.*).

This is one of those books where the dust-jacket seems to have nothing to do with what goes on between the covers and where one chapter has very little to do with the next. I suppose, if you had a mind to, you could call it episodic. For the record it's all about drugs and rackets in Aussieland, with glimpses into unconvincing worlds of state police and long-distance truck drivers. Pearls and girls also figure somewhere and the yarn winds up in New Guinea. The final witty exchange sums up the book: "The Yanks have a word for it." "Baloney?" (Wait for it!) "You've said it, Chief—with all due respect."

"VOTE FOR DEATH", by Norman Longmate (*Cassell*, 12*s*. 6*d*.).

A very nice idea. Murder during a three-cornered election, with the Liberal candidate being the victim and the chief suspects his Tory and Labour opponents. The story is well up to the accepted who-dunit standards and your choice of murderer will doubtless be decided by the political party you support. In this case, I am glad to say, I was one of the "don't-knows".

"THE CASE OF THE CHASED AND THE UNCHASED", by Thomas B. Dewey (*Boardman*, 10*s*. 6*d*.).

Another book with a weary pun for a title, by the author of *Prey For Me*. It's not just the punning, but you'll pardon me if I don't go dewey-eyed over this latest offering. It's crisp and tough and everything you expected from this stable, but somehow it's all rather tired. This is possibly because one has had enough of movie producers and directors and blondes who swim in the nude and private eyes who can take it and cops with a sense of social purpose, and all. How's about a nice fresh cast, like authors and publishers and book critics and people who sit at home and read crime books, for example.

"THE GALTON CASE", by John Ross Macdonald (*Cassell*, 11*s*. 6*d*.).

A book well up to standard by one of my favourite crime writers. Can one say more? This time Lew Archer is bounding about America investigating the claims of a plausible young man to inherit a fortune. Needless to

say, this is only the start of the play, and, as the blurb says, Lew Archer's "characteristic wariness of the obviously" leads to the inevitable tangle of high-powered criminality.

"BLACKSHIRT SEES IT THROUGH", by Roderic Graeme (*John Long*, 11*s.* 6*d.*).

Another Blackshirt novel—still strictly for *Boys' Own Paper* fans. Guess what the old Rapscallion is doing this time, chaps? Blow me if he's not actually serving on a jury, and him a light-fingered gent, too. Never mind, it doesn't stay in the stuffy old courtroom long. There's a lovely chase with lots of horrid thugs, and everything comes out O.K. in the end. Just the thing for eight o'clock bedtime.

"TO DUSTY DEATH", by Hugh McCutcheon (*John Long*, 11*s.* 6*d.*).

This book, I suspect, will be on the way to a dusty death on obscure shelves in public libraries almost as soon as it is launched. It is a tedious, uninspired tale of amnesia, larceny and safe-cracking, garnished with a little unrefined murder. Strictly for those who like their crime novels unmemorable.

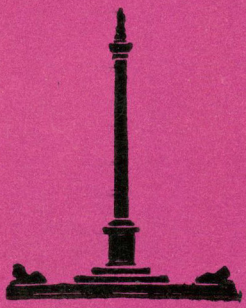
"THERE IS NO SILENCE", by Meyer Dolinsky (*Robert Hale*, 10*s.* 6*d.*).

Murder of a wealthy real estate manipulator, evidently by his mistress. But a very clever piece of psycho-analytical crime detection which, for a change, more than half convinces in its efforts to reveal the behaviour patterns of the suspects

and reveals a thoroughly surprising and sinister denouement.

"GIVEN IN EVIDENCE", by Ex-Det. Chief Supt. John Capstick (*John Long*, 21*s*.).

Another of these books of memoirs written by ex-high-up coppers. They reflect, of course, their authors—stolid, worthy, unsurprisable men of vast experience and a fabulously high standard of professionalism. This collection of cases with which the writer was closely associated include the infamous murders of June Devaney, Edwina Taylor and Patricia Curran and the hunting down of Ronald Harries, the noted uncle- and aunt-slayer, and John Dand, who chilled the steward at the York Rugby League Club Ground. On the whole, it would be fair to say that the cases in this collection are less sensational than others I have read, though, of course, for this reason they are less well known. As for the photographs, well, ghouls need simply not apply, for there is none of the "A-fragment-of-Betty - Chambers's - pancreas - was - found-in-this-copper" type of picture.




Another scan
by
cape1736