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LONDON
MYSTERY

No. 46



A quarterly anthology of the best
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LONDON MYSTERY



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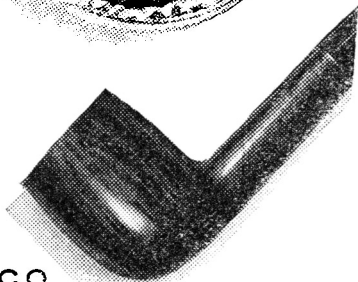
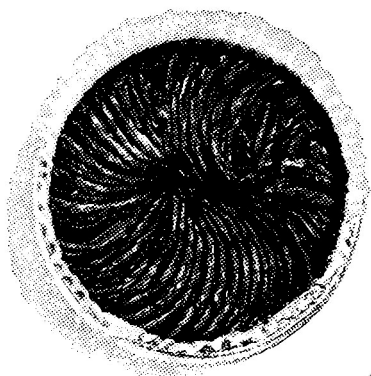
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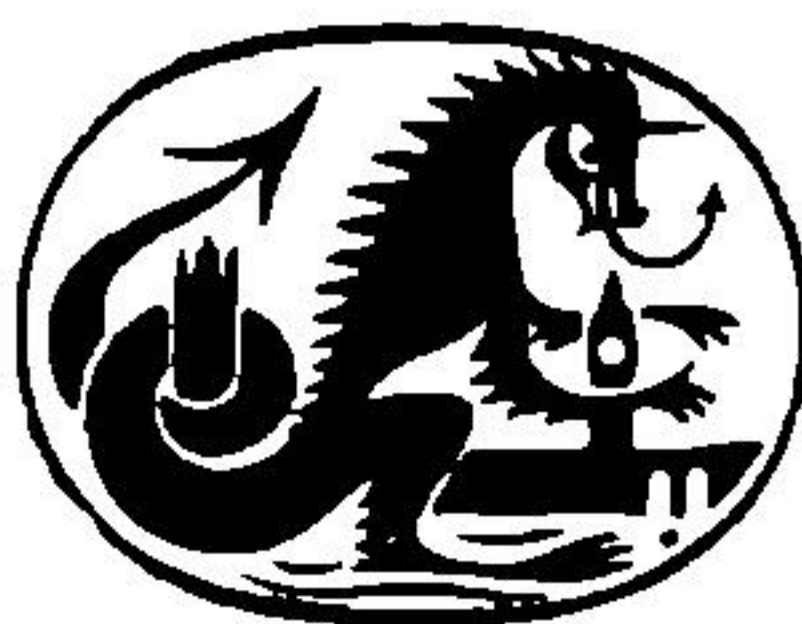


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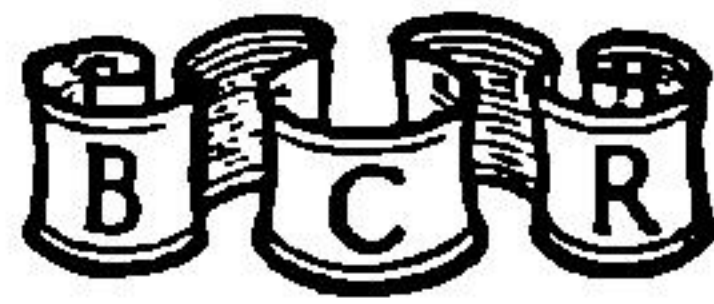


THE LONDON MYSTERY SELECTION

The classical demands for a beginning, middle and end to a story did not take into consideration the mystery *genre*; if a mystery is to be a mystery at all it can hardly have the tangible sort of conclusion Aristotle had in mind. Yet a mystery must end with *something*: it isn't good enough for the author to arouse our hackles only to leave us suspended in mid-air by saying, "Well, I don't know the answer either." The wilful suspension of credulity asked of us in the theatre is also required for the appreciation of mystery, but the good mystery will suggest a plausible possibility for us to think about. Such material is not the easiest thing in the world to obtain, but once again we have managed to select a few tales which we feel worthy of your attention: among them are L. P. Davies's "Infiltrant", which will perhaps not only leave you thinking but arouse your interest in young Johnny's workshop. "It Makes You Wonder", by Cyril Donson, is really a "who-dunit", but the title justifies itself. You should be intrigued by "The Messenger", but if that doesn't satisfy there are a dozen other stories to consider. Fact invariably being stranger than fiction, we include another piece by A. E. Murch, who relates the unhappy story of an eighteenth-century French serving girl, and Alister Kershaw's account of a more recent homicide in France. The first of a short series of selections from the wonderful description of London's nineteenth-century underworld by that ace crime reporter Henry Mayhew provides more fascinating fact.

Autumn is an admirable time of the year to relax a little, to look back and to look forward. We hope that you'll relax with this issue of LONDON MYSTERY—on the edge of your chair, of course—and look forward to the next edition.

EDITOR.



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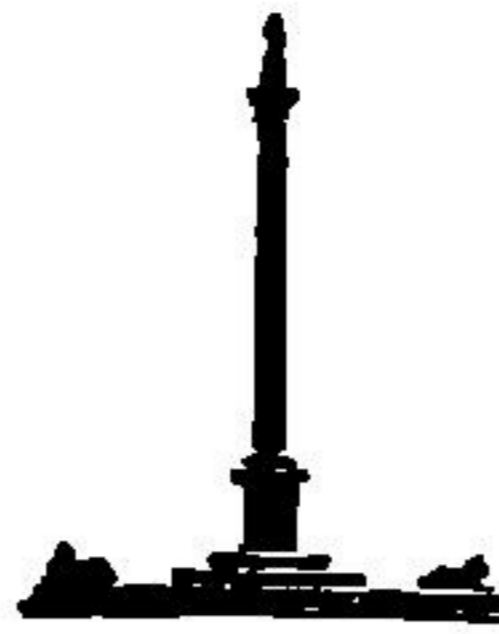
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THE LONDON MYSTERY SELECTION

NUMBER FORTY-SIX

SEPTEMBER 1960

7	The Last Evil	<i>Robert Bridgeman</i>
17	The Word of Willy Spender .	<i>Morgan Evans</i>
21	It Makes You Wonder .	<i>Cyril Donson</i>
34	Hauntings Limited	<i>R. F. Songhurst</i>
38	The Crooked Smile	<i>Robert Blake</i>
46	Infiltrant	<i>L. P. Davies</i>
53	The Slave Detective	<i>Wallace Nichols</i>
61	The Messenger	<i>Leslie Vardre</i>
70	The Way Out	<i>James Worth</i>
74	Intruders in the Forest	<i>Dan Ross</i>
80	The Ordeal of Marie-Françoise .	<i>A. E. Murch</i>
88	Impromptu Part	<i>Frank Mace</i>
96	The Flying Fox	<i>Lawrence Peters</i>
105	Murder in Play	<i>Alister Kershaw</i>
113	The Victorian Underworld	<i>Henry Mayhew</i>
121	Crooks in Books	<i>Steve Austen</i>

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THE LAST EVIL

RICHARD BRIDGEMAN

Illustrated by Norman Battershill

THE END CAN'T BE very far away. I've stuck it for as long as I can. But the knowledge is too much for one man to keep to himself. And I'm scared—scared of the waiting and scared of how it will be.

Perhaps I'm a coward. Not that it doesn't take courage of a sort to hang yourself in cold blood when you're sane and sensible. But I'm the only one who knows that the end is inevitable. And it's all my doing.

Maybe it wasn't what I found in that damned box that started it all. Maybe it would have happened any-

way. That's what I try to tell myself. But it's resting on my shoulders. The death of a world. That's what Brinky called it—"The End of Everything."

It wouldn't be too bad if I knew for certain that it would be quick. But it might not be like that. Linger- ing, more than likely—a horrible death, they say . . .

So I'm going to write it all down, and then I'm going to take this rope and put it round my neck . . .

At the start there was Brinky and Foxy, and me.

Nineteen hundred and forty it was, the back end. Long dark nights and the bombs.

London. A pub in Soho.

"There has to be an explanation—a reason—for everything," Brinky told me. "Everything."

He talked, did Brinky. Well, it helped to pass the time when the windows were blacked out and sand-bagged and we were huddled in the cellar with the planes overhead.

A cut above us, Brinky; and clever. Most of what he talked about was well over our heads. He had a theory for most everything. God knows how he ever came to be mucking in with Foxy and me in the ration-book racket.

A layer of yellow flesh over bone for a face; eyes that were sunk so deep they were nearly always in shadow; clothes that were threadbare and hung on his shoulders as if they'd been thrown there.

We never did know his real name. There was talk that he'd once been a teacher of sorts—whatever they call them—at a university. But he'd been turfed out.

He was worth his weight in gold to us.

Foxy was the craftsman; Brinky the brains. I distributed and collected. They trusted me to dish the dough out evenly.

Foxy? He was called that because he looked like one. A fox, I mean. Sandy, and a bit of a runt. Thin nose and squashed eyes. Used to work the racecourses before the war until things got too hot. Then he got a job with a printing firm Chepstow way. Came the war and we got together with a second-hand press, turning out ration-books to help the hungry rich.

Wallace calls me the black sheep

of the family. He's my brother; half-brother really. We get together from time to time. Usually when I run short of the ready.

He's a decent sort, Wallace. Had a good job, too. Something to do with the Ministry of Supply. So they didn't put him in uniform. Not until near the end, that is. They never got round to pegging me down till the war was almost over. I kept on the move, like Foxy. Brinky was safe enough. He was too old.

We had the press in a basement in Soho and we spent most of the time when we weren't working at a pub near by, the landlord being something of a pal of ours. He had a good cellar: concrete roof, solid beams. Stand anything but a direct hit.

Most evenings we used to sit and drink and talk. Brinky used to do most of the talking. I guess from the way he spoke he must have been well-nigh over most of the world. But Greece was his country. Hours he used to spend talking about Greece. That was how we came to be talking about Greek mythology that time. A quiet night—the alert was on, but they were plastering way across the river—Foxy had dozed off. Brinky's voice was soothing.

I followed him for a while. I remembered some of the stuff he was talking about from my school days. Then he said there was an explanation for all the stories about Ancient Greece. Like the Medusa. He said he could take me to the island and show me the actual spot where the head had hung. And the Minotaur. He said he had been to Crete and the laby-

rinth was still there. Or what was left of it.

"It's just a question of age-distortion," he explained. "Every one of those stories is true. They have to be. The places, the ruins, are there for any to see . . ."

"Take the Medusa, one of the Gorgons. The story has it that to look on her face turned man to stone. But not if a mirror was used. Now that bears thinking about. Surely if the face had been as horrifying as all that it wouldn't have lost anything by being seen in reflection? Ossification by contact is the answer. Some form of radiation, perhaps?"

"She had serpents for hair?" I told him, more to air my knowledge than to offer objections.

He waved that aside. "Allegory, pure and simple. They use similar expressions today."

The bombs rumbled far away; Foxy snored gently in his corner. At the far end of the cellar a small group of people chatted softly.

"Spent most of my life collecting facts," Brinky said. He had his pipe going; foul it was. "Some amazing things came to light. They knew more than we give them credit for, those ancient Greeks. Much more. The legend of Atlantis is only part of it. They were the remnants of a lost civilization; they carried on some of the past learning in legend."

He was miles away. For some reason I felt like arguing. Maybe because he always treated us like kids. Airing his superior knowledge.

"Nonsense," I said. "Fairy tales."

I wish now that I'd kept my trap shut.

Not that he turned on me right away. It was like he hadn't heard the interruption. He was well into his stride. Pandora it was next.

"The first woman," he mused, one eye on me. "They say that Vulcan made her."

"There you are," I said. "Adam and Eve all over again."

"No," said he. "Oh, no. Think, man, think. What do they call the President's wife in the States? The first lady. You see, it's just a term; the first lady of the land. Or the first in some particular field. And they say that Vulcan made her. That's a common enough expression even today. Why, I've heard you say yourself that your brother knew a man at the Ministry and that it was the making of him . . ."

I was driven to protest further. "That's different."

"No," he said again. "Exactly the same. And I think I know in which field Pandora was the first lady. And that box of hers—filled with the evils of the world. Allegory again. Secrets given into her trust by Vulcan, who was human enough to overlook woman's natural curiosity. So she opened it up and talked about the secrets it contained. She let loose evil on the world. Only the Greeks tell the story with a slightly different ending. They say that as soon as she realized what she had done, she slammed the lid back on again. And one last secret was still inside. The greatest, they say, the greatest evil of

all. The complete destruction of mankind. Inevitable annihilation.

"Vulcan took the box from her and sealed it down and hid it away . . ."

He pointed the stem of his pipe at me.

"And d'you know what happened to that box? I've got it."

It was a moment or two before I realized the significance of what he had said. Then I told him what I thought of him trying to pull one like that over on me, and he lost his temper. For the first time since I'd known him he lost his temper.

"You're a fool!" he shouted. "Just like all the others. I spent nearly twenty years in tracing it to a tin-pot museum in a broken down town on the south coast of Greece. And they didn't know what it was they had stuck on their shelves. I tried to buy it and they refused. A garlic-stinking, ignorant curator refused to listen to me. So I did the only thing I could. I stole it. And it didn't take them long to find out who'd taken it. I lost my job at the university and had to pay recompense. But I had the box, Pandora's box. I hid it until things quietened down."

Foxy woke up then. Well, Brinky had been shouting at the top of his voice and the rest of the folk in the cellar were listening, and nudging each other and grinning.

"What's up?" Foxy wondered. "Raid over?"

"No," I told him. "Only Brinky blowing his top."

"You're a fool," Brinky said to me again. Only now he wasn't shouting.

"You can only believe what you see. Good God, man, if I were to tell you of the things I discovered while I was tracing the box you'd say I was stark staring mad."

"Look," he said. "The Gorgon's cave is there to be seen. So is the labyrinth. You've got to accept that. So why not the box?"

"So you've got the box," I told him. "So what? I suppose you've opened it?"

"No," he said. "No, I haven't opened it. For one thing the lid won't come off without damaging the box. And another, I wouldn't want to see what's inside."

The all-clear went then. Foxy yawned and stretched. Brinky gathered his hat and raincoat. The rest of the people were filing up the stairs.

"You haven't as much intelligence as I gave you credit for," Brinky said to me over his shoulder. Then he seemed to hesitate. "Look," he added. "Would you like to come and have a look for yourself? Perhaps then you will believe?"

So he'd got something. But what? I laughed in his face. I mean, I didn't believe a word of his story. But I wondered what his racket was. For a while, before we teamed up, he'd worked the gold brick. He ought to know better than try anything like that with me. I mean, I'd been in the game too long. And I hadn't any money. He knew that.

"Come and see it," he said from the top of the stairs.

"What's 'e on to now?" Foxy wanted to know.

"Nothing," I told him.

We went through the bar and out into the dark street. London was throwing a red glow into the sky, way over the other side of town.

"What now?" Foxy asked, yawning again.

I considered the point. "I've got a batch to deliver. If I were you I should get the press rolling again. We've lost too much time these last few days."

"Seein' ya," Foxy said, and made off into the darkness.

Then the bomb came. No warning, no gun-fire, nothing.

Just the sudden whistle, and the end of the street erupted.

Brinky and I flung ourselves to the pavement. "Foxy!" he shouted above the uproar, and pushed himself to his knees.

I looked at the inferno. It was a paint works that had caught it. "He's had it!" I shouted back. "We can't do anything . . ."

Then he was on his feet and running towards the flames. A grotesque flapping bird against the scarlet streamers.

The bomb had fallen smack in the road, right in the middle of the people who had been with us in the cellar. If we'd gone the same way instead of turning to the left . . .

I shouted after Brinky, but my voice was lost.

Then the wall came down. I watched it come, a slow tottering, then a crash that rocked the street as much as the bomb had done. And Brinky was under it.

He was one of the first to be

dragged out. I identified his clothes. His face was gone. There weren't even any clothes left to show if Foxy had been there.

So I was alone.

All in a few minutes. Both Brinky and Foxy gone.

Then I set about getting reorganized. A spot of ready cash would have to be the first consideration. The bomb had come at an unlucky time. We'd just pooled our resources to buy more paper and pay the rent. I was practically broke.

I went first to the cellar where we kept the press. There were a few books ready, but I didn't know the first thing about operating the press itself. Or where Foxy got his materials from. So that was out.

I collected the finished books and added them to the pile in my room. There was about fifty in all. Then I toted the lot round to Wilky Barbett who was off to Liverpool that same night. There were more than he wanted to handle at the one time and he cribbed at first, until I told him that there wouldn't be any more. Unless I managed to get hold of another bloke to work the press. And that wasn't likely.

Quite upset was Wilky. Well, it had been a good thing while it lasted. Ten bob a time we'd been charging. Wilky sold them for a quid.

"There may be a few odd ones at Brinky's place," I said thoughtfully. "He sometimes kept a few in hand. I'll slip along and have a butcher's."

I knew where Brinky had hung out, but I'd never been inside his place before. The door was locked, but that

sort of thing had never worried me. Just half a minute with a piece of wire and I was inside as easy as if I'd used a key.

Two rooms there were: a bedroom and a scullery. Tidy—neat as a new pin. That's where breeding tells. My place is like a pig-stye.

I sat on the bed for a while. Brinky was all round me. The room smelled of him. Then the full realization that I was alone came and hit me in the stomach like the kick of a mule.

Not so much that they were gone, but that my livelihood had gone with them, and it takes dough to keep going when you're trying to keep out of uniform.

After a while I started to search the place. And it wasn't a job I relished. There was something wrong, somehow; almost as if there was someone standing behind my shoulder.

I'm not imaginative; never have been. Dead steady, take no chances, that's my motto.

Before the war I'd done quite a few breaking and enterings. An expert, I guess. Never caught once. And I'd never had that feeling of someone close behind and watching every move I made. It was nasty.

So I worked as quickly as ever I could, turning out the most likely places first. The cupboard by the bed; the chest of drawers under the window; the dressing-table. There were about twenty books in the dressing-table drawer. Another ten quid to help tide me over.

I found the box in the scullery.

God knows why I went in there at all. Habit, I guess. When all the time

I was fairly itching to get out of the place.

Under the sink was one of those cupboard affairs. You know, the place where all the pipes and tins of soft soap and old scrubbing brushes are kept. Usually I wouldn't even dream of bothering about such a place. But this one had a lock on it. A good solid lock on a cupboard that usually only holds junk.

That got my nose twitching. It's noticing things like that that make a good burglar. I found a screwdriver and wrenched the lock from its moorings. And inside was a parcel, wrapped in thick, brown paper. Then I remembered what he'd been telling me about the box.

Pandora's box.

That's what he had said. The result of a lifetime of searching.

It was made of ivory, yellowed with age and smooth-cornered. About nine inches deep and a foot square.

The first thing I did was try to open it. But it was fastened down with a number of ivory pegs, and so tight that there wasn't even room to edge the thin blade of my knife in between.

And there was something inside. Something that rattled and rustled when I shook it.

I took it away with me. Wrapped in its brown paper, and with the ration books in another parcel, I took it back to my place.

I left it on my sideboard while I took the books round to Wilky. Then I came back. It must have been about two in the morning. It had turned into a quiet night after the earlier



bombing. Quiet as a grave it was.

Opening things that aren't meant to be opened is my speciality. But this box was different. Quite a challenge. Not that I believed for one moment all the tripe that Brinky had told me. About it being Pandora's box. He must have had a racket in mind.

Not trying to work it on me, perhaps, but just testing, to see if I would buy it. If he could fool me, then he could fool most anyone. That's the

way his mind must have worked. Quite a compliment in its way.

But it wasn't much use to me. Especially as it wouldn't open.

Next morning I took the box round to Issy Bos at the hockshop. He offered a couple of quid, because he knew me and because it was ivory. Then when he found the lid wouldn't come off he dropped to ten bob. So I brought it back to the digs and started work with a chisel.

Nearly an hour it took me, and all the time it was just as if there was someone breathing down the back of my neck and warning me to lay off.

The lid came off in two pieces, broken right across. And part of one side of the box itself came with it. The air came out with a little hiss of sound when I wrenched the pieces apart. It smelled, too. Musty, age-old mustiness.

The roll of parchment inside was yellow and brittle. I suppose it was parchment, but I don't know much about that sort of thing. I tried to unroll it, and found it was covered with writing and things that I couldn't make head or tail of.

Apart from that one roll the box was empty. And it was ruined. I wished I'd taken Issy's ten bob.

I put the roll in one of the dressing-table drawers and threw what was left of the box in the dustbin. Then I started to try and find someone to take Foxy's place. But there was nothing doing. And by then I was flat broke, which meant a visit to brother Wallace.

I used to take him a bit of spare grub when I was out to touch him for a fiver. This was before the ration-book lark, and what with me living in Soho I used to collect a bit of imported cheese like you can't get anywhere else in London and use that as an excuse.

But this time I'd run myself to the last half-dollar. Which meant I would have to go empty handed. Until I remembered the parchment.

He forked out a fiver without even bothering to look at his present. He

was in his office—I knew where he lived, but it was way on the other side of town—and it seemed he wanted to get rid of me rather sharpish. He didn't even ask how I came by the parchment. Not right away, anyway.

But a week later when I got back to my digs, tired out after another day trying to find someone to take over Foxy's work, I found Wallace waiting for me. And there were a couple of blokes with him. Cold types, no smiles, not much to say. Hands in pockets all the time. Just sitting and listening while Wallace asked questions.

—“Where did I get it from?” “Who was Brinky?” “What was his real name?” “Where did he get it from?”

For an hour or more it went on. Talk about the third degree. And all the time the two blokes sat and listened.

I told them all I knew. Except for the bit about it being Pandora's box. I didn't want them laughing at me. I said that Brinky had spent a long time in Greece. I told them he'd found the parchment somewhere over there. The two blokes looked at each other. Then one of them opened his mouth. “How long ago?”

I told him I didn't know.

Then he wanted to know if Brinky had ever mentioned travelling in any other countries apart from Greece. I said I thought he'd travelled over most of the world by the way he used to speak.

There was one last question before they went. Had I any idea what was written on the parchment? Only they

didn't call it that, "papyrus" was the word they used.

I said that I'd no idea. Then they went.

At the door, Wallace took me on one side and put something in my hand. He spoke very earnestly. "Keep all this to yourself. Don't breathe a word to a soul. If you keep quiet there'll be more money for you. But if we think you've been talking we'll have to take steps."

"I've vouched for you," he added. "Don't let me down. This is a damned sight more important than you can ever imagine . . ."

He left me then. And it was a roll of notes he'd shoved in my hand. A hundred. Then I got to thinking that it must have been something pretty important to make him fork out that much. And without being asked. So I decided to keep my eye on brother Wallace. Well, I mean, if he was on to a good thing, then I wanted my rake-off. And I had a feeling that a hundred smackers was chicken-feed.

Wallace really started to come into his own, then. He left the Ministry of Supply and the next time I saw him it was his picture in the paper; he was in uniform, brass tabs, the lot. I went to his house once—I didn't know where he was hanging out in Whitehall—and his wife told me he was in America. But even she didn't seem to know what he was doing over there.

I didn't see or hear from him again until two years later. In 1945 it was, with the war in Europe just over. They'd grabbed me into the Army almost a year before—well, it was one way of getting something to eat—

and I'd made the rank of corporal. I read in the paper that Wallace had just returned from the States. They weren't so hot on censoring the news by that time.

With a forty-eight hour pass tucked in my wallet I changed into civvies and went up to town. I went to his house and he was quite pleased to see me. Really a big noise he was—a Lieutenant-General, with three rows of ribbons. We talked about old times and how much longer the war with Japan was going to last. Most of the lads felt the same as me—that the little yellow men would be good for another three or four years, what with us having to winkle them out one by one. But Wallace said a very funny thing.

He looked very knowing and said: "Not long, now. A week; maybe a few days longer. But soon. You deserve to know that much. After all, it was through you that we——" Then he shut up closer than a clam, and looked as if he was sorry for what he'd said.

And of course he was right. I mean about the war being over so soon. Just a few days later, there it was, glaring headlines in all the papers. All about a new bomb that had been dropped on a place called Hiroshima.

Then I got to putting two and two together, and coming up with an answer that I didn't much care for at all.

It looked to me that maybe Brinky had been right after all. About the ancient Greeks having secrets of an even older civilization. And maybe it had been Pandora's box that I had

tipped into my dustbin. But not before I had opened it and let out the last evil to plague mankind.

All my doing: what had Brinky called it?—Complete, inevitable annihilation.

At first I tried to persuade myself that it couldn't be like that. But I've watched it grow. And now I'm sure.

So when I've finished putting this down on paper I'm going to hang myself.

I can't risk the chance of not being killed outright. I'd rather do it now, all tidy and clean, than have my teeth drop out, then my hair. And have the blood rot and bleach in my veins.

There's just one thing though . . .

Something that could change everything.

Earlier, when I knew for sure that it was Pandora's box, I went to the trouble of reading up the story again.

And there's one other thing that Brinky hadn't mentioned and I'd forgotten.

Hope.

Hope came out of that accursed box as well as evil and suffering.

So there's just a chance that it won't work out the way Brinky said. And in that case I'll have to do some more thinking.

I mean, hanging oneself's such a permanent thing. And while there's life, there's Hope . . .



Oh! Death will find me, long before I tire
Of watching you; and swing me suddenly
Into the shade and loneliness and mire
Of the last land!

RUPERT BROOKE.

The long habit of living indisposeth us for dying.

SIR THOMAS BROWNE.

The angel of death has been abroad throughout the land; you may almost hear the beating of his wings.

JOHN BRIGHT.

THE WORD OF WILLY SPENDER

MORGAN EVANS



HE CAME LIMPING up the road past the station, and watching him brought the thought that he had been afoot all night. An insignificant creature of bundled rags and flapping boots; a faded army great-coat tied about him with frayed rope, a battered and shapeless hat. He was unshaven and with the filth of days in the deep hollows of his cheeks. A dusty grey scarecrow with hands deep in pockets and an old blue scarf tight about his throat to keep out the morning chill. Only the eyes alive, burning and purposeful in the featureless sallow of their surrounds.

He passed with a look and a nod and came back on second thoughts. He said that it was a grand day to come. I said if the dew was anything to go by it was certain to be hot.

He took dirt-grained hands from his pockets to rest them on the gate. They trembled and shook. And he was tired; it hung round him like a cloud—utter and complete weariness.

I offered a drink of coffee. He refused, politely enough, and stared earnestly into my face.

“Would you ’ave bin seein’ anyone passin’ along the road this morning?” he wanted to know. And when I shook my head: “Or las’ night, maybe. P’raps you went down the road a spell round about sunset; p’raps you might a’ seen someone else a-walkin’,

like as it might be me, now? . . .”

“No,” I said. Then added unthinkingly, “I saw no——” And then I stopped for even though he was obviously a tramp I still didn’t want to hurl the word in his face. But he gave it to me with both hands.

“I’m a tramp,” said he, “—’ave bin all me life. An’ no shame in it neither. Allus a man o’ me word; allus above-board and honest. An’ that’s why I’m ’ere now.”

And shaking with weariness, heavy lids drooping, he changed his mind. “If I might ’ave a cup of corfee after all . . . just a small cup . . .”

He shook his head at my offer of opening the gate and inviting him inside. “They might pass while I’m inside. They’re not far away either a’ead or behind. Likes I passed ’em larst night, but they’re on this road somewheres.”

When I came back with the coffee—the largest cup I could find—he had his back to the gate, scanning the road first one way then the other. Over the rim of the cup—both hands to it and even then it shook so that the steaming contents splashed to the ground—he invited my sympathy.

“Perishin’ larst night. An’ dark. Allus gets cold about dawn . . .” Some colour came to his cheeks. “A power o’ good in this,” he confided.

He was small and shaking and tired to the bone. I wanted to help him.

“These friends of yours that you are looking for,” I offered. “Perhaps

if they are coming along behind I might see them later on. Could I give them a message . . .”

“Message? . . .” Then he smiled, and smiling brought expression to his face. But no warmth; only coldness, almost evil. “They’re no friends of mine. At least, she was once, but ’e never was.”

“An’ the only message I got for ’im is in me pocket.” He took one hand from the cup to tap the bulging, tattered pocket. “Right ’ere . . .”

He looked for somewhere to set the empty cup and I took it from him. “By rights ’e’s no tramp,” he told me, now back to looking up and down the road. “A gypsy ’e calls ’imself—when ’e does ’is fortune-tellin’ at the fairs. Gypsy Pinto sees the future . . .”

His face was hidden but the narrow shoulders were suddenly expressive. “This is some of ’is future ’e don’t know abart yet . . .”

“I reckon as ’ow they must be a’ead,” he said thoughtfully. “I might’ve passed ’em larst night while they wus a-kippin’ in an ’ayrick, but I figger ’e’ll try and keep goin’ though likely she’ll slow ’im down.”

“Narsty, ’e is,” he brooded, shoulders hunched. “Sly an’ thievin’. Never did git on together, me an’ ’im.”

“A thief?” I wondered.

He turned, his eyes hooded. “Ay. Thief right enough. For ’e stole my woman . . .”

“Not far a’ead,” he said dreamily. “Reckon as ’ow I’ll catch up wi’ them pretty soon. I knows they’re on this road for a bloke at a pub sees ’em yesterday an’ they’re bound to be makin’ for Dalston Fair.”

“Must be on me way,” he said. “An’ thank you kindly fer the corfee. It’s brought new life. An’ if they does ’appen to be be’ind an’ you sees a man an’ a woman—the man youngish an’ spry, wi’ flashin’ eyes an’ white teeth an’ a face the colour o’ burnt oak; an’ the woman with a blue shawl that matches ’er eyes an’ soft red lips—then you can tell ’im that Willy Spender is a man o’ ’is word, and ’e’s arter them, an’ when ’e catches up then it’s a killin’, no less. Maybe fer both, but certain for ’im. An’ Gypsy Pinto’s throat will run red . . .”

“I told ’im,” he said gravely. “I told ’im when he first came sniffin’ round what’d ’appen if anythin’ like this came up. . . . An’ I allus keeps me word. I lorst me pride years ago, but I allus keeps me word . . .”

“But that would be murder,” I was driven to protest.

“Aye, so it would. That’s one way o’ lookin’ at it.” Then: “You wouldn’t ’appen to ’ave a fag on you?”

Something prompted me to give him the whole packet.

“Decent,” he said, “right decent o’ you. An’ because you’ve listened, an’ I can see it’s got you worried some, then I’ll come back this way when it’s done, and I’ll tell you one way or the other. An’ that’s fair enough, now ain’t it? And what you does abart it is your concern.”

Then he was gone, with a slow lifting of one hand, plodding through the morning sunlight with his face to the hills.

I didn’t know; I just didn’t know. After breakfast I sought out Con-

stable Robbins. Red-faced and only half-serious, he leaned across his bike while I told the story.

"Maybe yes, maybe no," he said. "Just wind, most likely. Ain't much I can do unless I 'phones sergeant in Dalston."

"Tramps," he said, suddenly fierce, "more trouble than they're worth. Reckon I'll give sergeant a ring, just to be on the safe side. . . . But likely it's just brag. I mean, ask yourself, sir, it don't make sense to tell a stranger you're goin' to do a murder."

"He said that he'd come back afterwards and tell what happened."

"That settles it," Robbins said then, and slapped his thigh. "Can you just see it? Coming back and telling you that he's murdered a bloke?"

And so the day passed. With the coming of evening I went to lean on the gate. Willy came with the first lengthening shadows.

Grey and featureless as before. And still tired. It hung on him like a black cloak. He stopped in the middle of the dusty road to look at me. The fierceness had gone from his eyes; they were calm and steady.

"It's done," he said gravely. "I found 'em this side o' Dalston. It's done . . ."

And then the breeze blew suddenly cold and when he raised his hands to tighten the blue scarf I could see how the blood had dried and caked from the cracks of his fingers, thin brown streaks down the back of each hand.

"I said as 'ow I'd let you know," he said, and then passed on his way into the gathering dusk, his feet padding soundlessly in the dust.

I met Robbins as I was on my way to his cottage. His face was white—the corners of his mouth tight and drawn. "It's murder, all right," he said before I could speak.

"I know," I told him. "Willy Spender has just told me."

"You've seen him?" Robbins asked excitedly. "You mean he did as he said he would?"

"Barely ten minutes ago. He was going back up the road."

Robbins swept his bike round. "Wait at the cottage," he said. "They're coming from Dalston to pick you up. I was just on my way to fetch you."

"Fetch me?" I wondered.

"The sergeant says they've got a corpse and a hysterical woman on their hands. And they can't get sense out of either of them. They've took the woman to the hospital. The sergeant says he reckons you know more about this than anyone else."

Then he was pedalling furiously away down the road, and the black saloon was waiting for me at the cottage.

They took me, apologetically enough, to a farm about a mile away, to a sack-covered body in a barn. There the Inspector was apologetic all over again. "Sorry about all this, sir, but it seems the murderer confided in you. I take it he described this gypsy?"

"He did," I said, eyeing the shrouded form with some trepidation.

The Inspector laid his hand on the sacking. "There's no need really if you'd rather not. It can't be conclu-

sive identification. But it would give us a start . . .”

“I’ll do what I can,” I told him.

“It’s the throat,” he said. “But that’s covered. It doesn’t look too bad. Just a quick glance at the face to see if it tallies with what this Willy Spender told you.”

Then he peeled the sacking back so I was able to identify the body. Positively identify it, for the grey face, the faded blue scarf and the old army

greatcoat were unmistakable. And somehow I’d known that all the time, ever since Willy’s last visit, when he’d stood shadowless in a world of lengthening shadows.

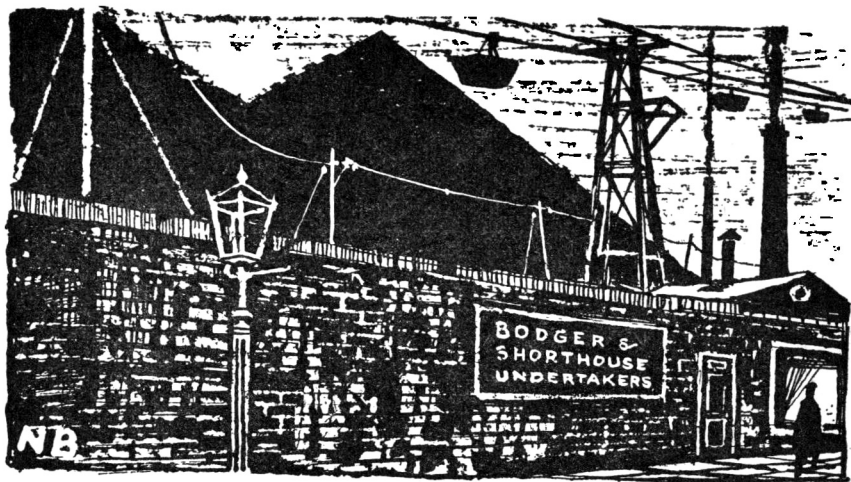
“This is Willy Spender,” I told the Inspector. “The murderer is a gypsy called Pinto . . . flashing eyes, white teeth and a face like burnt oak.”

Willy had been right when he said he always kept his word.



Me miserable! which way shall I fly
Infinite wrath, and infinite despair?
Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell;
And in the lowest deep a lower deep
Still threatening to devour me opens wide,
To which the Hell I suffer seems a Heaven.

JOHN MILTON.



IT MAKES YOU WONDER

CYRIL DONSON

Illustrated by Norman Battershill

I OFTEN WONDERED about Bert Bodger.

Sober, he was just a non-entity. After he'd had a drop, he was majestic, imposing, magnificent.

I had plenty of time to get to know Bert. We'd worked together on the railway, in a manner of speaking. We were both guests of the (Nippons at the time, in Burma. For about three years we shared a few square feet in a prison compound. You get to know a man that way.

I soon had Bert weighed up as a pretty clueless bloke, harmless, but with no imagination or ambition.

You'd have a tidy job finding anybody who looked less likely to be deliberately, and calculatedly dangerous. Imagine him, in those days, five-foot nothing, all skin and bone, with a naturally apologetic face and fast-receding hair. He looked like a jockey who'd hit on hard times.

But it was funny the way accidents had a habit of happening when Bert was around. And they never happened to him. It was always one of the Jap guards who got maimed.

Bert was so blatantly distressed and upset when questioned that the Japs ended up trying to assure *him* that these things will happen. Bert

was that type of bloke, convincingly repentant, violently critical of his own ham-handedness; yet always giving the impression of being the abject and willing slave.

The Jap overlords lapped up this sort of stuff. It was meat and drink to them. And after all, what were a few Jap guards between conquerors and conquered?

Being so close to Bert those three years I became convinced he really was dim and left it at that. It was so much easier than trying to visualize him in the role of hero, waging a private vendetta against the Nippons with inordinate skill.

After the Yanks dropped that big bomb on Nagasaki and the war ended, we were released. Waiting with scarcely-contained impatience in Hong Kong, I saw a new and unsuspected Bert Bodger.

He rounded up about fifty of us and organized a party. He'd whipped up a squad of coolies, each one staggering under a load of canned beer. We all got fell in behind and Bert led the way. With Napoleonic effrontery he commandeered the biggest place he could find, complete with Chinese orchestra and installed us.

There followed the most riotous booze-up it's ever been my good fortune to attend. This was a new Bert. Just where he packed the stuff I don't know. To look at him he hadn't the body to hold one half-pint, yet he downed three to every one I drank. And I'm no mean performer.

It would be a frantic lie to say Bert was sober halfway through the party. But he was still capable. In

fact, he was the life and soul of the party. I would never have guessed Bert was the type to recite poetry but he gave us some recitations that night of marathon length. Not that they were the sort of poems you'd find in the classic anthologies.

With a bellyful of beer Bert was truly magnificent. The last I saw of him on that eventful occasion, he was prancing down the highway at the head of the Chinese orchestra, brandishing a table leg. With the rabble of instruments and the clamouring troops behind, he conducted his own private victory parade. Every now and then, without pausing in his stride, he tossed his home-made mace sky-high, miraculously retrieving it when it seemed certain it would brain somebody.

A memory like that sticks. I hadn't seen Bert for years, but I had thought about him from time to time, and wondered.

On my first visit up north since my demob., I was travelling on a trolley bus—the things they call tracklesses in that part of Yorkshire—when I saw the signboard.

I'd been thinking, even in a place as dead as this progress makes changes. Some things remained unaltered. The dreary houses, black scaled from years of grime, were still stacked like cards in dark streets spoking off the main road. The welcome you get is never-to-be-forgotten. It caters for every sense.

You can see, taste and smell the muck. It pervades the atmosphere with such density you can feel it. And it seems to scoop up, like a giant,

invisible shovel, every noise within range and pour it about your ears.

Mountains which hadn't been there on my last trip, two towering slag heaps, dwarfed everything else. Tubs laden with waste from underground, laboured up the narrow-gauge railway to the summit, dumped loads, and ran down empty and relieved on an adjoining track.

The two peaks steamed continuously, thickening the fog that already enshrouded everything; more hearty odour; more eyesores on a landscape already an industrial scab.

The signboard was the only thing that looked clean. Freshly-painted, it was fastened to a high wall I knew hid the main railway line from the roadway. Cream letters a foot high on a black ground, declared boldly: "BODGER AND SHORTHOUSE. Undertakers."

Bodger . . . it took me back a few years. In a trice I was dancing, tight as a tick, on Jap-starved legs, down that Hong Kong highway. Ahead was Bert Bodger, the leader of the band, a transformed, inspired, regal Bert Bodger.

I acted on impulse and got off the trackless at the next stop, walked back some distance and stood looking at the sign. Alongside was a door painted black, and beside that was a large window, black-framed. There was a large stone pot, something like a Grecian urn in the window with a few faded lilies drooping from it. A printed card informed me that wedding cars were also available at competitive prices.

I had just about decided it couldn't

be the same Bodger I'd known—for all I knew Bodger might be as common as Smith or Higginbottom in these parts—when the single portal to the funeral emporium opened and there he was, larger than life.

Despite the structural improvements time had wrought upon him, I knew at once it was Bert. He was no longer skinny but almost indecently plump. He filled his black mourning suit like air fills a balloon. It was a prosperous-looking Bert Bodger, yet the face hadn't altered much. The faintly apologetic expression had a smoother, tight-skinned look, and the thinning hair was not discernible, being veiled beneath a black silk topper. But it was the same unmistakable face.

He noticed me staring and he stared back for about a minute, with an expression about as cordial as a coroner's summing-up. Then, all at once, he recognized me and with a grin splitting his mute face, he waddled across the street.

He pumped my hand up and down for a full two minutes.

"Bill Rutter! You old so-and-so! Fancy seeing you after all these years. Must be getting on for twelve years. What brings you to this mucky hole anyway?"

I released my hand, flexed the fingers and grinned.

"That's some grip you've got there. How's tricks? You're certainly looking more prosperous than last time I saw you. I'm just on my way to my sister's place. First time north since I was demobbed. Having a bit of a break."

Bert laughed. "Some place to pick for a holiday! But it really is good to see you. Ever see any of the other fellers?"

"Not one. You're the first," I said. "Where'd all those bones get to?" I patted his midriff.

"The tendency was always there, I guess. The Japs never gave us much chance to get fat did they? Well—now we've met up again, we must get together before you go back. Have a jar."

"I'm all in favour," I said.

He looked serious for a second, reminiscing.

"We had some tough times together, Bill."

"We did that, But the Hong Kong booze-up is my most vivid memory —"

"Ha—that was quite an affair, wasn't it?"

He chuckled. I quizzed him.

"By the way, I've often wondered, Bert. Where *did* you get all that beer?"

His eyes wrinkled and he looked innocently apologetic.

"I know you won't believe it, Bill, but the truth is, I found it."

As true as I'm riding this camel, I thought, but let it go. Bert looked at his watch.

"Got to dash now. Feller to bury. What about tomorrow night? Here's my card. I'll expect you."

We parted, going in opposite directions.

* * *

I arrived at my sister's place in time for tea. After five minutes, I

was made to feel I'd never been away.

There's nothing like a real Yorkshire welcome, with a coal fire blazing halfway up the chimney, strong tea from a pint pot instead of a cup, hot toast and the company of kin you've not seen for years.

"I thought you'd be ready for a bite after your long trip. We can have a cooked meal later," said Ethel, tall and stringy, and energetic as ever.

We tidied up all the loose ends left by years of absence, bringing each other up to date, and then drifted into a comfortable, homely silence, munching and drinking. Harold, Ethel's husband, had just got home from work. He sat reading the paper in his shirt-sleeves, ignoring Ethel's entreaties to go and get cleaned up.

He passed the paper over and I started to read it, a warm feeling of well-being lulling me into a drowsy state.

Then I saw the headline. It made me sit up. I read it again. "Big Robbery At Local Undertaker's." A sub-heading declared: "Safe Cleaned Out."

I read the story. "Mr. B. Bodger, well-known undertaker in the town, found that his office had been burgled when he arrived this morning to start the day's work. Interviewed by our reporter, Mr. Bodger stated that he estimated something like £7,000 had been stolen from the safe in his office."

There was a whole column of it. Police investigations had started and all the rest of it. No mention of the other partner, Shorthouse.

I whistled through my teeth. Bert

hadn't seemed unduly worried when I saw him. Must be pretty well lined, I thought, if he could stand to lose that much money and smile it off!

"What's got into you?" said Ethel, my sister.

"Just read about the robbery. Very nice for somebody."

"They've asked for it, if you ask me," she sniffed dogmatically. "If they'd had any sense they wouldn't have kept that much money on the premises."

Harold cut in: "Bert don't hold wi' banks. Never would put his money in. But from what I heard to-day there might be more behind this lark than meets the eye."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Bert and his partner haven't been getting on so well for a bit. It's common knowledge. And I heard Sam Shorthouse has scarpered."

"You mean he's done a bunk?" said Ethel.

"Aye. And like as not he took the money with him. I never trusted Sam. He's got a mean eye, that one."

Something prompted me then, to remain quiet about my knowing Bert.

"It doesn't say anything in the paper about Sam disappearing," I said.

"They haven't got hold of it yet but you can take it from me it's right enough. Chap as told me had it straight from Sam's missus. He's left her. She thinks he's gone off with another woman."

"What woman would look twice at a feller like Sam Shorthouse?" said Ethel. "He's no good—never was much account. But that Bert Bodger

gives me the shudders. He's queer. Mind you, there's no wonder. Spent some years in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp, I believe. . . ."

I let that pass. "What makes you say he's queer?"

"It's the way he looks at you sometimes, fair puts the creeps up me. Mind you, fair's fair—he's a real gent when it comes to burying people. Not like that Sam Shorthouse. He's not fit to bury a dog if you ask me. If he's gone, it won't be much loss."

Later that evening, over a pint at Harold's local, I got more of the story out of him. I learned that Bert had come to live in the town only four years ago from somewhere down south. He'd struck up an acquaintanceship with Sam who had a bit of cash tucked away. He'd made it running a back-street book on the geegees.

"Bert is a dab-hand at carpentry and that—and seems to have a good head for business. They made a deal, it seems, Sam put up cash, Bert to do the work, both to share profits on an equal partner basis."

"They must have done all right out of it," I said.

"You bet. There's never any shortage of customers in the undertaking lark," said Harold.

The following evening I called on Bert. The house he lived in was one of a row of ostentatious terrace houses. Outwardly they displayed no individuality.

Each had a small front garden, jutting bay windows, tiled recesses housing identical front doors. They were built in the hey-day of privately-

owned coal pits for mining officials to live in. Since Nationalization the houses had been sold to private owners.

The robbery and the absconding of Sam didn't appear to have upset Bert unduly. He greeted me affably.

"I was beginning to think you weren't coming."

I grinned and followed him inside. The furniture was good although there wasn't much of it.

"Haven't got much in the way of furniture yet—but you know how it is," said Bert.

"You live here on your own?" I asked.

"Afraid so. Haven't met a woman as would give me two looks. I'll probably die a bachelor."

"Nice place. I like it. By the way—sorry to hear about your spot of trouble."

"The robbery?" He shrugged. "It's a setback—but there's still the business."

I gave him a cigarette and lit one for myself. "A bit risky leaving all that cash in your office, don't you think? Not that it's any of my business——"

"Banks have been robbed."

"But your money would be safe."

He laughed. "It's all a matter of opinion. I've no time for banks. Besides—that way a man can't hide how much he's making."

So Bert was on the old income tax fiddle, I thought.

"I'd hate to lose that much dough," I said.

"It kind of gives me a pain," said Bert.

"Seems you're having a rough time of it—what with your partner doing a bunk as well——"

Bert almost dropped the glass he'd been filling for me and swung round. His face had gone dead white.

"*What* was that you said?"

"I said your partner had vamoosed."

He put the glass down. "Where did you hear that?"

It was plain he was shocked, and the information was news to him. I told him how I'd come by the story.

"I'd better nip round and see Molly. Do you mind?"

This was a different Bert to me. He seemed far more excited about the disappearance of Sam Shorthouse than he had been about losing the money. It made me wonder.

"Not at all. I'll come with you," I said.

I don't know what I expected to see but I got quite a shock when I met Molly. In a coarse sort of way she was a tidy bit of goods, nicely rounded in the right places, blonde hair permed a treat, no mean looker. I guessed she'd be around twenty-fivish—which was all right for Sam, provided he was mine and Bert's age.

And this being so, Sam wanting to leave her didn't figure somehow. But who am I to know—I'm only an inexperienced bachelor.

Moll certainly acted upset, but I got the feeling a lot of it was put on. She was doing some pretty heavy sniffing and her eyes were red. She kept dabbing at them with a useless bit of handkerchief.

"Oh, Bert, I'm so glad you came

round. Sam's done it. He's gone off and left me," she sniffed.

Bert made a rare job of patting her hand. He was altogether a bit too familiar for my money.

"You *sure* about this, Moll?" he said.

She nodded and sniffed some more. "He's not been home for two days. He went out the night before last and that was the last I saw of him."

"Night before last. That was the night the safe was robbed," said Bert.

Molly gasped. "Oh—you don't think——"

"Could be. If Sam was going far, he'd need some money."

"Especially if he went off with that hussy Beryl Clegge!" said Molly.

I noticed she didn't seem all that upset now. Bert, too, seemed to accept the situation with the minimum of fuss and palaver. He patted Molly's hand. "Don't you worry none, Moll. I'll see you're all right."

We left, after a while, and went back to Bert's place. He adopted a mood reminiscent, to me, of another halcyon occasion . . . the Hong Kong booze up.

We drank steadily from Bert's seemingly endless stock, talking over old times. The clock ticked round, unnoticed. I was amazed Bert had so much beer and spirits on hand, and wondered whether he made a habit of going on the bottle.

But it was all very pleasant, sitting back in the comfort and safety of his living-room and living over the hell of those war-torn days. Incidents which had almost driven us crazy at the time now assumed a rosy glow.

By midnight we were both pretty well oiled. When the clock on the wall struck the midnight hour I was as startled as Cinderella must have been the night of the ball. I had no fairy godmother to keep the right side of, but my sister could be pretty sharp-tongued.

"I . . . I'd better be going, Bert. Thanks . . . for a wonderful evening," I said.

Bert protested. "But you can't go yet. The session's only just started. We've lots more to talk about. Do you remember the night the Jap guard left his rifle——"

I stood up, a bit wobbly on my pins. "Bert, I'm sorry. But I really must be going. My sister . . ."

Bert looked offended. "Very well," he said with exaggerated dignity. "If you must. But first—I insist that you come and see my office and works. . . . Though I say it as shouldn't, I made a real spanking professional job of that old barn."

Neither of us were inebriated to the extent that we ran the risk of being run in, but we were far from sober. Bert had about him the same Napoleonic pomposity he'd displayed the night of the unforgettable Hong Kong parade. I couldn't refuse. But it all reminded me so strongly of that other affair I began to giggle.

"Can't see what there is to laugh at," said Bert shrugging into his funeral jacket and slapping his tall hat on his head. "C'mon."

The streets were deserted and it felt miserably cold and damp. We walked briskly, a somewhat precarious operation from my point of view. My

legs seemed to have developed a will of their own, and a desire to go off in a different direction. But we made it in about ten minutes.

Looking back on that night, I often see the funny side of it. At the time it didn't strike me as being ludicrous at all, the idea of going to inspect a funeral emporium at dead of night.

We inspected the office first. Bert had certainly done a first-class job on it, prefabricating the whole thing from scratch. It was furnished in ultra-modern style, with polished desk, filing cabinets, pictures on the walls and the safe in one corner.

"All my own handiwork," said Bert proudly.

"Very nice, too," I said.

We went down a short flight of wooden steps to the workshop. Bert switched on the roof lights, very much the monarch of all he surveyed.

"Take a good look around, Bill. Hard to imagine not long ago this was a crummy old barn, eh?"

"You've certainly made a good job of it, Bert," I agreed.

There were coffins all over the place, in various stages of construction, and quite a few completed. Timber was stacked up against the high rafters on all sides. Shavings, and tools littered the benches and floor. There was a dank, woody smell pervading the vast workshop. Finished caskets were stacked around the walls, singly and in pairs and threes.

There were coffins to suit all tastes, pockets and dimensions, Bert assured me seriously.

I followed him round the workshop

examining the caskets, making suitable comments from time to time. I don't know whether I over-did the complimentary stuff but with a sudden impulse, Bert gripped my shoulder.

"Bill," he said, solemnly. "You're an old and respected friend. Seeing as you're an old chum . . . you can have one."

I gaped. He waved his arm impressively.

"Go on—I mean it. Take your pick. Any one you like. You can either take it with you, or I'll have it sent."

I wasn't so drunk I couldn't imagine the trouble I'd run into if some night-beat copper saw me staggering home with an empty coffin on my back! I declined the generous offer with thanks.

But Bert was adamant. "To refuse a gift from an old comrade is an aff . . . aff . . . an insult," he said.

So to oblige him I made another tour of inspection. There were coffins in white wood, coffins in oak, some with brass fittings, some with beautiful chromium handles.

I stopped beside a truly magnificent casket, about my size. It was the most beautiful coffin I ever saw.

"Very well. I accept your kind offer. I'll have this one," I said.

The fittings, handles, gleamed like silver under the bright roof lights.

Bert looked distressed for a moment.

"I'm sorry, old friend, I should have told you. This one is booked. I made it specially for my partner, Sam Shorthouse."



"What's he want with a coffin?"

"He intends to put it aside until he has need of it," explained Bert, very dignified. Suddenly he clapped his hand over his mouth. "What am I talking about? Sam's gone—that's right. Sam's left us."

He slapped me on the shoulder, beaming.

"You can have it, Bill. It's all yours. And a finer coffin you wouldn't get anywhere. You'll be proud to be buried in that . . . some of my best workmanship, though I say so myself."

I walked round it. It certainly was a nice bit of carpentry.

"Why don't you try it for size?" said Bert.

I tried to lift the lid off, expecting it to come away easily. I couldn't budge it. Bert laughed. It was a hollow sound in that barn-like place.

"Caught you there, didn't I?" He started to giggle. "Self-locking handles—hinged top . . . all special features built-in at the request of my partner Sam. Can't think why he wanted 'em . . ."

He stooped and manipulated the handles in turn, releasing catches mortised into the woodwork. I lifted the coffin lid and it swung back on its hinge, creaking eerily.

Then I stepped back, eyes bulging, stone-cold sober, and petrified with fright.

In the coffin lay a fully-dressed man. He looked to be very dead.

Bert sobered up too. He took a step backwards.

"Cripes," he said. "Sam Short-house!"

Things happened fast after that. The police asked Bert and me a lot of questions. Naturally enough, they were a bit concerned about how Sam came to be locked up in that casket.

I spent the rest of that night thinking about it. I asked myself a lot of questions. I didn't like what everything seemed to add up to.

I couldn't see any possible way Sam could have accidentally locked himself up in his own coffin. I began to wonder about the money, too.

When I met Bert at his office the next day, as arranged. I was surprised to find him treating the whole affair lightly. Either he was too dim to see the spot he could be in—or he was boxing clever, I thought.

"You look as though you had a good night's sleep," I said.

"I slept like a top, why shouldn't I?"

I let that pass. The side door leading to the workshop opened and a tall, hefty man came into the room. Bert waved his hand.

"I don't think you've met the sergeant, Bill. Sergeant Cluster, local C.I.D. and coroner's officer. This is my old friend Bill Rutter."

Nervously I shook hands. Cluster looked tough, and smart.

"I'd like to use your office, Mr. Bodger, if I may. Ask a few questions."

"Bert nodded. "Pleasure. Help yourself."

Another plainclothes man joined us, notebook and pencil in hand. Cluster started on me.

"You were with Mr. Bodger when the body was found?"

"I was. And I'm not likely to forget in a hurry!" I said fervently.

"Tell me, Mr. Rutter, how did you come to be in the workshop at this time of night?"

Briefly I told him what had led up to the visit. It sounded banal and fantastic to me and I figured he wouldn't believe a single word.

But he seemed to accept my story. Then he questioned Bert.

"The idea of a coffin with special handles which automatically lock—strikes me as being—er—unusual? Whose idea was it?"

"Sam's—for some reason he insisted on them. Perhaps I ought to explain, sergeant. Sam had a peculiar fixation. He was bent on having his coffin ready—and he wanted to be sure it would be the finest ever seen around here. He had a strange sort of snobbery about it. Even insisted on trying it for size every now and then."

"I see," said the sergeant. "That sort of thing has been known before. Eccentric—but not quite crazy."

"Once, I even had to get him out of the coffin by force and take him home," said Bert.

"When was that?"

"We'd had a night out together. Sam was drunk."

Cluster switched his questioning. "Had you any reason to suspect Sam was planning to leave the district?"

"Not until his wife told me," said Bert.

"Would he have taken the money from the safe?"

"I wouldn't have thought so," said Bert.

Cluster nodded. I watched the other man scribbling away, not feeling so good.

He had Fred Stables into the office next. Fred was about sixty, bent with rheumatism.

"You're employed here as a labourer, Fred?" said Cluster.

"That's right, sarge. Been here two years."

"Tell me, Fred. When did you last see Sam Shorthouse alive?"

"That's easy. It were the night of the robbery. About five, I'd say. I were packing up to go home when Mr. Shorthouse called me into the office. Mr. Bodger had gone."

"What did Sam want you for?"

Fred looked a bit embarrassed.

"You must answer, Fred. It might be important," said Bert.

"Well, he asked me if I'd like to do a bit of overtime like. I said I didn't mind the extra money. You can always do with it can't you? So he says, well Fred, you report back here at eight-thirty sharp."

"What was the job he wanted you to do?" said Cluster.

"I don't rightly know," said Fred, frowning. "He told me to come in by the workshop door and on no account switch on any lights. He wanted me to take his coffin in one of the cars to some place."

"What place?"

"He didn't let on. Said he'd tell me that night when he saw me. I never did see him."

"How come you didn't see him?" asked Cluster.

"Well it were like this, see. I gets to the workshop door at half-past

eight but Mrs. Shorthouse was there. She grabbed a hold of me and demanded to know where Sam was and what was going on, like. She didn't seem to believe me when I said I didn't know anything. She started to shout and rant and made me go inside, and switch the lights on. I guessed by this time Mr. Shorthouse must have heard her and cleared off. But to get to the lights I had to grope my way in the dark right across the shop. I bumped into some timber and a whole cartload of it crashed down right along."

He laughed, then resumed a serious expression, as though he'd just realized he had committed blasphemy.

"I switched the lights on and Mrs. Shorthouse searched the whole place, office an' all. Sam—Mr. Shorthouse was no where around. But there was a proper shambles in the place, wood all over the place——"

"Thank you, Fred. Now one more question. Did you notice the coffin—Sam's special coffin?"

"No—that I didn't," said Fred.

The next man to be questioned was Tom Jones, a cabinet-maker who worked for Bert. He was about forty, short and very broad.

Cluster asked: "When did you last see Mr. Shorthouse alive, Tom?"

"The same night the safe was burgled," said Tom with no hesitation. "I called in, noticing a light in the office. Wanted to book some cars for my daughter's wedding. Hadn't had time all day. It was about half-seven."

"Was it usual to find Sam in the office so late?"

"No, it wasn't. Sam wasn't one for much overtime."

"I see. Did you manage to make your booking?"

Tom laughed. "Yes—but it were a bit of a job, seeing as Sam was as drunk as a lord."

"Are you positive he was drunk?"

"Never more sure of anything in my life. He was reeling all over the place, laughing and singing."

"I see. Did you notice anything else?"

"Well—he had pound notes all over the desk. I asked him if he wanted any help to put them in the safe. He told me to mind my own so-and-so business."

Cluster pursed his lips.

"Thank you, Tom. That's all. You can go."

When Tom had left, Cluster addressed himself to Bert. "I don't think you need to worry, Bert. I think I know how Sam died."

"Yes?" said Bert.

Cluster talked, almost as though he was talking to himself.

"First of all let me tell you we found the missing £7,000——"

Bert and I both jerked forward.

"You what?" said Bert.

"We found the money," repeated Cluster. "Some of it, a small amount, was in Sam's pockets. The rest was neatly tucked inside the silk lining of the coffin."

"Why would he want to put it there?" asked Bert.

"I figure it this way," said Cluster. "All the evidence points to the fact that Sam was going to abscond with the cash. He probably planned to

hide it in the coffin, get Fred to deliver it to some place where he could pick it up later.”

“Wouldn’t that be rather unnecessary?”

“Not if Sam planned to stick around *after* the fake robbery to throw suspicion off himself. He probably meant to disappear later. He knew the money would be safe in the coffin. But tragedy intervened.”

“How?” said Bert. I never saw him looking more dim.

“Well, the night he emptied the safe and stuffed the cash in the lining of his coffin he was drunk. We have Tom’s word for that. He was on the premises. Yet when Fred and Sam’s wife arrived less than an hour later, there was no sign of him. We have to fill in the events between.”

“How can you do that without witnesses? How can anybody know what happened?” Bert was convincingly stupid.

Cluster shrugged. “We can only guess—from the facts we know. Sam was there. He was drunk. He had stuffed the money in the coffin. We know he was eccentric about that coffin. You told me yourself you once had to remove him by force, when he was drunk.”

“So you think——”

“I think—that after Tom left,

knowing he had a bit of a wait before Fred came, Sam stretched out in his coffin. He might have fallen asleep—anything. We can only surmise. But suppose he was in the coffin, and the hinged lid was resting against the stacked timber that was leaning against the rafters . . .”

Bert gasped. “When Fred barged into the timber in the dark, and it crashed down, some of it knocked the coffin lid shut?”

Cluster nodded, grimly convinced his theory was right. “It could be the answer. The only feasible one.”

And that was the way it went at the inquest. A post mortem showed the cause of death was suffocation. The jury accepted Cluster’s theory, backed by the available evidence. The coroner recorded a verdict of “death by misadventure”.

I didn’t know what to think. I couldn’t help remembering. It was funny the way accidents had a habit of happening when Bert was around.

Two things bothered me. Bert had, throughout insisted it was Sam’s idea to have patent locking handles on that coffin. Tom, who helped to make the casket, told me it was Bert’s idea entirely.

Then, six months after the inquest, Bert married Molly. I could be wrong. But I often wonder.



HAUNTINGS LIMITED

R. F. SONGHURST



IT WAS A peaceful evening in late November; the rain was driving in sheets across the churchyard of St. Wulfric's and the wind shrieked around the tower, howling gustily past the lychgate. The waterspout on the wall near our detached tomb gurgled vulgarly, much to my wife's annoyance as she basked in a puddle close to the railings, while I reclined against a headstone, reading the *Haunter's Gazette*. In fact, it was one of those rare evenings when death seems really worth dying.

I folded the paper to get at the advertisement columns and Emma (late Clifton, obit 1827) remarked, "Anything of interest in the paper, dear?"

"Nothing much," I replied, skimming the columns, "just the usual . . . there's exactly 25,000 spectres and horrors out of work. The paper is full of adverts of nightmares seeking employment," and I briefly read out a few: "Elderly nightmare seeks situation, baby-frightening preferred . . . vampire requires employment, 890 years with the same family, house now subsiding due to open-cast mining . . . shrieking lady wants quiet lodgings with respectable family, etc., etc."

"It appears to me," sniffed Emma, as she sewed a new hole in her Sunday shroud, "that things are not too

good all round, and really, dear, although you often grouse at the lack of prospects in local government, it is at least steady and regular . . . and is better than being unemployed like those other poor spectres."

"True," I grunted, folding up the paper and jamming it between my ribs, "but still, you know, I'd feel happier if I thought that I was going to get somewhere . . . to become somebody of importance," and I snivelled with anguish and writhed all over.

"What you need," said Emma, shaking the mud from her shroud, "is a part-time fiddle. Why not run an employment agency for ghosts? And now, what about supper?"

Having settled for moonshine and moss, she incanted and vanished into the tomb, leaving me to brood over her words.

I'm not a quick thinker at any time but I am a sound brooder over things; on this occasion I excelled myself and went numb all over, and it wasn't until Emma had shaken me to pieces that I realized supper was ready.

Some three years later, having brooded over the matter carefully and discussed it both with my wife and our mutual friend Aggie the Were Wolf, I decided to set up a Limited Company, composed of myself, Emma and Aggie. After getting the legal formalities drawn up and

settled by our solicitors, Messrs. Morrow, Rundale and Hesp, we arranged to rent the lower crypt of St. Wulfric's from Sir Enoch Beagle, who keeps his body in the left-hand coffin at the foot of the stairs. Perhaps I should say that the rest of the crypt is a common (very common) charnel house, and nobody knows who really owns which remains; it's apt to be confusing at times . . . indeed, Emma once caught me coming home with the wrong bones.

When Aggie had tastefully furnished it with the most expensive cobwebs and illuminated the crypt with corpse candles, Emma added the final touch with the office furniture of coffin desks, a pile of bones for ghosts awaiting interviewing to disport themselves with, a large ledger to record the fees in and another one for appointments wanted and vacant.

I sat next to Emma with the ledger in front of me, while Aggie sat on the other side in her beautiful shape of a girl, ready to freeze on to the fees and cast a suitable leer at the clients.

Suddenly a red mist formed adjacent to Aggie; it turned to a bright scarlet, then vanished, leaving a tall, ragged figure clad in an old pair of trousers and a shabby jacket, holding a blood-stained dagger in the right hand. The face was quite Hibernian in appearance, but the missing left eye and gashed nose did not improve its beauty.

"Well?" remarked Aggie, sitting up and purring like a cat with a mouse. "Well, darling, what can we do for you?" she leered up at him.

I cannot hope to reproduce his

pure Irish accent, but the gist of his reply was that his name was McBeagle, and that he had emigrated to England in hopes of bettering himself, having tired of haunting a disused fire station.

"What is your speciality, Mr. McBeagle?" I enquired, poisoning my pen.

"Sure, Oi'm a great hand at the bleeding, and since Oi murdered me ould grandma with this wee knife, Oi've bled all over the place . . . the ould hesp wiped me one back with a chopper before she died . . . the filthy crature."

Having duly entered this in column one of the book, I resumed, "You don't go in for anything else, then? No howling, screaming or chain rattling? Just bleeding?"

"Oh, aye," he chuckled. "Just bleeding all over . . . in fact," puffing out his ribs, "Oi would go so far as to say that Oi'm the biggest and best bleeder anywhere," and after he had given us a demonstration of his powers that left the ledgers and desks spattered with blood, he leaned on the desk and leered at Aggie, while Emma searched through the register of appointments.

"I think this might suit, Mr. McBeagle," said Emma. "Appointment going in the blood-donors laboratory in Bedford Row . . . would that be all right?"

"An' what wud the work of a blood laboratory be?" inquired Mr. McBeagle, resting a bloody hand on the ledger and winking his one sound eye at Emma and Aggie alternately.

"Well, the work wouldn't be very

difficult," said Emma sarcastically, "merely filling bottles with blood . . . I suppose you could arrange to bleed into bottles and not just over the furniture?" and she proceeded to mop up the gore on her desk with an old shroud, while Mr. McBeagle thought things over.

It struck me that Aggie had taken a fancy to our visitor, though for the death of me, I couldn't think why, for a more commonplace horror I've never met. A mere leaver-of-bloody-marks! Not even a howler!

There she was leering up at him, and even blushing when caught in the act; while her nose kept twitching like a dog scenting its dinner.

"Oi'll tak it," finally announced Mr. McBeagle, "and now what wud be the fee?"

"One hundred years' salary in advance," snarled Emma, entering it in the register.

"Oh, very well then," and diving into his ragged pocket, Mr. McBeagle pulled out £100,000 and 4*d.*, which he then passed to Aggie, who, blushing and giggling, received it, and gave him a receipt. He then left, taking his bloody mist with him and firmly clasping the letter of introduction in his left hand.

"Well, that's one client," snapped Emma, "and a pretty poor specimen, too," and she oscillated viciously.

"I thought him rather a darling," sighed Aggie. "I wonder if we'll see him again?"

"I doubt it," I grunted, bouncing my head up and down on the desk, idly . . . "as a ghost he wasn't up to much, but he struck me as very

genuine . . . probably stick to his new job all his death, you know."

A sudden ghastly scream rent the void and our next client, a Shrieking Lady, put in an appearance. To cut it short, we were kept very busy, taking down details, collecting fees and so on for the next five years.

Some æons later, I was quietly dozing in my coffin when my wife entered, luminous with news. "Have you heard? Aggie is going to get married."

"Rubbish," I laughed, sitting up. "Aggie might run around a bit, both as a wolf and as a girl, but she's not the marrying type . . . you've been talking to that oily-tongued Welsh Dragon again." I glared at Emma accusingly.

"Here's Aggie herself to confirm it, anyway," sniffed Emma, as a sudden warmth fell on the air, to be followed by a strong smell of violets, followed by Aggie herself, accompanied by a red mist that resolved itself into the shape of Mr. McBeagle, no longer ragged, but decently, even expensively dressed.

"The fact is," remarked Mr. McBeagle, putting one arm round Aggie, who blushed very much and beaming round at us. "The fact is, Aggie and Oi have decided to get married . . . we foind we have a lot in common and we both hope ye'll come to our funeral together . . . and hope we'll all be good friends and proper beastly to each other!"

Numbed, I wave them to a seat, while Emma passed round glasses of Hellwater for celebration. Then

Aggie, spoke for the first time, writhing and blushing.

"You see, I loved Michael from the first . . . Well . . . we've seen a lot of each other since . . . and when he asked me to get buried to him, I realized how much I really detested him . . . you see, he's so perfectly and utterly bloody," and she threw her arms round McBeagle's neck and kissed him.

Suddenly, I realized the reason for the love match: as a vampire, Aggie naturally loved blood, and McBeagle

was, as he said himself, "a great bleeder."

Solemnly, Emma and myself drank their healths and after the three hundred and seventy-ninth glass, McBeagle waxed sentimental and caused Aggie to slightly decompose by hiccuping as he held his glass to the light. "Perhaps nexsht year . . . who knows? . . . there'll be the screaming and bellowing of li'l vampires . . . and if they only have their mothersh beauty, plus my blood . . . hic . . . Oi'll be miserable for death!"



THE CROOKED SMILE

ROBERT BLAKE

Illustrated by Vera Jarman



TONY CAME FROM his aunt's bedroom, slamming the door behind him with more than necessary violence. He stood for a moment on the landing, his eyes filled with her simpering crooked smile and the high querulous voice still in his ears.

The nurse came up the stairs in a rustle of starched, antiseptic whiteness, her arms piled high with clean linen. Ignoring her silent appeal to open the door he brushed past her and went down the stairs and into the lounge.

The Victorian atmosphere of solid, ugly furniture was almost physical in its impact. Massive sideboards, tall-backed chairs and heavy-framed pictures glowered and threatened. The very air seemed lifeless and dusty and age-old. But then the whole house was like that—a mausoleum of the past, with its corpse-like custodian lying in a nest of silks and satins in the bedroom high above his head.

All he could remember of his life was bound up in these yellow-brick walls. He was only five when his parents had been killed and Aunt Cynthia had taken him to live in her virginal fastness.

Aunt Cynthia—a frail, fleshless parcel of bone; a wrinkled, painted

face with a crooked smile; a thin trembling hand that controlled every move he made.

When he had been very small, in the days when she had still been able to move about the house, he had wondered about the thick coating of paint, the heavily-rouged cheeks, the scarlet greasy lips that looked so incongruous beneath the straggling grey hair and the pink-frilled mob-cap.

But as he had got older so he had come to realize that the paint and rouge was an ineffectual attempt to disguise the scar that ran deep-etched from corner of mouth over sunken cheek to disappear into the thinning hair. The scar that had drawn and twisted the thin lips into the eternal travesty of a smile.

Once, long ago, he had loved her. But only with the affection of a lonely child for the hands from which food, clothes and toys had flowed in an abundant, satisfying stream. Once he had been happy and content in the Victorian *ménage* of flickering candles, gleaming silver, fine damask cloths and wine-red draperies.

But now he was a man. It was a man's face that stared back at him from the curtained mirror over the ornate marble fireplace. An ordinary face, looking younger than his twenty-two years; straight flaxen hair, pale blue eyes that had a tendency to

watering when the wind was cold; a narrow, pale face with a loose flaccid mouth and a chin that lacked any semblance of determination.

Once, he had been content . . .

But now that was all past; now there was the world outside. Now there was Mabel.

And, of course, he had never dared tell Aunt Cynthia about Mabel. He knew beyond doubt that she would be jealously disapproving of any girl that he took up with, let alone the tight jumpers, the short skirts, the bleached brassy curls and scarlet mouth that was Mabel.

Mabel lived by herself in Stepney; she worked in the little snack-bar with the fly-spotted window at the corner of the street. She was cheap and common, but she was a woman—the only woman who had ever shown the slightest interest in him as a man.

They had first met one rainy afternoon, perhaps a year ago now, when he had offered her the protection of his umbrella. Since then they'd gone out quite a lot together, and he had found the stolen interludes pleasing, all the more so for their being his first adventures in the world that lay outside the tall house with the marble pillars where Aunt Cynthia ruled from her bed.

He'd told Mabel all about the old woman; she knew how he lived in the tight-fisted grip, how even his pocket money was doled out a few shillings at a time. But she knew as well that because there was nobody else, one day he would own the house and its contents, and the money that went with it.

But that wasn't the reason that she went out with him—she'd gone to enough pains to make that clear.

"I love you, Tonikins," she'd whispered. "I don't mind if you can't give me all the things you'd like . . . But it won't always be like this, now will it?"

But he hadn't told her about the nurse; how she'd been working her insidious way into the old woman's affections ever since she'd come to look after her. Five years of flattery and fawning attention, agreeing with Aunt Cynthia's slightest whim, even trying to turn her against him. He'd have to be very careful. No matter what the cost he must keep on the right side of the old woman.

"No," he'd whispered back to Mabel, "it won't always be like this." And then she'd kissed him, the small room reeking with her cheap perfume.

But after a while— "Let's get married anyway," she'd pleaded. "We can keep it a secret for the time being. Our secret? . . ."

"We can't," he'd told her, "not without money; you know that, Mabel—we'll just have to wait. It won't be long now, she's getting very old."

And then her voice had risen, becoming harsh and discordant.

"Wait?" she'd cried, and for a moment he had his first glimpse of a different Mabel—a frightening, hard-eyed stranger. And somewhere at the back of his mind was the thought that one day there would be others to choose from, that perhaps Mabel

wouldn't fit into the new life that one day would be his. But that was some time ahead—Mabel was a thing of the present, a warm body of flesh and blood.

"Please . . ." she'd wheedled, her voice softening again, her fingers twined in his hair.

"You know it's impossible," he'd reasoned.

"Unless we can get married, you must stop seeing me." Was she trying to be sensible or was she threatening?

"No . . ."

And then she'd said something that altered everything.

"There's another thing—I didn't really want to tell you——"

"Yes?"

"I'm going to have a child—your child."

"My God!" he'd breathed, searching her face.

"It means I'll 'ave to give up me job—you see what I mean? An' who's going to look after me then? Now will you try an' get money from the old bitch?"

"I'll speak to her," he'd promised, reeling under her news, "I'll see what I can do."

* * *

"Haven't you got everything you could possibly want?" Aunt Cynthia had asked plaintively when he went to her room.

"I'm a man," he'd told her sullenly, feeling like a child begging for a few extra coppers. "I want to get out more—go to shows and things—buy my own clothes . . ." He daren't tell her the truth, of course.

"Tell me what you want to do," she'd replied, "and I'll get the nurse to arrange it for you. Now how does that sound?"

She was treating him like a child again—a special treat if he was good, like a kid being taken to the pantomime.

She put it into words. "You're only a boy," her voice soft and whining. "You know nothing about the world. You must let me decide what's best for you. One day, when you're older, you'll be fit to handle your own affairs. I'll be dead and gone then, and you'll have all my money to do exactly as you like with."

He'd started to protest, "But I'm twenty——" and she'd raised herself laboriously from the laced pillow, the crooked smile grimaced with exertion, the sleeve falling away from a scrawny rope-sinewed arm as she reached up to stroke his cheek.

"You're all I have—you mustn't leave me now."

He'd known all along that that was how she felt. A stupid, selfish old woman spoiling his life because she wanted him always by her side. He mustn't be permitted to leave; he must stay tied to her apron-strings, eating her food, wearing the clothes she paid for, begging for every little thing he needed.

So he'd stormed out of the room, relieving a little of his feelings by slamming the door. He was sure that there'd been a secret sly smile on the nurse's face—just as if she knew. He'd have to watch her very closely—wills could be altered by a stroke of the pen.

He waited in the usual place under the square, gilt clock outside the jeweller's shop facing the snack-bar. He was hatless and the wind lifted his thin hair, his eyes watered a little with the cold. He leaned against the grill and smoked a cigarette while he wondered what he could tell Mabel.

He'd done all he could and she couldn't expect more than that. Or could she? And then there was the child. Was she telling the truth? . . .

He looked up at the familiar sound of the shop door being opened and closed. Mabel waved to him, her cracked, patent-leather handbag dangling from her arm. She turned to try the door, then teetered across the road, swaying on her high heels, the thin blue coat clutched tightly about her buxom figure.

He took her arm and they walked slowly along the street.

"Well——?" She peered up from beneath mascaraed lashes.

"Well, what?" he asked with artificial cheerfulness.

"Did you ask 'er?"

He nodded, his eyes on the pavement. "No go; she wouldn't give me a penny. I knew I'd only be wasting my time, anyway."

And then the new Mabel, and one he'd glimpsed once before, came to the surface. She stopped dead in her tracks, and he slowed, turning to look back. Her usually pallid face was flushed, the blue eyes narrowed, the scarlet mouth tight and hard.

"D'you know what I think?" she said, her voice cracking with vehemence, "I think as 'ow you never asked 'er at all. I think you're quite 'appy

going along the way you are . . ."

Her voice rose, strident and vicious, seeming to fill the street with its raucous clamour. "Well, I'm not! An' what are you goin' to do about it?"

"I tried," he mumbled, shocked at the revelation, "I did ask——"

"You asked," she mimicked. "An' just supposin' you did? Call yourself a man? There's other ways than just asking."

Tony clenched his hands, thrusting them deep into his pockets to conceal their trembling.

"What are you goin' to do about it?" she asked, arms akimbo.

"I don't know—there's nothing I can do."

She took his arm, then, the storm seeming to pass as quickly as it had arisen.

"Look, Tonikins," she pleaded, her eyes now soft and melting. "We can't go on like this, what with the baby comin' an' all. Surely you see that?"

He nodded, finding nothing to say.

"There's bound to be money in the 'ouse, to pay bills an' such like . . ."

"The nurse," he explained dully, "she takes care of that sort of thing."

"Well, where does she get it from?"

"From my aunt, of course," he told her. "She always goes to my aunt. But I couldn't steal——"

"You couldn't steal it?" she persisted, watching him closely. "But don't you see it wouldn't be stealin'. It's all goin' to be yours one day—now isn't it?"

"I suppose so," he hedged; he'd never looked at it that way before.

"Only suppose so——" Her voice started to rise again. "What d'you mean—only suppose so? Is there any doubt about it?"

And then, before he could open his mouth, "I'll tell you what I'm goin' to do—I'm goin' to see 'er meself. I'm goin' to tell 'er what you've bin doin' an' 'ow I'm goin' to 'ave a kid. That oughter liven things up a bit—that'll make 'er alter 'er way of thinkin'."

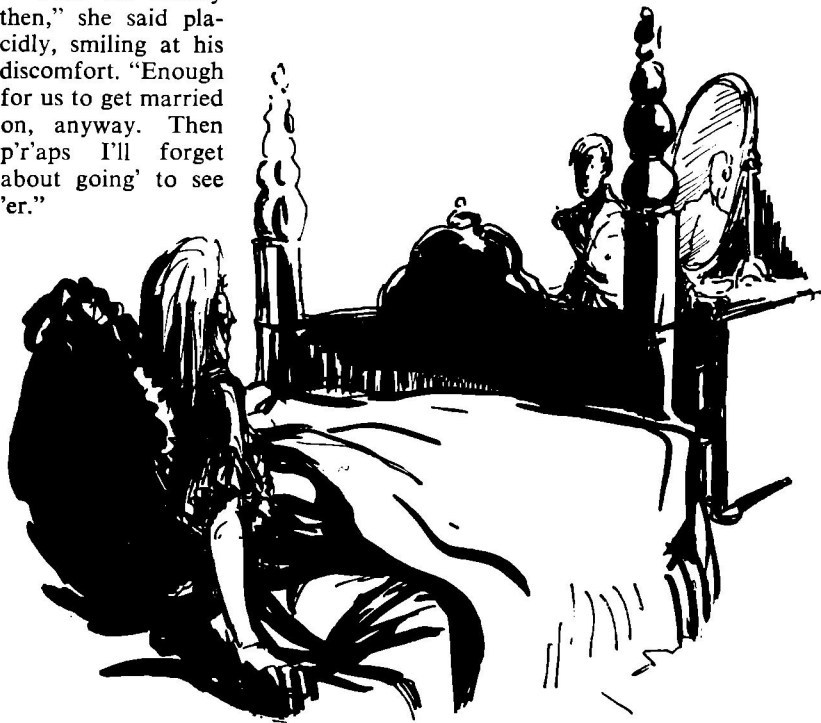
"No!" he shouted, stung to violent retaliation. "Whatever happens she must never find out about us."

"Find the money then," she said placidly, smiling at his discomfort. "Enough for us to get married on, anyway. Then p'r'aps I'll forget about going to see 'er."

The nurse was waiting for him when he got back to the house. She beckoned him into the lounge.

"You upset your aunt this mornin'," she said, chin drawn disapprovingly into the stiff collar, arms folded over the crisp apron. "Talking about wanting more money, and then storming out like you did. I won't have my patient upset like that, you gave her quite a turn. I had to send for the doctor—he's coming again sometime today. She's sleeping now, mind you don't disturb her."

"I won't," he told her, swallowing



his resentment, and went thoughtfully up the broad staircase.

He waited for a moment on the landing, making sure that the nurse wasn't going to follow. Then, when the lounge door showed no signs of opening, he quietly opened the door of his aunt's bedroom, and as quietly slipped inside.

She was fast asleep, her mouth open, wheezing, tortured sounds coming from the back of her throat. The wizened claws trembled on the satin cover, the thin nose pointed at the ceiling.

He stood by the side of the bed, looking down at the thickly-plastered rouge and lipstick that failed to disguise the smile that was crooked even in sleep.

His eyes wandered round the room, assessing dressing-table, chest-of-drawers and bureau. The bureau would be the most likely place.

Silently then, across the thick pile of the carpet, opening the top on well-oiled levers, peering inside at the piles of letters and bills, touching with prying fingers the accumulations of the years. He opened the small drawers, looking inside each one, prodding and stirring.

And then, hearing the sudden creak of bed-springs, he turned to look into Aunt Cynthia's accusing eyes. She had pulled herself upright, holding on to the sides of the wide double bed.

He leaned back against the bureau, his hands searching for a grip to steady himself, his face chalk-white, his blood turning to ice. He had felt all along that this would happen—

somehow he'd known that he'd never get away with it.

"Tony!" Her face and voice alike were filled with sorrow. "You were looking for money—you were going to steal from me?"

And then, when he made no attempt to reply, "After all these years—after all I've done for you"—her eyes now on the open bureau—"I would never have believed . . ."

"I had to have it," he told her desperately. "You don't understand, I have to get married. Don't you see? I have to . . ."

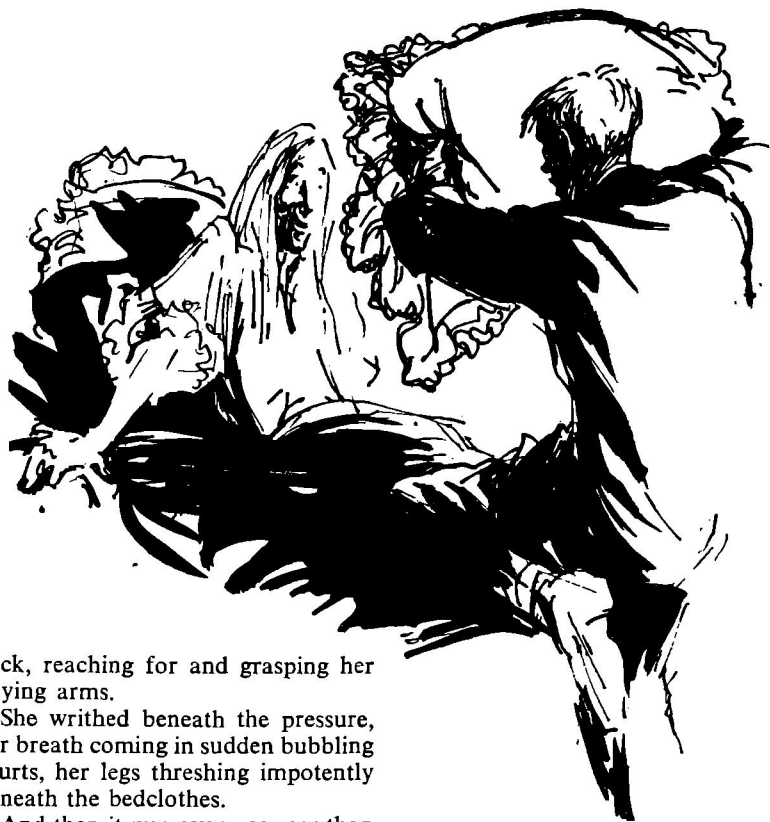
"Married?" The word had taken her by surprise. "Married? You?"

And then realization dawned, and with it came a new hardness so that the familiar face took on new lines, the mouth tight, the eyes narrowed.

"After all I've ever done for you," she echoed her own words, her hand reaching for the dangling cord of the bell. "D'you think I'm going to let you ruin your life? D'you think I could rest in my grave knowing that you were going to let some designing hussy spend all my money? I'll take care that that never happens. . . . The nurse was right, you're not fit to have my money."

And then he was by her side, looking down at the furious face, his hands reaching for the lace-frilled pillow by the greying head.

She fell back, staring up at him with dawning horror, her hand dropping away from the untouched bell-push. Then the crooked smile was blotted out as he bore down with his soft enveloping weapon, pressing her



back, reaching for and grasping her flaying arms.

She writhed beneath the pressure, her breath coming in sudden bubbling spurts, her legs thrashing impotently beneath the bedclothes.

And then it was over—sooner than he had thought possible. She lay still, the breast no longer heaving, her arms dropping limply when he released them. He kept the pillow tight against her face for another minute, then peeled it carefully away, watching intently for any sign of life.

With the realization that she was dead came a feeling of calmness and overwhelming relief. The power of death had been in his hands—his thin hands which had ceased their trem-

bling; and now the worries of the past were over, the whole tenor of his life changed. He wondered dispassionately why he had never considered murder before.

Slowly, now, and carefully, he replaced the pillow by the staring face, smoothing it back into shape, wiping all traces of his grip from it. He straightened the disordered bedclothes, tucking them into the sides of the mattress. The open eyes wor-

ried him, and he hesitated, fighting back a sudden revulsion before laying his fingertips on them, closing them for the last time.

On the landing he called down, his voice urgent, and filled with just the right amount of alarm. "Nurse!"

And as she came running, so the door-bell rang.

"I'll answer that," he cried, racing down the stairs. "Go to my aunt—she's had another turn. I think she's——"

He avoided the word, and opened the door, immediately recognizing the doctor.

"Thank heaven!" he cried. "You're just in time—upstairs, quickly! My aunt——"

The doctor looked down at the still figure, his hands fumbling with the dangling stethoscope.

"I expected this," he told them, the nurse quietly whimpering at his side. "Hardly so soon, perhaps, but I knew that the next attack would most likely prove fatal."

He made to draw the sheet 'over the dead face, but the nurse was in his way, bending sobbing over the body, laying her hand in a gesture on the cold, white forehead.

"She was a fine old lady," she whispered, her voice breaking, and then, the tears starting to course down her cheeks, she clutched at the pillow, raising it to her face in a frenzied gesture of sorrow.

Tony looked at the two crooked smiles, side by side. The one on the dead face on the bed—the other on the centre of the pillow, vivid and starkly clear.

"So that was how it happened," the doctor said softly in his ear.



Death stands above me, whispering low
I know not what into my ear;
Of his strange language all I know
Is, there is not a word of fear.

WALTER SAVAGE LANDOR.

INFILTRANT

L. P. DAVIES

Illustrated by John Hancock



FOR SOME TIME now he had had the feeling that there was something wrong; something terribly wrong.

Danvers cradled his glass between fingers that were tense and trembling with the urgency of his thoughts. The club-room was a place of old leather and soft-drifting smoke.

"Supposing," he said, "that one country wanted to invade another, but they were so far away and would have so far to come that only the minimum force necessary could be used . . ."

And when the doctor raised one slow deliberate eyebrow, "I mean assuming this first country wanted to infiltrate rather than openly invade; how would they go about it?"

The doctor leaned back. "In what context?" he wanted to know. "I'm not sure I'm with you."

Danvers, narrow intent face, sensitive chin, pale nervous hand, stared at his glass. He wasn't sure himself of the context; he had only broached the question to put into words the nagging thoughts at the back of his mind. "Purely hypothetical," he said lamely. "A line of thought I was pursuing."

"Another article from the gifted pen?" the doctor mocked gently. He was a friend of the family; he had in his time brought both Danvers and

his son into the world. Shaggy-haired and with the face of a benevolent cherub, he was nearly seventy and still in practice.

Danvers felt no rancour at the mention of his job with the local paper. He was used to it, at least as far as the doctor was concerned. "No, doc. Although—" He hesitated, then lied: "Yes. It might be at that 'What has happened to the Fifth Column?'—you know."

"That's your answer," the doctor said. "The Fifth Column."

"But suppose," Danvers said, suddenly cunning, "suppose there was such a difference in the physical structure that it would be impossible to infiltrate in the usual way . . . ?"

"Physical structure?" The other peered up sharply. "You've got another bee in your bonnet," he stated, mildly accusing. "This wouldn't have anything to do with your fancies about Colin?"

* * *

Danvers left his car in the drive and went into the house. Laura dropped a light absent kiss on his cheek. "Busy day, dear?"

"So so." He unfolded his paper. "Colin about?"

"Up in his room," she said lightly. "Ready for tea?"

She flowed from the room, her feet barely seeming to touch the floor.



Slender, ethereal, pale-blond; drifting, swaying through life, wrapped up in her garden, her friends and Colin.

“Up in his room”; the attic way up at the top of the house. A twelve-year-old boy with a room of his own and a lock to the door. Laura’s idea, of course; give him anything he asks for—satisfy his every whim. And she was completely under the boy’s thumb.

Danvers rested his elbows on the chair to steady the trembling of his hands.

There was something wrong.

Something very wrong; he was sure of that. Unless he was going out of his mind.

Six years ago the first vague stirring of suspicion. He had come quietly into this very room to find Colin, a fragile six years, curled up on the settee, slim brown legs tucked beneath him, pointed chin resting on one hand, his mop of golden curls bent tight over the morning paper.

It had been no skimming through the pictures, no looking at the strip cartoons on the back page, but a careful studying of the news. Deeply engrossed, pale eyes flickering across the print. Absorbed, intent. . . .

That had been the start—the first indication that something was wrong.

Danvers had coughed, and the old-young face had changed on the in-

stant, the paper was tossed aside and Colin had become a very ordinary six-year-old boy eager to be picked up and carried round the garden on his Daddy's back.

"But he's clever," Laura had said when he told her.

Clever? Yes, he was; but not in the way she meant.

At school, term after term, the reports had always been the same. Mediocre. And more than that, exactly mediocre—neither good nor bad. As though that were the position that Colin had picked for himself. To always be medium; not to draw attention to himself.

And not only at school, but everything else. The games he played—all so very ordinary.

But nothing he could set his finger on and say, "This is wrong."

"We're lucky he's as strong as he is," Laura said placidly. "Especially after such a bad start. We're lucky that he's here with us at all—you know that, dear."

He knew that; he knew that Colin had been weak and sickly at birth and actually died . . . for one minute and twenty-eight seconds the doctors had said, and then the miracle of the oxygen tent. Not unusual, it had happened to other babies, it would happen again.

But that had made Colin different from most children. Then the time he had caught him reading the paper; then a thousand and one other little things he just couldn't quite pin down.

His quiet dominance over his mother; the way he had taken over

the attic; the way that tears had to be forced when he fell down and cut his knee. As though he only cried because that was the thing to do. And once—and he had only been five at the time—Danvers had watched him deliberately trip himself up, then come running to Laura to be comforted . . .

He kept his toys in the attic and played with them there in the lonely emptiness. If his father went up, then he was welcome to join in a game with the trains. But all the time Danvers felt that there was tolerance on the boy's part, almost as if Colin was immeasurably the older of the two.

Then: "Mommie, I was thinking. Wouldn't it be nice if I could have a key to my room . . . ?"

That had been on his twelfth birthday, some four months ago.

"A key, dear?" Laura had wondered. "But why . . . ?"

"So's I can have somewhere to go an' think. An' it'll be somewhere all my own."

So Laura had given him the key. "How sweet," she said to Danvers. "Wanting his own private little room."

"I don't like it," he had said stubbornly. But, of course, Colin had been given his key. And any protest against the indignity of being locked out of a room in his own house was met with tears from Laura. . . . They must give Colin his way; he was a good boy; why shouldn't he have some privacy if he wanted it?

So now the attic door was kept

locked, even when the boy was inside . . .

The feeling of strangeness had grown from that time. Now it was almost revulsion. Any love that he had had for his son had died, withered in the alien feeling that surrounded the boy like a cloak. And he was the only person who seemed to notice it, to be aware of anything different.

It had been an unpleasant discovery to find he had lost all affection for Colin. For a while his conscience fought a battle with the alien cloak. And when the battle was lost he found himself able to stand back and watch the child from a coldly disinterested point of view. And so watching brought another discovery; that Colin was watching him in the same way.

That same day he dropped in at Wilson's surgery.

He came right to the point. "I'm worried about Colin."

"Something wrong?" the doctor asked.

Danvers felt he wanted an ally. But how to go about it?

"I can't put my finger on it," he told the doctor, "but he seems different."

"You mean he's off-colour? I'll drop in and have a look at him."

Danvers hastened to refute the suggestion of illness. He didn't want the doctor to call at the house. That might put Colin more on his guard.

"He's well enough in himself. It's just that he seems to be different from other children of the same age. I can't quite——" Then he floundered,

conscious of the doctor's probing eyes, almost as if he, himself, were the sick one.

"He's a perfectly normal youngster," Wilson said flatly. "Are you sure you're not imagining things?"

There was no point in mentioning the paper-reading episode; that was some years back, anyway. So what was there he could say?

"Considering he got off to a rough start," the doctor said, "I think he's made a good job of growing up. He's perfectly normal. I just can't see what you're driving at."

The rough start; that was something concrete to go on. Even the doctor would have to admit that that had been different . . .

"I've often wondered about that," he said tentatively, almost hopefully.

"Well, give up wondering." The doctor stretched, openly bored. "Reduced to it's simplest terms, as I must have explained before, there was a respiratory failure, followed by recovery as the result of oxygen treatment. If that's the bee in your bonnet then you can give up worrying right away. It can't have had any effect on the boy. For that to happen is rare, certainly, but not unusual. If my memory serves me right there was a similar case in the same ward about the same time."

Similar? The same sort of thing at the same time? Coincidence?

But the doctor refused to be drawn any further. So it was back to routine, but always watching his son.

Just a boy excited at picnics and going to the seaside. He liked the cinema and watching television; foot-

ball matches, sticky toffee, the lot. Everything that a normal boy liked doing.

But there were secret yawns in the cinema, as if the picture bored. Yawns and silent shufflings when a child should have been on the edge of his seat with excitement. There had been the wanderings away from his parents at the seaside. And once he had followed him; not to the sea or the donkeys or the amusement arcade, but to a seat on the crowded promenade. Danvers had watched from the cover of some trees, seeing how the boy had sat, intent upon the faces of the passers-by, noting, seeming to be accumulating and storing knowledge.

But nothing he could tell about. Nothing.

"Tea ready," Laura said, and he came to life with a start.

"My," she laughed, "you were a long way away. I had to call three times."

From the bottom of the stairs she called, "Colin . . ."

The boy trotted down and into the back kitchen to wash his hands under the tap. Only now and then did Laura have to remind him about dirty hands; and those times Danvers felt sure the boy had deliberately avoided washing, just so he could be told. . . .

And his hands did get dirty; greasy, sometimes. And sometimes there was a smell that hung about him. Sharp, clear; like the smell of lightning in a thunderstorm.

"And what have you been doing in school today, Colin?" Danvers asked his son.

"The usual things, Dad. Trig an' algebra. We had to do an essay this afternoon. The usual things, you know."

Yes; he knew—the usual things.

Imagination?

After tea Colin went into the garden and played with a ball, bouncing it hard against the garage wall. Danvers watched from the window for a while. A thin boy in a white shirt and brown trousers throwing a cricket ball against a wall.

He went up to the attic, shaking hard on the handle. But the door was immovable. But the crisp smell of ozone seeped on to the landing. Ozone? How did he come to call it that? It was the smell that came from the back of a television set, an indefinable tang of electrical equipment. He came thoughtfully down the stairs. Colin was standing silently at the bottom, his face expressionless. Danvers passed him without a word.

"Dad," Colin called after him. "Take me to the shops before they close, an' buy me an ice-cream. Please?"

Was it all his imagination after all? For his own peace of mind he must try and find out.

The next morning he took time off from his usual work to visit the hospital. He presented his official card at the desk.

"I'm writing an article," he lied, "about people who have died and been brought back to life. I was wondering if you could help at all?"

They were reluctant, worried about the publicity. He promised that nothing would be printed until they

had approved it. Then he was passed to a cold room of filing cabinets and tall-backed chairs, and a Mr. Walton offered a languid hand and introduced himself as the registrar.

He, too, was coldly reluctant at first.

"It was my own son who gave me the idea for the article," Danvers said cunningly. "He was one of the babies who died and were later revived."

The personal touch brought the registrar to opening metal-clanging drawers and flicking through masses of brown folders. And then the coincidences. . . .

There had been Colin, and there had been others. Not just one or two, but eleven. Eleven newly-born babies who had died and then been brought back to life in the oxygen tent. And all in the same year. It hadn't happened before—not in that hospital, anyway; and it hadn't happened since.

The registrar seemed faintly puzzled. Danvers watched him closely. But it was just a coincidence, obviously. What else could it be? Folders accumulated on the desk; the registrar made notes.

Danvers waited patiently. Then he asked for names.

"Names?" Apparently his presence had been forgotten. "Oh, no. We will help all we can, but names are out of the question. Violation of privacy. I suggest you write your article in general terms."

Danvers left the registrar in his files. He felt satisfied with his findings; and at least he had given thoughts to one other person. But

now he had to go a step further.

For no reason at all, he picked on a small Midlands town. A sleepy cathedral town with a tree-enclosed cottage-hospital. Only a small hospital, and so only seven more to add to his list. And all in the same year.

A village next, and even smaller hospital. Two more.

Then a large industrial town with eight hospitals, one of them a community in itself. Fifty-eight more . . .

By the end of the week he had nearly four hundred. Four hundred deaths shortly after birth; four hundred recoveries. All identical with Colin.

Coincidence?

He felt sure that every hospital he visited would have the same tale to tell. Not only in this country, but all over the world. He wondered why the coincidence hadn't reached the public's ears. Perhaps it had, in the musty, roundabout way of the medical journals. Perhaps doctors and surgeons had read about it, then passed it over. Perhaps the coincidences had remained isolated, never coalescing. . . .

And now he felt he need go no further. He knew enough; he knew all he could hope to find out. Except perhaps what was tucked away in the attic—in innumerable attics and cellars and sheds all over the world. Rooms with locks that belonged to small boys, all of the same age; rooms filled with a gentle humming and a smell of warm metal, and a frosty tang of electricity.

But he would never find out where they came from, these substitutes for

humans, these infiltrants, this Fifth Column. He couldn't even guess which planet, which far-off star had spawned them.

He was sure that they were the prelude to an invasion—perhaps they were the invasion. How they got here he didn't know. In the dust probably—dust motes from space, dancing in the still air, seeking entry when it was offered; perhaps even making entry possible.

And now they were here, and who would believe him?

Or was he going mad?

And how long would it be before these—children—would be ready?

Or was it all his imagination?

Perhaps they were almost ready now. The locked attic in his own house. . . .

Colin was playing in the garden when he stopped the car in the drive. Danvers watched for a moment. A boy with a bow and arrow, running breathlessly round the garden, hiding in the bushes and springing out at imaginary enemies. Just an ordinary boy, or——?

Danvers went inside and climbed the stairs to the attic. The door was

closed and locked as usual. He put his shoulder to the panels. The air was dry and seemed to crackle; a low humming came from beyond the door. He went downstairs and took a thick screwdriver from his tool chest. Back at the door he used the tool as a lever, splintering the wood, thrusting the door open so that a blue-brilliant light streamed out.

He couldn't guess how the boy had come by the things set out round the walls and in front of the screened window; he couldn't guess at the use of the complexity of dials and flickering lights and snaked cables. And over it all the smell—dry, sickly-sweet.

Colin was in the doorway behind him.

“Hullo, Dad. You broke the door open; you shouldn't have done that, you know.” Smiling, but not a child's smile; a cold, fathomless smile. . . .

“And we're very nearly ready. We can't have you spoiling things now.” He closed the shattered door behind him.

“We can't let you spoil things now,” Colin said, still smiling, and coming towards him.



O strong and long-liv'd death, how cam'st thou in?

JOHN DONNE

THE SLAVE DETECTIVE

THE CASE OF THE BEHEADINGS

WALLACE NICHOLS

Illustrated by Juliette Palmer

“**S**O AGAIN you’ve caught your man, O Slave Detective,” said Marcus Titius Scaurus, laying a hand patronizingly on Sollius’s shoulder.

“I and Gratianus, the City Prefect, completed the case,” replied Sollius. “But the man is dead: justice cannot lay hands on him.”

“Sollius has gained much praise in the case,” said his master, Titius Sabinus the Senator.

“I am sure of that, Uncle,” laughed the young man, “and I know how proud you are of your slave. You must tell me all about it, Sollius. I am interested in crime. We who serve on the eastern frontiers meet with it incessantly—and have to act for the honour of Rome.”

Scaurus was the son of Sabinus’s only brother, who for some years had held the chief command of the Roman armies watching the Persian border. Marcus had been sent home on long leave after a wound in the head and was spending it with his uncle.

“You must tell me all about it,” he repeated eagerly.

“It has been a horrible case,” said Sollius, his voice full of disgust, and then, pressed to satisfy the young soldier’s curiosity, he related a recent

sequence of events which had both mystified and horrified Rome. A series of murders of young women—slave girls and flute-girls and hetairæ and the like—had taken place in peculiarly revolting circumstances. These murders had occurred at sporadic intervals during the previous three months until such fear had reigned in the City that no girl of even the most abandoned sort would be found out at night in the particular quarter where each murder had been perpetrated, bordering on the evil Subura. All the murders were clearly by the same hand, for the method had been similar in each instance: a strangling and the cutting off of the victim’s head.

“Fearful deeds in truth!” said Sollius with a shudder at what he had seen.

“Flowing blood under the sword,” commented Scaurus, “is a fine colour; yet after battle the dried blood is not so pretty,” and he proceeded to tell tales of great slaughters, to break off and apologize gracefully for interrupting Sollius’s narrative.

“Well, there will be no more such deeds,” said Sabinus, “for Sollius and the Prefect caught the man.”

“Who was he?” asked Scaurus.

“A slave named Davosus who had bought his freedom, aped a gentle-

man's vices, and become, I am sure, a madman in the process."

"How did you trap him?"

"We had four suspects at first," replied Sollius, "Rabeo, an ex-legionary who frequented the Subura's brothels; Morganus, a galley-rower from Britain, who was seen continually in the area where the girls were killed; Canidius, a ruined man of good family suspected of epilepsy, and this Davosus."

"How many murders were there?" asked Sabinus.

"Seven, Lord. At first Davosus was the least suspect of the four. In fact, Gratianus had nearly struck him off the list: he had merely been questioned by a patrol of the Urban Cohorts near the place and within a brief time of one of the killings. But he produced a friend who swore he had been with him in one of the taverns of the Subura. Gratianus believed it; I remained uncertain."

"Ah, here you are, Bassius!" cried Scaurus. "Come and listen. The Slave Detective is telling us how he trapped a terrible murderer."

The man who came forward was a scarred veteran of many wars who was Scaurus's trusted body-servant, and who had come with him from the East. He glanced at Sollius sharply, then his face seemed to dull and he stood to attention behind his master and listened.

"Need I tell you, Lord, how Gratianus and I slowly eliminated Rabeo, Morganus and Canidius from suspicion and fixed upon Davosus? Little things are often great in deduction and the little things contradicted their guilt. But we could not bring it home

to Davosus and I suggested a trap. We employed one of the hetairæ as a decoy and set her in the district of danger. Davosus, alone of the four, approached her, and, frightened, she cried out. The watching soldiers of the Urban Cohort rushed up to protect her, but her current lover—whom she had herself, without our knowledge, set behind a column to keep guard, ran up and stabbed Davosus before we could intervene. We lost our prey, but he was the man, for he had a butcher's knife in his clothes."

"It was but supposition," said Scaurus. "You did not prove your case, did you? There was no confession."

"It was a reasonable supposition, Lord," replied Sollius. "Gratianus and myself are satisfied that justice claimed her proper victim, though not by the law."

"How long ago was this?"

"A little before you arrived from Rome, Lord—and there has been no murder of the same kind since."

"The Slave Detective," said Sabinus sententiously, "always gets the right man."

"I am sure he is the wisest slave ever, Uncle," answered Scaurus. "This case interests me," he went on, turning again to Sollius. "You say that the victims were beheaded?"

"In each case, Lord."

"Were the heads left near the bodies—or perhaps taken away by the murderer?"

"They were always laid carefully on the ground just above one or the other shoulder, sometimes the right, sometimes the left, but always in a



sequence of right and left in turn. That was the clue which told us that the murders were by the same man."

"You have no doubt but that you caught the right man?"

"None, Lord."

One of the household slaves came quietly.

"The Lord Popilius, master," he announced to Sabinus, "is here."

"I will come at once. Follow me, Marcus. Popilius has the finest collection of emeralds you ever saw. I'll ask him to show them to you."

"Emeralds, Uncle? I do not much like them. I greatly prefer the blood-red ruby. If he has rubies to show me I should be delighted. I brought a fine, large ruby in my baggage, but that part of it which contained it—as

well as my father's letter to you—was washed overboard in the storm that nearly wrecked us off Rhodes."

"I am particularly sorry not to have received my brother's letter, Marcus," said Sabinus.

"Bassius tried to save the package. He did his best, but the sea was terrible. He always serves me like a kindly nurse," he laughed, and followed his uncle to greet the visitor.

Sollius, watching, surprised an almost maternal look on Bassius's face.

A few days later the City Prefect sent for Sollius urgently.

"We must have made a blunder, my friend," he said. "Another girl has been murdered precisely as the others, with her head severed and placed by her shoulder. Davosus couldn't have

been the man. I am arresting Rabeo, Morganus and Canidius at once."

"Yet," said Sollius, "I am sure it was Davosus. . . ."

"We can all make mistakes, even you," snapped Gratianus.

But Morganus had sailed back to Britain and Canidius been killed in a brawl: neither could be the new murderer. Rabeo was the sole suspect left to bring in. He was arrested in his usual low haunt. Taken to view the dead girl and shown the severed head, he paled, but denied that he had ever seen her.

"She is not a girl of the Subura," he stammered. "She must be a flute-girl hired for a good house, or some hetaira, O Prefect, of the better sort."

The latest victim had indeed been of a superior class to the other murdered girls.

"This knife found in your den," accused Gratianus, "has blood upon it."

"I helped a butcher to kill a pig."

He gave the butcher's name; the statement was true. But Rabeo was not released.

"The Emperor is horrified by the case," sighed Gratianus. "I dare not release my remaining suspect."

"It may be a mad imitation," murmured Sollius.

"Why complicate my troubles?" groaned the City Prefect.

A day or two passed and again Sollius was summoned to the principal barracks of the City Cohorts.

"Another murder—last night," said Gratianus grimly. "Another girl of the same type—and the head severed and placed by the *other* shoulder. The

same alternating pattern, by the Gods—and Rabeo was in prison. If you have never proved your skill before, O Slave Detective, prove it now. My office as Prefect is in danger: save me, my friend."

Sollius returned home and communed deeply with himself. He did not take even his usual assistant, Lucius, into his confidence, but sat by the fish-pool in the atrium as still as a statue.

The rumour of the new murder had followed him in. The household slaves knew of it first; then it penetrated into the chambers of Sabinus and his nephew. They came out together, with horror-stricken faces, followed by Bassius, who remained at a little distance, but listening.

"Is it true, Sollius?" demanded his master.

Sollius rose, and bowed his head.

"So you did not catch the right man?" smiled Scaurus.

"So it appears, Lord."

"And for once," continued Scaurus, still smiling, "the Slave Detective is at fault, like an ill-trained hound."

"The original evidence," murmured Sollius humbly, "still accuses Davosus—and Davosus is dead, Morganus oversea, Canidius dead and Rabeo in prison. . . ." He broke off, spreading his hands.

"Someone is cleverer than the Slave Detective," said Scaurus, "which, I can see, pricks my uncle's pride in you. We cannot allow you to lose your reputation, Sollius. Come, we must help you. Describe these latest murders. The same method, you say, was used?"

"Exactly the same, Lord."

"You never caught or suspected the right man. He is at work again after lying low."

Sollius looked mulish, but gave no answer.

"What things happen o' nights!" cried out Bassius, raising both arms, and coming a pace or so forward. "While you slept, Lord, and I was wakeful with an aching tooth on my pallet at your bed's foot. It was last night the new murder, was it not, O Slave Detective? What unknown awfulness could happen! How terrible is Rome!"

"Terrible indeed, Bassius," said his master.

"What will be done now?" asked Titius Sabinus.

"The whole district will be well patrolled by the cohorts," replied Sollius. "Another murder will be . . . very difficult . . . for the murderer. I can promise him that. I advise him to go out of business."

"I wish you—and His Excellency Gratianus — every success," said Scaurus with a touch of patrician arrogance.

"My Sollius will not fail in the end," struck in Sabinus, a little angrily.

"Rome waits for his success, I am sure," answered Scaurus, bowing to his uncle.

* * *

The City Prefect, usually a calm, calculating man, was agitated.

"I thought we had the right fellow in Davosus, and then in Rabeo—but

now . . . and the Emperor is asking for an immediate report."

"Do not despair, my friend," said the Slave Detective. "I have a new suspicion. We did have the right fellow in Davosus; these new killings are an imitation, and I think I know the man."

"By the spite of the Furies, how can you? I have all the same knowledge as you, and I can see nothing—nothing. . . . What is this new suspicion?"

"It is based on something you could not know, O Prefect. Listen: who knows, save you and me, about the alternative placing of the severed heads at the right shoulder and left of the victim? You would answer: none, save you and me. Now I know of three more."

"By the Gods, you do?"

"I related the circumstances of Davosus's crimes to my master and his nephew—and one other was by, the body-servant of the latter, an old soldier. To them I divulged the alternate placing of the heads. Now, Gratianus, if you and I agree that these latest crimes are imitative . . ."

"As we do," assented the City Prefect.

". . . then the criminal knew what to imitate. The cutting off of the heads was common gossip; the alternate placing of them was not."

They stared at one another.

"I can add more," said Sollius. "On the night of the last murder his master was asleep, but he, on his own confession—and he sleeps in his master's chamber—was awake. He could have done anything while the lord

Scaurus slept, for, after his head-wound, my master's nephew takes a sleeping drug."

"What is this fellow's name?"

"Bassius—a soldier familiar with the sword."

"A madman?"

"A campaigner for years under the Persian sun."

"Where shall we interrogate him?" grunted Gratianus.

"In my master's house," answered Sollius in a decided tone.

"Rather than here—with the instruments of torture at hand?"

"If I find your man for you, Gratianus, you must allow me my method," replied the Slave Detective.

* * *

The arrival of the City Prefect with a file of soldiers and two lictors to arrest Bassius struck consternation in the mansion of Sabinus. Outraged at the apprehension of his nephew's trusted servant, the Senator insisted upon being present at the interrogation which followed.

"On the night of this last murder you told Sollius that you were awake with toothache in the chamber of your master. Is that true?"

"It is true, O Prefect."

"There was a crime before that: on the eve of the Ides of this month. Were you again in the chamber of your master?"

"I was, O Prefect. I sleep there always."

"Was your master," asked Sollius, "asleep on both nights?"

"On both nights. He still has pain from his wound, and I give him a

Persian drug that kills it and sends sleep."

"So your master," pursued Gratianus, "cannot witness to your presence in his chamber all night on either occasion?"

Bassius suddenly paled and mutely shook his head.

"Did you leave the house on those nights?"

Again Bassius mutely shook his head. He appeared too stricken to have the use of his tongue and his face was drawn.

"You have, no doubt, a stabbing-sword."

"I am a soldier," wearily answered Bassius, "and have my weapons."

"Who is a soldier and has his weapons?" asked a brusque voice, and Scaurus entered the Senator's library in which the interrogation was taking place. "Of course Bassius has them—and well has he used them over and over again. What is happening, Uncle? Why are these men here?"

"I am the City Prefect of Rome," Gratianus told him. "I have arrested your servant Bassius on the charge of murdering two young women," and he explained the suspicions attaching to him.

"But this is nonsense," cried Scaurus. "Not only is no such wickedness in the good fellow, but he sleeps in my chamber. He was there during both nights you name."

"When you, my Lord, were in a drugged sleep!" rasped Gratianus. "You are no valid witness for the defence."

"Release my servant at once!" ordered Scaurus haughtily. "My

father commands on the eastern frontier and my uncle—you know who is my uncle. A word from them to the Emperor . . .”

“The Emperor’s justice is in my hands in his city of Rome,” broke in the Prefect no less haughtily, “and I have arrested Bassius. Take him, lictors!”

“O master! . . .” implored Bassius, and his scars stood out lividly against his grey pallor.

“Sollius,” cried out the troubled Sabinus, “do now for your own master what you do for others. This touches the family you serve.”

“You permit me a few questions, O Prefect?” asked Sollius formally.

“My friend, always!” answered Gratianus, but he flashed a glance at the Slave Detective that was as puzzled as sharp.

“How long, Bassius,” asked Sollius, “have you been the Lord Scaurus’s body-servant?”

“Why, since he were a boy. I served his father then, and I taught the lad to ride and to handle his weapons. I have served him from youth to manhood.”

“You have kept a faithful eye upon him?”

“That be so.”

“And have a fatherly affection for him?”

“That be so, too,” replied Bassius, brightening a little.

“And when he was wounded you nursed him?”

Bassius nodded.

“Tell me: when you cut off heads, you placed them above the body’s shoulders alternately—is that not so?”

Bassius opened his mouth, then suddenly nodded again. Sabinus gave a horrified exclamation.

“We are investigating,” continued Sollius calmly, “just these two last murders. In what order of shoulders, left and right, did you place the heads. Which in the first murder and which in the second?”

Again Bassius hesitated, and then gave an answer. It did not accord with fact. Sollius and Gratianus were careful to avoid looking at one another.

“This is an impertinence!” cried Scaurus. “Uncle, have this slave whipped.”

“You must, indeed, substantiate this,” said Sabinus irritably, “or I shall have even you, Sollius, scourged into truth.”

“I have served this house, Lord,” replied Sollius, “faithfully all my life. I have a duty to it, I acknowledge; but I have another duty to the Law of Rome.”

“Continue your questioning, Sollius,” commanded the City Prefect. “These lictors, O Sabinus, witness to my authority.”

“I admit it,” growled the Senator, and almost wrung his hands.

“My Lord Scaurus,” continued Sollius, “you take a sleeping drug for your head-pains?”

“What of it?”

“Do you take it every night?”

“I—I need it.”

“Bassius, has the lord Scaurus not good nights as well as bad?”

“Question *me*, not my servant,” rasped Scaurus.

“Answer the Slave Detective, Bas-

sius!" ordered Gratianus, and Bassius nodded in reply.

"Do you yourself take a drink at night?" pursued Sollius.

"I mix the drug in my master's bedtime wine and he permits me a drink of the same wine as a favour."

"In your case not drugged?"

"Of course," smiled Bassius.

"It could be easy," said Sollius tonelessly, to exchange the cups."

"Slave!" burst out Scaurus.

Bassius flung himself on his knees.

"It is I am guilty, I!" he declared loudly.

"Those nights it was you who were drugged," solemnly said Sollius.

"What, by the Gods, is this?" gasped Sabinus.

Gratianus motioned the lictors towards Scaurus.

"Master . . . master . . ." wept Bassius, beating the floor with his hands.

Scaurus began to giggle.

"Your slave, Uncle, on my honour as a Roman, is cleverer than any slave should be." He giggled again and before the lictors could close in upon him ran from the chamber.

"Stop him!" cried Bassius, leaping to his feet.

They were too late. He had dosed himself so heavily as to be sure of almost immediate effect.



"There can be no doubt that my dear master," said Bassius, "was mad. Your brother, Lord," he went on brokenly, addressing Sabinus, "wrote a full account of the Lord Marcus's health and recommended him to your watchfulness, but he were so cunning that he cast it overboard in that storm—with, in the same package, a ruby, his talisman, to make it appear an accident, for who would dream that he would deliberately throw away his ruby? I should have told you, Lord, but I loved him, and hoped for the best. That head-wound, O Prefect, changed the finest young man in the army."

"Need the Emperor," pleaded Sabinus, "know the full truth?"

"The Slave Detective shall help me with the report," said Gratianus.

THE MESSENGER

LESLIE VARDRE

Illustrated by Vera Jarman



A CLOCK started to chime the hour as he walked down the stone staircase. The first stroke came as he met the bright sunlight of the yard, and he counted automatically on his way towards the gates. It was eight o'clock.

As the last stroke died away, so came a sudden momentary darkening of his eyes, and a wave of nausea clutched at his breast, forcing him to stop in mid-stride. Cold moisture lay in beads on his forehead and the breath caught in his throat.

Then, as suddenly as it had come, the spasm passed, leaving him pale and trembling, and wondering what had caused it.

Excitement, he told himself, take it easy.

He stopped by the office and the warder nodded.

"Maddox, isn't it?" He opened the inner gate, whistling softly between his teeth. "On your Jack Jones, chum; the only one out this morning."

He unlocked the little barred door, and the noise of traffic came flooding in.

"All your's, Maddox, make the most of it. And good luck to you."

Maddox drew in breaths of the petrol-tainted air, savouring the first

feel of freedom. Behind him, the door clanged shut.

Buses and cars, lorries, bicycles and people on their way to work.

A small crowd was by the main gate, a gathering of men and women, silent, for the most part. One woman, an old, grey-haired woman, was kneeling on the pavement, hands clasped, lips moving, eyes tightly closed. A workman in overalls and a cloth cap was pointing upwards, way beyond the high spiked wall. He was saying something and other eyes had turned to follow his arm. One of the women started to cry, sharp, racking dry sobs, a handkerchief pressed close to her face.

Maddox watched them dispassionately. He knew why they were there—strange how some people found a morbid appeal in such a thing.

Home now, back to Evie. She'd be waiting breakfast for him. She'd wanted to meet him out, but he'd said no. Just a few yards to the bus stop. Fifty yards down the street, the screw had told him. Number eleven bus, take him all the way to Hanbury.

Then why was he crossing the road? Why stand by the bus stop on the opposite side of the street? This would take him in the other direction. . . .

His head was starting to ache and there was a dryness at the back of his throat. The aftermath of that

little attack, he supposed. He wondered what had caused it, but of course, it must have been the excitement of getting out.

He placed the little attaché case between his legs and felt for a cigarette. A rich smell of coffee drifted from the little café behind him. Time for a cup?—or would he miss the bus?

The little crowd across the road were being dispersed by a policeman. He was helping the kneeling woman to her feet, patting her on the shoulder.

A number eleven bus was the one he wanted, but that stopped on the other side. There was one coming now. What was he doing over here?

He could just make it if he ran. He picked up his case and started back across the street, dodging the stream of traffic. Halfway across the dizziness came again, bringing him to a stop. A taxi driver leaned from his cab to shout something at him.

He went back to the pavement and leaned against the metal post of the bus stop, fighting to get his breath back. The red monster with "No. Eleven, Hanbury" on its front, rumbled past and away down the road.

Inside the café he sat at one of the round, marble-topped tables. His hands were trembling, his throat hard and dry. A dark shadow and a stained white apron came to stand by him.

"Coffee," he asked. "Black, with three lumps."

Behind the urns, the man in the stained apron held a chipped cup under the tap while the steaming

brown liquid frothed. He looked at the man at the table. Ex-con, obviously, and just out. He knew the type.

This one didn't look much—insignificant, with thinning, sandy hair. Pallid face, too, and dark, staring eyes. Weak mouth and soft chin. Tatty blue suit, very creased; weather-stained cap. Shabby little suitcase, tied up with a piece of frayed rope.

"Tanner," he said, bringing the cup to the table. "Anything to eat?"

Maddox shook his head, savouring the aroma.

"Just out?" the other wondered, and went to stand by the fly-mottled window, "Silly bastards," he mused. "Bin out there since seven, just waiting—you know?"

Just out, Maddox told himself, three months—a summer for a settlement. Three months for a first offence that didn't amount to anything.

"Eltham?" he asked suddenly. "How often do the buses run?"

The proprietor spoke without turning. "Twenty-three—runs every half-hour. One due in ten minutes. Silly bastards, hanging round the gates like stupid fowl. What good can it do?"

"Eltham?" he asked, his voice alive with interest. "Isn't that where he came from?" He motioned backwards with his head.

Maddox put the empty cup on the brown-ringed table. He picked up his case, and went out from the café.

"Good luck, chum," the other told him as he passed.

He leaned against the post again. Evie would be waiting; he'd better get across the road to the proper stop.

There's a bus coming now, a twenty-three, going to Eltham, it says. But he didn't want to go there—he just wanted to go home.

The bus came and he climbed aboard. It was almost empty, and the conductor hovered while he went through his pockets.

"Eltham," Maddox told him, but the conductor still waited.

"Big place," he said briskly. "Which part, chum? Masters Street? 'Fox an' Hounds'? Crampton Street?"

That was it, that was the name.

"Crampton Street," Maddox told him.

The conductor punched the ticket. A newsagent's shop slipped by with glaring newspaper placards set out on the pavement. "Air Crash", "Motor Works Strike", "Bronsky to hang Tomorrow". That was yesterday's news, of course. Bronsky was dead, now. Barely an hour ago.

Shops and houses, and pavements teeming. The conductor watched him from time to time, then finally came to sit by his side, busying himself with a board and papers clipped to it. He was a tall man with small weasel features set closely in the middle of a weathered face.

"Bin inside?" he asked briefly, pencil totting up rows of figures.

"Yes," said Maddox.

"What's it like in there?"

"It's not good."

"Ought to be abolished. Nar take this bloke Bronsky—never did think as 'ow he killed 'er. Not the type, an' I know people—you get to know them on a job like this. Take you, I

recognized you right off." He seemed pleased.

Maddox took off his cap, and passed his fingers through his hair. The smell of petrol and oil was sickly in his nostrils, the floor drummed under his feet and his stomach sickened to each sway of the vehicle. His head pounded and the dizziness still persisted.

"You feelin' all right?" the conductor asked, his face sharpened with concern. Poor devil, he thought, wonder how long he's been down for? Only young, too, not more than forty. Probably made a proper muck-up of his life.

"Got a job to go to?" he asked.

"Job?" Maddox looked up. "Yes. I've got a job."

"You live in Eltham?"

Maddox shook his head. Names were building up—Eltham, Bronsky, Crampton Street, Windy's Café.

"I'm looking for a place called Windy's Café," he said.

The conductor pushed the end of his pencil in his ear.

"Windy's Caff?—off Crampton Street. Frowsty dump—sure that's where you want to go?"

The bus jerked to a stop and a crowd came aboard; typists, laughing and chattering; a woman with a pram, and quite a business of folding it and stowing it away; a bowler-hatted city man with a glossy brief-case. The sun was warm on the thin fabric over Maddox's knees.

"Crampton Street," the conductor called, and Maddox roused himself. "Straight ahead," the conductor told him, "Third on the right." The bus

moved off, "Good luck," he called back from the platform. In the distance, a clock struck ten.

Crampton Street was dismal and grey-shadowed with smokey, warehouse walls. The shops were dingy and miserable, the few houses soot-blackened and tatter-curtained. Maddox found the third turning to be a cul-de-sac with a high wall at the end and smoke-pouring chimneys beyond. The names were still there, Crampton Street, Windy's Café and a new one—Barky Johnson.

The café was set a little way back from the pavement. A lace-curtained window with plastic signs—"Steak & Chips", "Fish & Chips", "Tea", "Coffee".

He started for one of the tables in the centre of the floor, then changed his mind and found a place in a corner behind a glass screen. A girl, a faded and bleached blonde in a red sweater and short, black skirt, took his order.

"Coffee," he told her. "Black, with three lumps."

She looked startled, and he could see that she was watching him intently while she busied herself behind the urn.

Two men came in, talking, both wearing raincoats and both hatless. They sat at the other side of the screen. Their faces were shadows through the frosted glass.

"As cool as they come. Going round as calm as you please. Hasn't got a worry in the world to look at him. . . ."

That was the taller of the two, the

one with the long, narrow oval of a face. The second man replied:

"Bronsky should've known better than try to cross Maxie. A mug would've known the set-up 'e was walkin' into. Daisy should've known, to. I tell you, Barky, takin' it all round, it was as neat a job as we'll ever see. . . ."

Maddox set his cup down with a clatter and the voices cut off abruptly. He went round the screen, his case in his hand. "I'm looking for Max," he told them.

"Who wants him?" the tall one asked. His eyes were blue and cold.

"Gotta message for him, they said that Barky would put me on to him."

Their faces were darkly suspicious. The girl, a tea-cloth in her hand, came to stand by the table.

"Who is he, Mabel?" Barky asked, his eyes still on Maddox.

"A stranger to me—asked for coffee, black, with three lumps, just like—"

"I'm looking for Max." His head started to pound again.

"You won't find 'im 'ere," the short one said sourly.

The man called Barky carressed a thin line of moustache.

"Try the Gimlet Club," he suggested slowly. "Nick Peletti's place," and as his companion made to speak, "I know what I'm doing."

Maddox thanked him and went out into the sunlight. A clock struck eleven.

Barky came out behind him. "Know it?" he asked, and when Maddox shook his head, "Belville Road, about half-way along on the

right—you'll see the sign outside. Carry on down Crampton Street and you'll see it right at the end."

Maddox nodded and started walking. Evie would wonder where he'd got to. He'd missed breakfast, but she'd have dinner waiting. She wasn't on the phone and there was no way of letting her know he'd soon be home. His head was still throbbing and there was a tightness about his face, as though the cheek-bones were trying to push through the flesh. The left side of his face itched, too, and he found himself scratching at the side of his mouth.

A greengrocer's cart stood at the corner of the street with a crowd of blowsy women haggling over its load. He turned into the main road again and saw that the two men and the girl were standing looking after him.

The road was long and dusty; heavy lorries trundled past, leaving a blue trail of diesel fumes; workmen whistled and women pushed prams filled with squalling babies. A girl, bright in black skirt and crisp white blouse, tripped across the traffic with a tray of cups. The sun was hot and dry, the gutters dust-parched channels.

Across the road, a park opened out, pleasant relief from the grey monotony of wall and window. A small, railed enclosure of soot-grimed trees and straggling bushes. His feet started to ache and burn and the sudden oasis of green was tempting. He crossed the road and turned in through rusted wrought-iron gates.

Two paths stretched ahead with bushes between. Maddox took the

right-hand path and sat wearily on a paint-peeled bench. A handful of sparrows settled chirping at his feet; the traffic was muted, the air still and heavy. Coarse, fibrous grass poked through the gravel path.

Voices and footsteps came from the path behind the bushes. There was a creaking of wood as bodies were lowered to a bench.

"He should've known better than try a double-cross with Max," one of the voices said, deep and harsh, but distinct.

"He's not the first"—a foreign accent, brittle and high-pitched—"but don't be jumping to the conclusion that it was a double-cross—they say it was a woman. . . ."

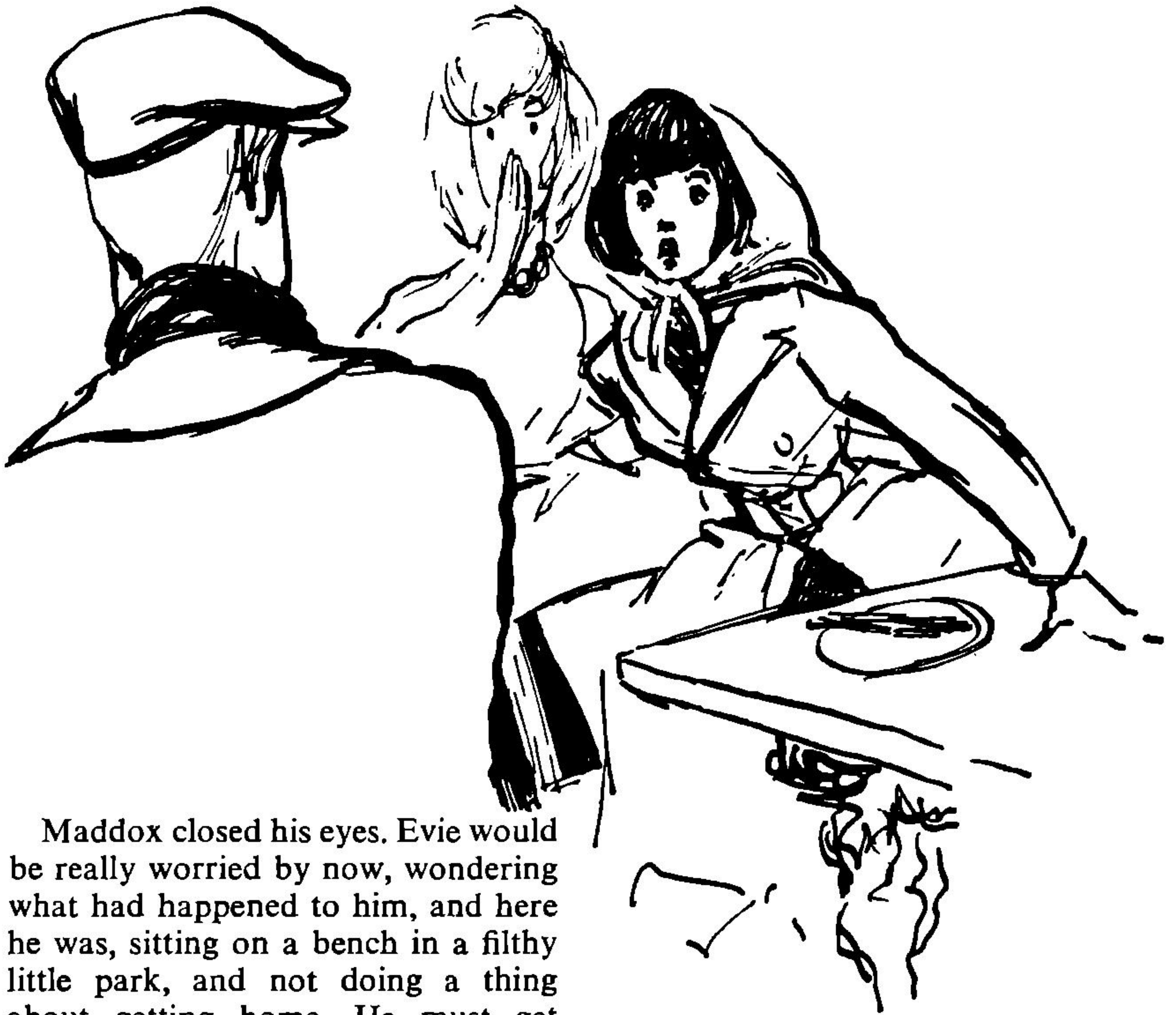
"He's 'ad it now, anyway,"—a laugh, a cackling throaty snigger.

"You theenk that perhaps Max himself, he strangle this girl?"

"You know Maxie—it's just up his street, that sort of thing. Never did like the knife. Now me—"

"Theese Daisy; she 'as a sister, yes?"

"Vi? She played 'ell. Kinda sweet on Bronsky, although he seemed to 'ave 'is eye on Daisy. But what could she do? The slops 'ad it all cut an' dried. The girl lyin' across the bed with her throat stove in, Bronsky standing over 'er and Maxie in the clear, somewhere the other side of town. Perfect set-up. An' when Daisy starts asking questions about the fire in the room an' how it could 'ave been on and kept the body warm—well, Maxie-boy takes his razor, an' 'as a quiet chat with 'er. Then she shuts up."



Maddox closed his eyes. Evie would be really worried by now, wondering what had happened to him, and here he was, sitting on a bench in a filthy little park, and not doing a thing about getting home. He must get weaving—.

The park darkened, and a grip of pain came to his chest. He fought for breath and the grip relaxed. There was a buzzing in his ears and the dizzy feeling again.

The sun was warm, the voices and the distant traffic soothing. He dozed, his head jerking on the stringy neck. When he woke, the sun had gone in, and he felt a little better. He was hungry.

He made his way back to the street and found a small café with a white-painted front and clipped trees

in green tubs. He sat to a small square table and ordered steak and chips. His head throbbed occasionally and with the pulsating came a brief dimming of the light. A white-aproned waitress set the food before him. The door opened and he looked up over a forkful of meat. It was the blonde from the other café and another girl—a slim, white-faced, dark-eyed slip of a girl wearing a tight-belted raincoat and blue scarf over thick black hair.

The blonde saw Maddox and laid her hand on her companion's arm.

They spoke together, watching him, and Maddox turned back to his plate. The thin girl seemed vaguely familiar, and he found himself racking his brain to remember where he could have seen her before.

After a while, she came and sat to his table. "They say you are looking for Max?"

Maddox nodded, his mouth full of food.

"Why?" There was a certain eagerness in her voice.

"Gotta message," he said indistinctly.

The blonde was leaning on the counter, watching them closely.

"I can tell you where to find him," the girl said. "My name's Violet, Violet Hanson—have you heard the name?"

He shook his head, thought, then: "Vi?"

"That's what they call me. Who's the message from? Barky said he thought you were fresh out of stir." Her face was pathetically eager, her eyes imploring.

Stir? Maddox wondered, how had Barky guessed? Did it show all that much? It could've been his white face and the suitcase tied up with rope. They'd know how a man would look who'd just come from prison.

"Is it from Jan?" she asked, "Jan Bronsky? You must know about him—they hung him this morning." Her voice was harsh.

"Never saw him," Maddox told her, and busied himself with his food. Why were they pestering him? All he wanted to do was go home to his wife. She'd be worried stiff by now.

But first he'd got to find Nick Peletti's place.

"He's dead," the girl said dully. "They hung him. But he didn't kill Daisy—I know he didn't. Max framed him because he thought Jan was after Daisy. But he wasn't, he loved me. Daisy and I were sisters and we looked very much alike. Max saw Jan and me out together once, and he thought it was Daisy. I know how he did it—Max strangled her, and fixed it so's everyone would think Jan had done it. . . ."

"Careful, Vi," the blonde warned.

"What's the message?" she asked urgently. "And did he say anything about me?"

"Message?" Maddox asked. "What message?" His head was throbbing, his face taut. He raised his hand to the left side of his face, tracing a line of pain from corner of eye to mouth. The girl watched intently. He pushed the plate aside and called for his bill.

She still watched while he put his cap on and picked up his case. At the door, the darkness wavered for a moment, and his throat tightened. There was something he had to say. He turned with his hand on the latch. "Be seeing you, little Vi," he told her, and there was a different timbre to his voice. The girl half-rose in her chair, one hand to her mouth, her eyes staring. She made as if to speak, but he was through the door and in the busy crowds outside. He pressed his free hand to his forehead, trying to still the tumult. Somewhere beyond the roofs and chimneys a clock struck two.

He tried to recall the directions;

Belville Road, the Gimlet Club—just at the top of Crampton Street. The sun had come out again and the air was warm and dust-laden. All about him was the laughter and talk of people. He heard the girl's voice calling after him, but her words were lost in the turmoil. He hurried along, looking anxiously ahead. He'd never had these spells before, he'd have to do something about them, talk it over with Evie—see a doctor perhaps. But he'd got to get home—he'd missed dinner now and Evie would be more worried than ever. There was something else to be done first, though. His face felt strange and unfamiliar, there was a difficulty in controlling his mouth. And there was that infernal itching down the side of his face as if something were trying to press it's way through the tight flesh. Is this what three months behind bars did for a man? Summer in prison—slam the gates in June, and open them in September.

Here was the end of the road, and the sign, "Belville Road". Better class district, large houses with white stuccoed fronts, posh shops, a busy street, even a cinema, a news theatre.

His feet started to ache again, a throbbing tenderness. He'd never had trouble with his feet before, but he'd got to rest them for a while. He crossed to the brilliant foyer of the news theatre and took a half-crown ticket. Evie would be waiting for him, but he'd got to rest a while.

There were only a handful of people scattered about the hall. He dozed off again, the news-commentator's voice and the soft background

music soothing. When he woke up, the place was nearly full and he felt much better. He scrambled along the aisle and out into the street. It was cooler now and getting dusk. Some of the passing cars had their lights on. A clock over a jeweller's window told him it was a little after seven. It was a few moments before he realized where he was—strange shops, a strange street—even the people who passed seemed strangers from another country.

His face was stiff—the stiffness that comes with the jab of the dentist's needle. His fingers explored, discovering new contours—a ridge, an indentation in the flesh that stretched from brow to corner of mouth.

His fingers pressed to his cheek, he idled along the busy pavement looking closely at the shop-windows and the garish name-plates of clubs and billiard saloons. Almost at the end of the road he found the green and red neon sign, "Gimlet Club. Prop. N. Peletti". A clock chimed the three-quarters as he pushed in through the swing-doors. Inside, he breathed the warm-scented air, standing in a corner shielded by a potted palm. The bar was a glittering affair of polished bottles, red leather and gleaming chrome.

A tall, bulky, black-coated man by the bar, threw back his head and finished his drink with a flourish. Then he buttoned his coat and went out through the door. Maddox filled the gap at the counter.

"I'm looking for Max," he said.

"Just this minute gone out, sir," the

white-coated barman told him. "The tall gentleman. . ." Maddox turned and left.

The tall man, his back towards him, stood on the edge of the pavement, apparently engaged in lighting a cigarette. A woman, thin and angular in a mottled brown raincoat, stood close by, talking animatedly with an equally thin man. A stream of passers-by divided the little group from Maddox.

"Max!" he called, and he couldn't recognize his own voice.

The man at the kerb froze, suddenly immobile, one arm awkwardly bent, a match still burning between the fingers.

"Max!" he called again, and this time his voice was louder, cutting sharply into the noise. He stepped from the shadow of the doorway into the glow from the neon sign.

The man turned, his face a white square beneath the black homburg. He lifted his hands as if to protect himself.

"No!" he cried, his voice climbing to a shriek, "No. . . You're—you're dead. You can't come back."

He stepped backwards into the road. There was a shrill squeal of brakes, the woman screamed, clutching her escort's arm. There was a silence, and somewhere beyond the roofs a clock struck eight.

Maddox had a confused impression of outflung arms, a body that crumpled and lay still; a driver climbing from the cab of one of the red

monsters, his face an anguished white blob.

"Right under the wheels," he was crying. "I couldn't do a thing." He knelt by the body, others gathering round. "He's dead," he said.

The woman's voice was raised. "I saw it 'appen—'e was frightened of something." She turned to point towards Maddox, "It was 'im, 'e scared 'im—" Her voice wavered.

"But that ain't 'im," she cried, and her escort took her arm, urging her to silence. "It were another," she shouted, shaking off the restraining touch, "A tall bloke, with black 'air, an' a scar—a big ugly scar right down the side of 'is face."

"Yer imagining things, Martha," the man soothed her. "You bin thinkin' too much abart this 'anging. You seen too many pitchers in the papers. Bronsky's got a scar down 'is face—you've got it on your mind."

He put his arm round her shoulders, looking apologetically at Maddox.

Maddox smiled back, squared his shoulders and thrust his way through the crowd. At the corner of the street a number eleven bus was just drawing away. He clambered aboard.

"Hanbury," he told the conductor, feeling at the side of his suddenly relaxed features. The indentation had gone. His head wasn't aching any more, he felt fine.

"Accident back there?" the conductor asked, jerking his head.

"Bloke stepped right into a bus," Maddox told him. "Didn't stand a chance."

THE WAY OUT

JAMES WORTH

IT WAS AT A party in his Thames-side home that Harry Webster disappeared.

Howard Johnson had had three or four drinks at the time, but even those couldn't be blamed for the events that happened soon after.

Harry Webster was a professional medium, an expert in mental communication. Later that evening he had intended to put on a show for a few sceptical friends. Two days previously he'd rung Howard to tell him he was "on to something big." They had been close friends for a number of years and he wanted Howard to write a series of articles on his work.

Howard saw Webster go out on to the balcony, but after half an hour he still hadn't come back. Pursuing his natural journalistic curiosity, he went to see what he was doing.

There was no one there.

At first he didn't believe it. Webster had definitely not come back into the room, and the only other way from that balcony was over the edge—a drop of forty feet or more on to a concrete drive.

He went back to the cocktail bar and asked a group of people if they had seen Webster.

They stared at him questioningly. "Who did you say?"

"Harry," he repeated. "Harry Webster."

"Never heard of him," they said.

Howard began to feel irritated.

"There must be some mistake," he said. "This is his house. He invited you all here for a demonstration on spiritualism——"

"What *are* you talking about?" A woman with pointed features peered at him over her vodka and lime. "We've just told you—we've never even *heard* of the man."

"But he was talking to you only an hour ago," Howard said desperately. "You said to him, 'How do you do it, Mr. Webster? Trade secret, is it?' *I remember your very words.*"

"You must be mad," the woman said. "I remember nothing of the sort."

"All right," Howard said. "Then whose house *is* this?"

"Lord Kennedey's," the woman said with surprise. "I thought everyone knew that."

Howard shut his eyes in an effort to clear his head. "Yes, of course," he mumbled. "Silly of me."

He heard their laughter behind him as he went out of the room.

I'm going mad. I must be going mad.

When he got home he sank into an armchair, clutching his head, trying to convince himself it was all some weird dream. He felt his wife's arm round his shoulder.

"Tired, dear?"

He uncovered his face and looked up. "Darling," he said, "where was I going this afternoon?"

His wife chuckled. "Goodness,

what a question! You mean to say you don't remember?"

"Well, it's a bit awkward, you see . . . there's a special reason. Don't ask me to explain. I just want a straight answer."

"Why, you went to a party at that beautiful house by the Thames, didn't you?"

"Yes, yes," Howard said, suddenly impatient. "But *whose*?"

"Let me think, now . . . Lord somebody or other . . . Kennedey, I think it was. . . ."

It can't be true. I'm going out of my mind.

For days he was haunted by the face of Harry Webster. To him he was as real as ever, but to everyone else . . .

"I'm on to something big," Harry had told him over the phone just before that party. He had seen him go out on the balcony, and then—nothing.

Of course, he told himself, it's impossible for a person to disappear completely. Somewhere there must be a clue, an answer to it all. He decided to probe into his past life and work his ideas into a series of articles.

That was when he encountered his first taste of real fear, the first incident in a number of events he would never forget. . . .

Harry Webster, in his day, had played rugger, a brilliant centre three-quarter. Howard even remembered the school he went to before Oxford. It was there he began his investigations.

The pretty secretary smiled as she ushered him into the headmaster's

study, informing him he would only be a few minutes. Howard thanked her, staring round at the trophies on the wall and the huge, heavy-framed photographs of past rugger teams. The sun streamed through the wide bay window, warm and pleasant on his face.

One photograph in particular attracted his attention. It was the school team for 1931–32, an enlargement of one Harry Webster had shown him proudly many times. He looked at it closely, scanning the immobile faces. Third from the left, he remembered. Second row.

And then he started with horror.

Harry Webster wasn't on the photograph.

He glanced quickly at the date again, wondering if he had the wrong one. But there was no mistake. The other players were exactly as he remembered them, but where Harry Webster used to be there was someone else.

Despite the sun's warmth, a shiver of fear went down his spine.

The headmaster confirmed what he had seen. He was very sorry, but he was afraid he'd never heard of Harry Webster. He was on the staff at the time and there was absolutely no doubt about it: no one of that name had ever attended the school.

That was the first incident.

The second was when he met the woman he'd always known as Harry Webster's mother.

"Mrs. Webster," he said to her when they had sat down, "what can you tell me about Harry?"

"Harry?"

"Your son. You see, I'm rather worried about him. Some odd things have been happening——"

"I'm afraid you're making a mistake," she said. "I have three daughters. I never had a son."

He left in a daze. What was he to think? That Harry Webster was a figment of his imagination?

Further inquiries revealed nothing. Nowhere could he find a trace of anyone having known Webster. He hadn't just disappeared that night of the party—he had ceased to exist.

Soon after that the nightmares began.

Always he seemed to hear Harry Webster's voice: *Don't do it, Howard. It's too big and incomprehensible for any of us to grasp. Don't interfere.* And he would see his face, distorted with fear, holding out his arms as though pleading with him. But beyond that there was nothing, a desolate emptiness of space and thought and reason.

He thought back over Webster's career: his work as a medium, the way he had demonstrated his extraordinary powers of mental communication. Could he, in some fantastic way, be trying to communicate with him now?

During all this time he continued working on his articles. He wrote about Harry Webster as he knew and remembered him. He spent hours in the public library. He went for long walks, thinking, often into the early hours of the morning.

And then, one evening, he met the stranger.

It was in Toni's, a small café on the

Pimlico Road, a place where he loved to sit and digest his thoughts. It was quiet. He was on his third cigarette when the stranger sat opposite him at the table.

"Mr. Johnson?"

He looked up, surprised.

"I'm here on behalf of Harry Webster," the stranger said tonelessly.

There was silence. Howard leaned forward, tingling with excitement. "You know where he is?"

"I've a few words of advice for you," the stranger said. "Keep out. Don't interfere."

"What d'you mean?"

"Leave Harry Webster alone. There are certain things you should not know."

Howard faced the stranger grimly, every nerve taut. "Go on."

"You must remember this: man is not the only creature. There are others with as much right to the world as he has. We resent any intrusion. Harry Webster had a brilliant mind but he went too far—we had to stop him."

"Then he isn't dead?"

"Dead? The word means nothing. As far as this world is concerned he *never lived*. We have taken care of that, as we have thousands of others. But this time, by an unfortunate accident, *you* remembered. So I ask you again, Mr. Johnson—don't interfere. Don't trespass. Forget Harry Webster. Forget that he ever existed. Otherwise——"

"Otherwise?"

The stranger shrugged. "We cannot answer for the consequences."

"I see." Howard leaned back, smiling. "What are you going to do—murder me?" He was beginning to feel light-headed, a little reckless. He wanted to laugh. The situation was absurd. Absurd. He signalled to Toni, a dark, stocky Italian standing behind the counter. He came over.

"You want anything, Mr. Johnson?"

"A coffee, please," Howard said. "Nice and black. I've lots of work to do." Then, before he could go: "What do you think about this, Toni? This fellow here is threatening me."

Toni grinned. "I'd like to see him try," he said. "You my good friend, Mr. Johnson. Anyone touch you—I kill him."

"There—you see?" Howard said to the stranger. "You haven't a chance. I'm going on, and one day I'll find the truth, just as Harry Webster did."

The stranger stood up. "We've warned you," he said, his face placid and unchanging. "That's all we can do." He turned and went out.

"Thanks, Toni," Howard said. "I appreciated your support."

"Don't mention it," Toni said. "Any time."

Howard took out his notebook and began to scribble notes. Another world, eh? Real spiritualist stuff.

He'd shatter all the old concepts of "the other side".

These articles were going to be sensational. He sipped his coffee, looking round at the empty tables. Yes, one day he'd find the truth about Harry Webster.

* * *

Toni finished wiping down his counter and went over to draw the blinds. Someone was gesturing him through the glass. He opened the glass.

"Got a cuppa, mate?" the man said.

"Sure," Tony said.

He went back behind the counter.

"Busy?" the man asked.

Toni shrugged. "Business pretty bad," he said. "Not one customer all evening. Just no one." He yawned and stretched. "Still, that's the way it goes. . . ."





INTRUDERS IN THE FOREST

DAN ROSS

Illustrated by Michael Ricketts

THE POUNDING OF tyre chains on the icy road alerted the Winstons even before the headlights of the stranger's car were visible at the bend of the road. Jim Winston had been cleaning the cage of the homing pigeons when he first heard the unexpected sound. With a surprised glance at his wife he walked over to the window of the log cabin. It looked out on the road which was covered with ice, and the great forest pines covered with snow from the light morning storm.

He watched the approaching sedan bump its way along the rutted, little-

used road, its progress marked by the rocking beam of headlights against the starry winter night. Eleanor joined him at the window, studying the car as well. "They'll be needing a warm drink whoever they are," he said. "Better put on fresh tea."

She moved back to the stove and he opened the door and stood in the crisp November night to greet the uninvited visitors. He wondered who they could be. Surely not the Forest Rangers; they came rarely and always during the day. And this was not a spot to expect anyone else. Then the radio report he'd heard that afternoon came to him in ominous memory. The payroll robbery at the pulp mill in St. Quentin and the kill-

ing of the watchman by two armed bandits.

The car drove up in front of the cabin now and he saw that there were just two men in it. The coincidence made him look nervously inside where Eleanor was busy at the stove. Too late to discuss it with her now. Anyway, his imagination was probably working overtime.

A fat, solidly-built fellow in city clothes got out first and came across to Winston with a too-smooth smile and an offered hand.

"Guess you must be Winston." The voice had a harsh New England twang.

"That's right."

"My name is Smith. Bill Smith, and my friend," he looked around and indicated the other man who came up to join them, "is Tom Jones."

The second man was thin and younger than the one who called himself Smith. He had watery blue eyes and a mouth that twitched nervously. "I've read your articles in the hunting magazines, Winston," he said. "And seen your photos as well."

"Good. Come in and get a warm drink," Winston invited, his weathered young face showing none of his inner uneasiness. He saw that the big man carried a rifle and guessed that the other one was probably armed as well.

"We heard back in the village," Smith said as he came inside, "that you and your wife were up here in the game reserve doing a series of nature pictures. We were more than interested, weren't we, Tom?" Tom

answered with a laconic smile, and Smith continued glibly, "We just had to come up and see how you were making out. Too interesting for we tourists to miss, even in this weather. I guess you understand, Mrs. Winston."

The fat man nodded to Eleanor who stood by the stove and watched her husband as if for a possible clue to his thoughts. She gave a slight smile and prepared tea and toast and plates of a tempting hot stew. From the tenseness of her movements Winston knew his wife wasn't too happy about their guests. And he was conscious of something missing from the room. It took him a moment to realize it was the cage with the two homing pigeons. It was nowhere in sight. Eleanor must have taken it out back in the shed while he'd been greeting the two strangers.

Smith kept his rifle close to him, leaning it against a cot by his chair.

"No one comes here," Winston told them, tea in hand. "But then this is a Game Reserve and an area prohibited to hunters." As he said this he glanced up at Eleanor with meaningful eyes.

Smith gulped his tea and tackled the toast and stew. Jones was a little more fastidious but just as hungry judging by the way his portion vanished.

Smith chuckled. "I suppose you wonder how we got the nerve to come up here." He eyed Eleanor.

"Not since you've explained your interest in our work," Winston tried to pass it off easily.

Smith leaned forward. "Right. But

that's not the whole story. We want to rest for awhile. Away from the rat race of civilization, if you get me. And what better place than right here? I see you've got an empty cabin just across the yard."

"Yes," Winston admitted. "The Forest Rangers use both these places from time to time." He didn't dare look at his wife because now he was convinced these were the gunmen, and this was the spot they'd chosen for a hideout. And likely they'd show small mercy to Eleanor and him after they'd made use of them. "It will be strange having neighbours again," he said.

He knew the two could have had no official permission to come there. They'd probably made conversation at old Gautreau's general store. Perhaps that bald-headed innocent had himself explained all about their picture-taking expedition and mentioned the big store of supplies he sold them for their winter-long stay in the forest.

"Well," Smith said, getting up from his chair, "I guess we'll move into that other cabin. We'll need some firewood, bedclothes and groceries. I imagine you can spare some." It wasn't a mere statement the way he said it. It was an order.

Winston nodded and stood. He looked at Eleanor for the first time since the men had eaten and saw the terror in her eyes. He glanced down at the floor with a troubled sigh. He knew there was something he must do. But what? To undertake an open showdown with the two could endanger both their lives.

"You got plenty of cameras and

stuff here." Jones stared at the shelf of equipment greedily.

"We need a lot." Winston's answer was preoccupied.

"I suppose you use movie cameras for action shots?" Smith said with one of his unpleasant smiles.

"Sometimes," Winston agreed.

Then Eleanor spoke. Her entry in the conversation causing her husband a slight surprise. "He gets his most successful shots at night. Using infra-red film and a telescopic lens. It's amazing how much easier it is to catch wild life on the prowl after dark."

"It's possible," Winston began, "but we—"

Eleanor interrupted. "We have a lot of trouble getting ready for them. Still we use that type of film all the time."

Winston decided she must have a good reason for bringing up the subject and added casually, "There's always a new idea coming along."

"Yes," agreed Eleanor brightly. "Like Mr. Gautreau's homing pigeons. Surely he must have told you about them."

Jones had moved in closer, an intent look on his pinched face. "No, he didn't, Mr. Winston. Just where do they fit in?"

Mrs. Winston managed a smile. "It's an idea of Gautreau, who runs the general store at the village. You met him on the way up, I suppose. In the winter these roads are impassable after a few storms. And he has this idea to give us some contact with the outside world in an emergency. He's training these homing pigeons and

plans to send them up by the Forest Rangers on their next visit in case we have trouble."

There was a moment of coldness in the room that matched the zero atmosphere outside. As if the masquerade the two intruders had carried on up to now might be suddenly dropped.

"Quite an idea," Smith's voice was hard. "I hope you'll never have to make use of them. We'll just take the wood, groceries and things and see you in the morning."

"Mr. Smith," Winston said quite calmly, realizing he owed it to Eleanor to have it settled. "How did the Government agent come to let you make this trip up here?"

Smith stood by the door, his grin was nasty. "He didn't," he said, curtly. And he went out.

Jones stood by nervously as Winston put a few items of groceries in a carton the two would need for breakfast.

The younger man gave a phoney laugh. "Don't worry about Smith," he advised. "These rich guys are all a little cracked."

"Oh, Mr. Smith is rich?" Eleanor asked.

"Has more money than he knows what to do with," the younger man winked confidentially and took the carton from Winston. "See you in the morning," he said and followed Smith out into the frosty night.

When the door closed, Winston sat down in bewilderment. Eleanor came over and rested her hand on his shoulder. "You think they're the killers, don't you?"

"They could be. I can't afford to take chances with you here."

"I'm sure they're the ones," Eleanor said.

The car outside started again and was moved closer to the other cabin. Through the corner of a frosted window Winston watched them go inside. It meant the end of his work. They couldn't stay here now. But how would they manage to get away? The Rangers had brought them up in their car and they wouldn't be by for weeks again. Winston knew he'd made a fatal error in not equipping themselves with a ham radio set. That could have made all the difference. Gautreau's homing pigeons were a reality and not promised as Eleanor had lied to the strangers. But even with them out back and ready to use there was no real hope. In the tests they'd made before the storm came, none of the pigeons had found its way back to the village store.

"I don't know," Gautreau had scratched his bald pate when Winston broke the news of his birds' stupidity. "Must be something wrong with the breed. I train them right."

Well, no matter. They wouldn't be any use now. He turned to Eleanor. "I've got to get us out of this some way."

"Don't be so dramatic," Eleanor kept her poise. "We'll manage."

Winston went over and kissed her. "Comforting thought even if I don't believe it."

"I think you should take some pictures. Some special pictures," Eleanor suggested.



"Not now, dear!" He groaned. "I'm too nervous to work."

"Not for this job, darling," she said patiently.

Thoroughly irritated he went on. "And why did you tell them all that nonsense about my using infra-red film at night and telescopic lens? You know that's not part of my technique at all. And telling them we expected to get the homing pigeons when we already have the stupid things out in the shed where you hid them!"

Eleanor smiled. "If you'll listen to me now. . . ."

When they'd finished talking he selected a camera and put on his heavy cap and mackinaw. He gave her a hug. "I won't be long," he promised.

The night was cold and still. Overhead the stars were a dome of twink-

ling splendour. He moved through the bushes until he was opposite the door of the other cabin. There was a light on inside and smoke curling from the stone chimney in a twisting wreath. Bending down he picked up an ice-covered stone and from his hiding-place hurled it against the cabin door. A moment later the two inside reacted. The door was flung open and they both stood there showing alarm and surprise.

The fat one, Smith, shrugged. "Likely ice breaking off the roof from the heat inside."

"Didn't sound like that to me," the younger man argued.

But they went back inside while Winston watched from the bushes. Quietly he made his way to his own cabin.

Next morning, when they were busy

in the yard tinkering with the engine of the car, Winston gave a nod to Eleanor and she brought one of the homing pigeons from its cage. He clipped a metal container on one of its legs and then went out into the yard and sent it on its way into the air in plain view of the two intruders.

Smith grabbed for his rifle and raised it and fired a blast at the pigeon. But the bird continued to wing its way out of sight. The fat man angrily came over to Winston.

"What's the big idea? I thought you were just expecting those birds," the fat man said angrily.

"I guess we forgot to mention we had that one, Mr. Smith." Winston was all innocent surprise.

"That thing!" The younger man indicated the empty sky in a rage. "Was it carrying some kind of message?"

Eleanor's green eyes opened wide. "But of course. That's what they're trained for. It must be half way back to Gautreau's store by now."

"Won't do you two any good! I never heard of dead people talking."

The fat man raised his rifle. "And for this smart alec stunt you're both going to get good and dead."

"Don't be hasty," Winston advised. "As it stands you might just have a chance to get away with a manslaughter charge on the payroll killing. If you finish us you've really settled things for yourselves."

"Who'll know we did it?" Smith jeered.

"Just one more thing," Eleanor said quickly. "I told you about the infra-red pictures my husband takes

in the dark. Well, when you came to your cabin door last night he got a lovely shot of you both. That's the negative we sent back with our note by the pigeon."

"So there'll be no guessing," Winston told them, his face grim. "Whatever happens here they'll know who's responsible. The smartest thing for you to do is to get on your way before they send help up."

Smith stood speechless with rage. Jones gave a cynical shrug. "They've outsmarted us. We better make a run for it."

For a moment the fat man raised the menacing rifle towards them and it seemed his rage would get the better of his judgment. Then choking on his anger he turned and went quickly into the cabin. Winston and Eleanor watched as they hurriedly packed the car. They watched it vanish down the icy road.

Eleanor gave a sigh of relief and hugged her husband's arm. "They've gone, Jim! They've really gone!"

"And without even the whisper of a struggle," his voice was small with awe. "You had a real idea, honey. A real thought. I wonder if they'll catch them."

"Bound to. It's just a matter of time. They're not smart at all." She paused in thought. "What I'd like to know is where that pigeon is heading right now."

He gave her a kiss and grinned. "Not to Gautreau's we can be sure of that. Probably somewhere south."

Eleanor wrinkled her nose in a delighted smile. "I hope it has a nice winter."

THE ORDEAL OF MARIE-FRANÇOISE

A. E. MURCH

Illustrated by Juliette Palmer



IN A HOT August morning in 1781, a young French peasant girl with a bright, honest face was plodding sturdily along the dusty high-road that led from the quiet little cathedral town of Bayeux to the busy city of Caen, eighteen miles away. She was Marie-Françoise-Victoire Saumon, just twenty-one years old, a farm-labourer's daughter, on her way to look for a new job in the prosperous capital of Normandy. Life there would surely be more exciting, even for a maid-of-all-work, than in the depths of the country where she had lived till then. Fortunately for her peace of mind she could not foresee the terrible ordeal that lay ahead of her.

She was barely seven when her mother died, and ever since Marie-Françoise had worked for her living, first as a scullery-maid, later as a general servant. Her *livret*, or worker's identity book, showed that in those fourteen years she had served four employers. Each of them gave her an excellent testimonial, describing her as a hard-working girl of good character. Her last place was with a Monsieur and Madame Dumesnil at a small country house near Bayeux,

where a frequent, much-respected visitor was Madame's distant cousin, Monsier Ravel, a high official in the Law Courts at Caen—the Public Prosecutor, no less! Often, as Marie waited at table, she heard him talking of the luxury and gaiety of life in the city. "There should be plenty of opportunities for a good servant in a place like that," she thought to herself, and when her next year of service ended in July she left the Dumesnil family and set out with everything she possessed in the world in a bundle over her arm. It wasn't much, just her last quarter's wages, a change of underclothes and her "Sunday pockets". In those days every maid-servant wore a pair of large, pannier-like pockets hanging from a band tied around her waist, plain ones all the week and a gaily-trimmed set on Sundays. Even Marie's "best" pockets were the worse for wear, but she was handy with her needle and had a new pair almost finished. The coarse linen linings were ready, waiting to be covered with bright material as soon as she could afford it.

She reached Caen in the afternoon of Wednesday, August 1st, and before nightfall was comfortably settled in her new place, with a highly-respected *bourgeois* family. Her employer, Monsieur Huet-Duparc, had a son of

twenty-one, another of eleven and a daughter of seventeen. With them lived Madame Duparc's parents, M. and Mme. Beaulieu, a querulous old couple aged eighty-eight and eighty-six respectively. Marie's duties were to wait on these seven people, do the marketing, cooking, washing and cleaning and take the old lady to church every morning, all for her keep and a wage of rather less than two English pounds a year.

Next morning, as soon as Marie had lit the fire, swept the kitchen and fetched the milk from the farm up the road, Mme Duparc showed her how to make oatmeal porridge for the toothless old gentleman's breakfast. "My father is very fussy about it," she said. "Never let it be lumpy, never put in any salt and always have it ready punctually at seven every morning." He was certainly a tyrant in the house. Rich and miserly, he owned two fine farms that would pass to his daughter when he died, but he was tough and wiry and seemed likely to live for years.

For the first few days Marie found life pleasant enough and on Saturday she gave herself a treat. In the market she found just what she wanted for trimming her new pockets, a piece of orange-coloured stuff, and brought it home in triumph to show her mistress. "I hadn't quite enough money to pay for it," she explained, "but when I told the stall-holder I was working for you she said I could give her the rest when I get my first wages. It's only a penny I owe her." Sewing was not permitted on Sunday, of course, but as she went about her

work Marie enjoyed planning how to use the gay material to the best advantage. That was her last happy day for almost five years.

* * *

Monday began badly. As Marie dressed hurriedly at dawn in her little bedroom—really a recess curtained off from the kitchen—she heard Mme Duparc quarrelling with her husband, shouting that she needed money. Soon, however, M. Duparc saddled his horse in the yard and rode away. He had business to attend to in the country outside Caen, and wasn't expected home again till the end of the week.

Marie ran to fetch the milk as usual, but on that particular morning it wasn't ready, which didn't improve Madame's temper. Still, before long the milkmaid, breathless and apologetic, brought it to the house herself and Marie began to make the porridge. When it was cooked, her mistress seized the saucepan. "Did you put salt in?" she asked.

"Certainly not, Madame. You told me not to."

"We'll give him some today, for a change," and picking up a wooden salt-cellar from the dresser Mme Duparc sprinkled in a liberal amount of salt, or, to be more precise in view of later developments, a white powder that looked like salt. Then she poured the food into a plate, took it to her father, and sat with him while he ate his breakfast.

By this time, old Mme Beaulieu was waiting impatiently for Marie to take her to mass. Then there was the

day's marketing to do, and the morning was half over by the time Marie came back. She found the house in an uproar. Soon after breakfast, M. Beaulieu had been taken ill with violent sickness and agonizing attacks of cramp that grew worse as the day went on. Madame Duparc would not call in a doctor, though at last she fetched a young apprentice from the nearest apothecary's shop, a well-meaning but inexperienced lad, whose professional skill did not extend beyond the application of a leech or a blister. When these remedies proved ineffective, he stayed to give Marie what help he could, but at about six in the evening the old man sank into a coma and died.

Then Marie had another patient on her hands—Madame Beaulieu, hysterical with shock and distress at her husband's sudden death. All night long she sat up with the old lady, till, as dawn was breaking, she sank into a fitful sleep. Then Marie, utterly exhausted dragged herself back to the kitchen to begin another day's work.

A few hours later, she was surprised to see her master ride into the yard. Madame, even more surprised, went out to greet him. He had heard the news, abandoned his business plans and hurried home, demanding to be told what had happened to his father-in-law the moment his back was turned. What he said to his wife, no one will ever know, but after that interview her face was white and set, her eyes glinted with cunning. She had not expected more than perfunctory enquiries. Surely nobody would be surprised when an old man

of nearly ninety died quietly at home in bed? Now her own husband was asking all sorts of awkward questions as though there was something suspicious about it. Other people might do the same. She sensed danger. She needed a scapegoat. Her glance fell upon Marie-Françoise.

Her opening move was deceptively mild. "You look tired out, my girl," she said. "Go and lie on your bed for an hour or two. I will cook lunch today." Only too thankfully, Marie did as she was told and was soon fast asleep. That day, the Duparc family enjoyed a tasty *ragout* of beef and a dish of fresh cherries, but soon they one after another began to complain of sickness and stomach pains, and Madame rushed into the street, shrieking that their wicked servant had poisoned the whole family with arsenic!

Marie was rudely awakened by a crowd of neighbours storming into the kitchen, terrifying her with threats and blows. Behind them came Madame with three family friends; an apothecary, M. Thierry, a surgeon, M. Hébart, and a legal gentleman, M. Frilet. Thierry examined the plates and cooking utensils, then poked around the fire-place where he found a partly-burned wooden salt-cellar which was eagerly passed from hand to hand. The surgeon took upon himself to search Marie's clothing and her room—that little annexe that anyone in the house could have entered at any time. In the pockets she was wearing he found, according to the evidence he gave at her trial, "a few scraps of dry bread sprinkled

with a white, shining, crystalline powder." He found grains of a similar powder on the mattress where she was lying, and traces of the same substance in her "Sunday pockets" which were hanging on the back of a chair beside her bed.

Meanwhile, M. Frilet was busy taking statements from each of the poisoned members of the family, by now almost fully recovered. This information he at once placed before the Public Prosecutor—Monsieur Revel. One might have expected that M. Revel, having known Marie-Françoise for some years as a trusted servant in his cousin's home near Bayeux, would have required some evidence before assuming she was guilty and treated her with common justice. All he did was to send a police officer in plain clothes, a M. Bertot, to bring Marie to him. She went without a moment's hesitation, no doubt thinking the *procureur* would soon dispel the cloud of suspicion hanging over her head. The moment she reached his house she was arrested without being permitted to say a word in her own defence, taken to prison, searched and placed in solitary confinement. That was on the evening of August 7th.

Next morning, M. Revel bestirred himself sufficiently to visit the home of the Duparcs to enquire about their health and then learned of the death of M. Beaulieu. At once he ordered an autopsy and when the surgeons who conducted it made their report it was clear beyond question that the old man had died of arsenical poisoning.

On August 14th, a prolonged enquiry was conducted by the *lieutenant criminel*, who questioned no fewer than twenty-nine witnesses. Many of them knew nothing except by hearsay; those who had actually been present in Mme. Duparc's house contradicted each other and the evidence offered was so scanty, so inconclusive, that the case was adjourned for further enquiries. Meanwhile, Marie remained in prison, without any official charge having been brought against her and without being allowed to make a statement in her own defence.

It was not until April 17th, 1782, that she was brought to trial, before M. Revel, and by that time the accusations against her had broadened considerably, thanks to the untiring efforts of the *procureur* and Mm. Duparc. She was charged with murdering M. Beaulieu; attempting to murder the rest of the Duparc family; having arsenic in her possession; having stolen a sheet from her former employer, Mme. Dumesnil (a relative of M. Revel, you remember); attempting to steal from Mme. Duparc a number of household articles, found in her bedroom cupboard after her arrest; and, finally, defrauding a market-stall-holder, named Lefevre, of part of the price agreed for a piece of orange-covered cloth. She was convicted on all counts, and M. Revel pronounced sentence. He did more. The case had aroused strong public feeling and he therefore ordered that a number of posters should be printed and publicly displayed in Caen, listing her crimes and stating the sen-

tence he had passed on her. One of these posters still exists. It reads as follows:

For punishment and atonement for the above offences, the said Marie-Françoise-Victoire Saumon shall be led by the executioner to the principal gate of St. Peter's Church in her shift and bare-foot with a halter round her neck, bearing in her hands a lighted candle of two pounds weight. In front of her and at her back shall be hung a placard with these words in large letters: "Poisoner and Thieving Servant". Before the church she shall kneel and confess her wickedness, proclaim her repentance and ask pardon of God and the Law.

She shall then be led to the market square of St Saviours, fastened to a stake with an iron chain and burnt alive; her body to be reduced to ashes and the ashes cast to the winds; her goods to be seized and handed to the King, or to whomsoever they may belong.

Required additionally that the said prisoner shall first be submitted to the Ordinary and Extraordinary Torture, to obtain information of her accomplices who gave her, or sold her, the arsenic found in her possession. Dated this 17th April, 1782.

(Signed) REVEL.

("Ordinary Torture" meant the commonplace devices of European prisons of the day—the rack, thumb-screws, hempen cords and twisted wires. "Extraordinary Torture" was the dreaded "*peine forte et dure*"

used on a prisoner "mute of malice". A poor wretch condemned to that would be stretched upon his back and have iron placed on him, "as much as could be borne, and more, and so to continue until he spoke or died").

Marie-Françoise, numb with horror at this terrible prospect, took the only legal step open to her, and appealed to the *parlement* of Rouen. After considering the case, Rouen confirmed the decision of the court of Caen and fixed the date of her execution as May 26th. Now Marie's last hope was gone. Small wonder that when this news reached her she broke down completely, and her wild screams echoed through the prison till the very jailers ran to quieten her. With them went three priests who happened to be visiting other prisoners, and between them they at last managed to calm her a little. The priests urged her to confess and receive absolution; she protested her complete innocence; they began to question her closely and in the end to believe her. Even so, they were powerless to help her, and could only counsel submission.

But one jailer's wife had a better idea and when the rest had gone she gave the distracted girl a little practical advice. Almost immediately, Marie pleaded for a stay of execution on the grounds that she was "quick with child". It was not true, of course. Since her arrest she had already spent more than nine months in solitary confinement. Still, the authorities agreed to postpone the date for two months—until July 29th.

Meanwhile, Caen was buzzing with



rumours and public feeling was running high. What possible motive could Marie have had to kill her employer's family? She had known them only four days! She had no money to buy poison, and knew no one who could possibly have given her any. The apothecary's lad told how kindly and carefully she had nursed the dying man. The milkmaid gossiped, too. It was she, not Marie, who brought the milk that morning. It was Mme. Duparc, not Marie, who had "salted" the porridge, taken it to her father and watched him eat it. Who refused to call a doctor? Mme Duparc. Who cooked the lunch with just enough poison to inconvenience, but not endanger, those who ate it and throw suspicion on Marie? Mme Duparc. Who spoke of arsenic long before the surgeons had identified the poison? Mme Duparc. Who inherited M. Beaulieu's money? Mme Duparc. There were people in Caen who whispered that a certain druggist had sold arsenic "for killing rats", long before Marie arrived in the town—to Mme Duparc!

The storm of indignation at Marie's sentence spread far beyond Caen and Rouen. The case became the talk of Paris, then of the court at Versailles, where it was at last brought to the notice of Louis XVI—no lover of petty provincial autocrats. He despatched a Royal Warrant to Rouen on July 26th, ordering a stay of execution and an immediate enquiry to establish the true facts. Rouen received it on the 27th, recorded it in their archives and sent it to Caen, where it arrived on the

28th. That was a Sunday. M. Revel and his colleagues did not work on Sundays and the King's Warrant lay unopened till next morning, the day fixed for Marie's execution.

At dawn, crowds began to gather in the streets, soldiers lined the market-place, the stake was erected with faggots stacked around it and Marie was already being led, barefoot, to the torture chamber when the Royal Command was read. She was saved, but still a prisoner, pending the result of the new enquiry. Rouen deliberated the problem at great length, compelled to obey the king, yet anxious not to discredit in any way their legal *confreres* at Caen. At last, with their French genius for compromise, they hit on a solution. The sentence passed by M. Revel was quashed on a minor technicality, and Marie was to remain in prison until further evidence came to light to establish her guilt or innocence. (It was already more than three-and-a-half years since her arrest. What likelihood was there of fresh evidence in such a case?).

Now, at last, Marie found a lawyer to assist her, an advocate named Lecauchois. He promoted a public subscription for Marie from which he paid himself a handsome fee for his services—but he served her well. He had access to the legal records of her case, from which he prepared a statement that was sent to the King on Marie's behalf. Louis ordered a complete re-trial, not in the provinces as before, but at the *Parlement* of Paris itself, in the presence of the highest legal authorities in the land.

Marie's defence counsel was the eminent *avocat*, Monsieur Fournel, and his speech, one of the finest in his career, remains on record in the official account of the proceedings. Cutting through the various technicalities that had previously been allowed to confuse the issue, he went straight to the root of the matter—Marie's complete innocence. He examined every scrap of evidence minutely and finally convinced the court that not only had she been wrongfully convicted but that she should never have been charged. On May 23rd, 1786, the *Parlement* issued its decision: Marie was to be at once set free without a stain on her character, and she was authorised to bring an action for damages against the persons who had falsely accused her of murder and theft, claiming compensation for her five years in prison.

Marie was now a figure of national interest. When she walked in the

streets of Paris after her release she was followed by a cheering crowd, and sympathisers raised a subscription sufficient to ensure her a modest income for life. When, however, she took steps to bring her action against M. Revel and Mme Duparc, as advised by the *Parlement*, she soon found herself thwarted. Not one single prosecuting counsel in the whole of France would agree to represent her. (What? A *procureur* to instigate an action against his brother *procureur*, M. Revel?) So poor Marie-Françoise never received any compensation for her ordeal. Still, Paris had the last word and gave her a licence to open a shop for the sale of stamped documents—a valuable concession that was, in itself, a complete vindication of her character, and as far as one can tell she lived the rest of her life in peace and comfort.



Murder, like talent, seems occasionally to run in families.

GEORGE HENRY LEWES

IMPROMPTU PART

FRANK MACE



I STOOD BEFORE THE mews doorway, pushing on the chiming bell and admiring the elegant copper lamp overhead. I was shaved, neatly dressed and calling on no less a person than Miss Ann Ribbens, the promising young actress.

A long way from my customary sleazy milieu? I certainly was; but I've always been a fan of the theatre. In fact, you might say that it was the fan-gossip that brought me to Ann Ribbens's front-door in the first place, and in particular Max Weston's Show-Biz column in the "Gazette".

You see, it was in Mr. Weston's breathless, bi-weekly compendium of theatrical chit-chat that the world and I thrilled to the news that Miss Ribbens, "that enchanting young actress", who was due to marry "brilliant young producer Paul Jonaby", had been presented with a jumbo-size sapphire-and-diamond bracelet as an engagement gift. This in itself didn't surprise me, of course, because Paul Jonaby, besides being young and brilliant, was known to be uncommonly well-heeled; and I recalled that his direction of Miss Ribbens had contributed largely to the play's success. What shook me a good deal more was that old Barney Rossman, in the back room of my shop some evenings later, should have taken out his grubby brown handkerchief and, slowly unfolding it, produced that

self - same sapphire - and - diamond trinket.

I still remember Barney's face that evening: ugly, gleeful, rapt with pride and covetousness. "Lovely thing, eh?" he said, studying my reactions closely. "An' you bein' a patron of the arts, I needn't tell you where it come from—eh?"

"No," I said, slowly recovering; "you needn't. But I never saw anything in the papers; where'd you lift it from? And when?"

"From her flat, of course, where else? Three days ago. Mews flat near the park; piece of cake, too. No alarms, an' a bit of a wall safe a five-year-old could've cracked."

"Dicing with death, weren't you?"

"Ah, but she's filmin', you see," said Barney with a knowing smile. "TV series; I read it in the papers. Which means she's got to be up early, which means early to bed with tranquillizers; which meant the goods'd be locked away somewhere—right?" I nodded. "Right," said Barney. "Now the way I figured, it had to be either a bank or a safe in her flat; probably the flat, I reckoned, 'cause she'd be inclined to keep her little trinket where she could take it out an' admire it. And, well, there you are," he concluded triumphantly, indicating the bracelet. "Bullseye, eh?"

I replaced it on the handkerchief. "It was a neat bit of reasoning all right," I said gently. "But I'm sorry

to have to tell you that this little item's a fake."

"A fake?" Barney's voice rose three octaves. "How d'you mean, a fake? It's from her flat, I tell you!"

"I don't doubt it," I said, "and it's a pretty job; I'm not surprised you didn't rumble it. It's worth about two hundred in the open market, but to me—absolutely nothing, I'm afraid." And I folded it in the handkerchief and gave it back to him. "Sorry."

Barney began to curse with a startling fluency and precision. After a while, he stopped for breath. "You *sure*?" he said.

"We've done business for nearly three years," I said soothingly. "Have I ever lied to you? Have I ever twisted you? And I wouldn't now," I continued, as Barney opened his mouth to speak. "This is a replica, and you can verify that elsewhere if you like. Little Miss Ribbens obviously keeps the genuine article in a bank vault, and I can't say I blame her. If this is an exact copy, the real thing would fetch between six and eight thousand."

"Well," said Barney at last, "I believe you; but it's enough to break a bloke's heart. Look here, though," he went on, "let me have a tenner on it for old times' sake, eh? You got to admit it's a handsome piece o' goods, even if it is junk."

I sighed. "Well, there's no market for it," I said, "but I'll let you have the tenner. Strictly for old times' sake."

"You'll never regret it!" said Barney fervently.

I did, though.

About a week later, I was sitting over a vodka in my corner-niche in the "Cherry Tree" when I saw Reggie McGraw come in. I never really cared for McGraw; he'd read a book once about a dashing gentleman crook and it had gone to his brilliant head. He even boasted an acquaintance or two in the so-called Smart Set and the show-business world; but as far as I knew he'd no real friends. At any rate, I certainly wasn't one.

I tried looking inconspicuous, but it wasn't easy in a deserted pub and McGraw came over and joined me. "How now, Adams old lad," he said, sitting down; "thought I might find you hereabouts. Two large Scotches, please, Miss."

"And what," I inquired without warmth, "has tempted you so far from the bright lights?"

"A little jaundiced today, old lad?" said McGraw; "a trifle misanthropic? Now that won't do at all." And he favoured me with his wide, phoney smile. "I've a little something here that might cheer you up a bit."

"What is it?"

"Ice. A trifle warm, perhaps, but still most acceptable to a shrewd businessman like yourself, I'm sure . . . Ah, thank you, Miss. Well, your health, Adams old lad."

"Cheers," I said sourly. "No, I'm sorry but I'm not in the market at the moment."

"Are you sure?" McGraw interrupted, glancing around to verify that we were alone. "Quite sure? I'm pretty well giving it away. Three thousand. Take a peek."

I darted a startled glance downwards. McGraw had laid a napkin—somewhat cleaner than Barney’s—on his knee, and he now unfolded it with a dramatic little flourish. “Not bad, eh?”

Yes, you’re right: it was the double of the piece Barney had sold me nine days’ earlier. But there was one major, and to my mind crucial, difference: this time it was unquestionably the real thing. “Where’d you get it?” I breathed.

“Ask none,” said McGraw with a wink, “and you’ll be told none. You recognize it, of course?”

“I certainly do,” I said. “But you never lifted it, that’s certain. Where’d you get it?”

“Now listen,” murmured McGraw, his smile slipping momentarily, “do you want the damned thing or don’t you?”

“Yes,” I said thoughtfully. “Yes, I think I do.”

I made the purchase; and that, briefly, is how I came to be in that fashionable mews, in front of that particular cream-and-yellow door on that particular Sunday morning, sounding the pretty chimes and admiring the copper coach-lamp overhead.

The door opened suddenly and a bright, slightly chubby young face appeared. She was, I thought, considerably prettier than her photographs. “Mr. Adams, is it?” she inquired cheerfully.

“It is,” I said. “Very good of you to see me, Miss Ribbens; I realize you must be extremely busy.”

“Well, I am, rather, even on my

rare days off, but you sounded so very mysterious, I thought I’d better find out what it was all about. Come in, please.”

She smiled and closed the door behind us. We were in a small, chic room decorated in grey and yellow, with a wine-red pile carpet and some flimsy *avant-garde* furniture. It was all so cheerfully extrovert, in fact, that I hardly knew how to broach my rather devious business. “Well,” I said cautiously, “as I mentioned on the blow—on the telephone, it’s in connection with the, ah, recent theft of your, ah, bracelet.”

She gave me a faintly quizzical look. “Yes . . . We tried so desperately to keep it out of the papers . . . You *are* from the Press, I take it?”

“Well—no, I’m not,” I said, somewhat taken aback. “And come to think of it, I don’t remember it being reported . . .”

“Then how did you know it was stolen, she inquired, losing a little of her conventional affability. “Look here, Mr. Adams, we appear to be talking at cross-purposes; shall we come to the point?”

Aha, that was better: a touch of asperity. Now I felt more at ease, more able to talk business. “I’d be delighted,” I said. “First of all, are you alone? No, no, it’s quite all right,” I added hastily, seeing her quick, suspicious frown, “it’s just that this is, well, rather a confidential matter, and I don’t want any—eavesdroppers.”

She smiled, faintly. “There won’t be any; not for the next half-hour or

so, anyway. Now, who are you and what's all this about?"

There was no point in further evasions; it was time, I saw, for our little Moment of Truth. I took the two bracelets from my jacket pocket; laid them on the table before me and fixed Miss Ann Ribbens with a look that might have been called "significant".

She reacted slowly, but rather splendidly, I thought. Her face paled and her expression of half-amused suspicion gradually hardened into something very like anger. She looked great.

"This," I said, breaking the long silence, "was why I telephoned."

"Both of them," she said quietly. "You've got both of them. Now, how did you manage that, Mr. Adams?"

"I paid for them, Miss Ribbens."

"I see," she said coldly; "so you're a receiver of stolen property, are you? And now you've come to sell the property back to its owner, is that it?" And she glared across at me, her eyes blazing. Anger Suppressed But Mounting, I suppose you'd call it; and beautifully done, I had to admit. "Well, Adams, or whatever your name is, I'll tell you what I'm going to do now—this very minute. I'm going to pick up that 'phone and call the police!"

I applauded lightly. "Splendid. You know, I'm a great fan of the theatre; I appreciate a good *bravura* performance when I see one. Still, I think you'd better hear me out before you do anything rash."

"Hear you out, you crook? I'll——"

"Now listen, my dear," I said patiently, "you wanted me to come to the point and I'm just about to; so please spare me the histrionics and pay attention. Now," I went on, nodding at the table, "you see here the Ribbens bracelets. One's real, and the other—well, it's not quite so real."

Her glare was as malevolent as ever. "Go on."

"Well, now come the true-confessions bit, so listen closely and please don't interrupt. Item one: about two weeks ago, the fake piece was lifted from your wall safe here; as it happens by a very good friend of mine. Item two: yesterday morning, a character by the name of McGraw, whom you may or may not know, approached me and offered to sell me the genuine piece." She gave no sign of understanding, but her pretty lips remained tightly compressed. "Well," I went on, "after I'd recovered from the shock, I bought it; and then I began to do a little hard thinking."

"And what conclusions," she inquired dryly, "did you reach?"

"Well, as I see it," I said, "you've been, if I may say so, rather a naughty girl. It happened, I think, like this—and please correct me if I'm wrong. First, you're given the bracelet as an engagement present. Okay. Next, you have a replica made; a good one, good enough to fool your nearest and dearest for a few days. Fine. You then make sure there's plenty of ballyhoo about the bracelet in the papers; you also arrange that it's not too difficult for some un-

scrupulous cad to lift the fake from your safe if he feels like it."

"I do?" she said quietly; "before I kick you out, would you mind telling me why?"

"Simple. You report the theft—luckily, it's genuine, though you were probably intending to rig one anyway—then stake your claim with the insurance company. Meanwhile, you've disposed of the real stuff to somebody like McGraw—I understand he sometimes moves in the more elevated social circles. In short, Miss Ribbens, you have it both ways: the insured value of the bracelet plus the price your buyer pays you. A very old dodge, but if it comes off a very lucrative one."

She stared hard at me for a few seconds then smiled cheerfully. "If it comes off; and if it were true," she said.

"Having any trouble with the insurance people?"

She eyed me sardonically. "Why should I? You yourself, Mr. Adams, said it was a genuine theft." And she gave a bubbling little laugh.

She was a cool little piece, I'd give her that. "So I was right, then?" I said. But of course I was: popular young starlet, plenty of high living, temporarily short of ready money—the whole thing fitted with jigsaw neatness. The point was, would she be prepared to do a deal? And had she really any choice?

I waited, while she looked me over thoughtfully for a few moments. "I must confess to a certain curiosity, Mr. Adams," she said. "Assuming your preposterous accusations were

true, wouldn't you have a hard time proving them without getting yourself involved? And more important, what *exactly* is it you want?"

"First of all," I said, "a few details. And please believe me, I'm perfectly prepared to involve myself, as you put it, if it's necessary. A short note to your fiancé, for example, or the insurance people, together with the bracelets—you've obviously never told 'em you've had a replica made—and I'm sure they'd be very interested. True, it might involve me in a certain financial loss——"

"True," she said. "And that, Mr. Adams, is why you'll never do it."

"I may lose money," I said soberly, "but unless I'm in on it, you're not getting away with anything." I meant it, and I think she realized the fact. "However," I went on, "since I believe we can be of mutual assistance to each other, I'd much prefer to do a friendly little deal. We can both do very nicely out of this if we co-operate. But first I've got to have those details. For instance, how much are you getting by way of insurance?"

"Before you leave," she said, examining her fingernails closely, "and just to see where this ridiculous conversation leads, I'm prepared to humour you—up to a point. It's probably safer, anyway." She looked up and smiled. "The insured value of my bracelet was four thousand pounds. Now what?"

"Think again."

She frowned across at me, stung to sudden anger. "All right, seven thousand—seven! What of it?" And she shook her head furiously, as if per-

plexed at her own behaviour. "Why am I bothering to answer your asinine questions, anyway?"

Her mask had dropped and I pressed my advantage. "Because you've been a trifle indiscreet," I said, "and because I'm in a position to prove it. Now, who took the real bracelet off your hands; was it our friend McGraw?"

She took a cigarette from a small silver box on the table and lit it, recovering from her outburst and deliberating what her next move ought to be. "What's your interest in all this?" she asked finally.

"You'll learn that when I've got my answers."

"All right," she said suddenly, sighing; "supposing I said I *do* know McGraw; what then?"

My pulse did a little obbligate of excitement, but I succeeded in retaining control of my features. I even managed a grimace. "I can't say I altogether approve of the company you keep, ducky."

"I can't say I do either," she admitted; "but besides being quite charming, Reggie McGraw's sometimes rather—useful. And to forestall your next question," she added wryly, "I met him at a cocktail-party about four months ago. Now, is there anything else I can tell you; my vital statistics, perhaps?"

Her admissions were too glib, too easy, the dourly rational part of my mind kept repeating; but my natural, vacuous optimism quickly reasserted itself and I gave a mental shrug. What else could she do, now, but play along and await develop-

ments? "Just one final thing," I said. "How much did McGraw pay you for the bracelet?"

"Two thousand," she said, with a trace of contempt. "As a favour, he said. Remarkably generous of Reggie, don't you think?"

Generous or not, that sounded about right: I'd given him three for it. "Right," I said pensively. "So altogether, with the insurance money, you'd have made nine thousand on the deal, Hmm, not bad at all. Now I'll tell you what I'll do," I continued, helping myself to a cigarette. "I'll let you have both these little trinkets back for"—I lit my cigarette—"for six thousand."

"Six thousand," she repeated tonelessly, and blinked.

"Yes. Now this, as you must realize, is going to spare you a great deal of embarrassment; you'll also get your bracelets back; and you'll still clear three thousand on the deal. You can even re-sell the genuine piece if you want to! Now, how does that strike you? Simple, quick and highly expedient for both parties, don't you think? Think about it, anyway; take your time. I can give you at least five minutes . . ."

She stared at me for some moments with no discernible trace of affection; then raised her eyes thoughtfully to the ceiling. "Hmm," was all she said.

I could do nothing now but wait. It'd be a fair enough deal for me, too, if it went as planned; and why shouldn't it? The thing was not to be too greedy; as it was, my own net profit would also be three thousand—six, less the three I'd paid McGraw—

and everybody would be (reasonably) happy. So I simply sat, sweating gently, and waited for her to think it out.

It took a long while; but at last she returned her penetrating gaze to me. "Well, I'll be frank, Mr. Adams," she said. "I can't say I like doing business with a receiver of stolen goods; but I'm at rather a delicate stage in my career, and I don't appear"—she stubbed out her cigarette savagely—"to have a great deal of choice, do I?"

"Not really," I said, trying not to sound over-smug.

She stood up. "All right; it's a deal," she said quietly.

"Good," I smiled, and rose. I was delighted (and a little surprised) at the smooth way things had gone. "I hoped you'd see how mutually beneficial our little arrangement would be. Well, I know how busy you are, so I'll bid you good afternoon. I'd be grateful if you'll have the money available in the customary small denominations by Sunday next at, shall we say, three o'clock? I'll call then, if you can manage to be home, and alone, at that time."

"I'll be here," she said, walking across the room to a bureau in the corner; "but you"—she turned, and it was unmistakably a .22 Browning that was being levelled at me—"will not, Mr. Adams. Pardon the melodrama, but you didn't really imagine I'd allow you to blackmail me in this way, did you?" And her voice hardened. "Sit down, please."

I dropped like a bagged grouse. "Look, let's not be absurd," I said,

suddenly hoarse; "put that thing down . . . you blow the gaff on me and I'll do some talking of my own, you know. Don't forget," I continued desperately, "if I go down, you'll come with me and believe me, it'd be a positive pleasure to put McGraw inside for a few years . . ."

"But supposing," she said smoothly, "you weren't able to tell anybody anything?"

My legs had suddenly acquired the stability of blancmange. This wasn't happening; it couldn't be. "You'll never get away with it," I croaked.

"Mr. Adams," she said gravely, "you're being disloyal to the theatre; you're stealing lines from television." And then suddenly, to my inexpressible amazement, she gave vent to a rich, throaty peal of laughter. "Oh, my poor man!" she spluttered.

I could think of no reaction appropriate to the situation; I simply watched her, dazedly, as her giggles subsided and she seated herself opposite me. "Listen," she said; "listen, and I'll explain. You were right up to a point, Mr. Adams; but after that you went way off the beam. You see," she went on, stifling a little gurgle, "Paul's engagement present, besides being rather wonderful in itself, was also excellent publicity—and being a fan of the theatre, you'll know just how valuable that can be. However, you'll also realize that a gift of jewellery can often lead to complications." And she smiled across at me.

"And so," she went on, "I had a replica made; a good one, good enough to wear at parties and things.

I didn't tell Paul, not for the rather dubious reasons you've suggested, but simply because I didn't want him to know I wasn't wearing his gift—he's rather sensitive about that sort of thing, poor lamb, and fearfully impractical, too; but I feel one has to protect one's assets, particularly when they're worth eight thousand pounds, don't you." (But I was still incapable of any coherent comment.) "Anyway, what you obviously *didn't* know," she continued, "was that at the time of the robbery I was keeping *both* bracelets here in the flat."

Making the supreme effort, I finally succeeded in articulating a broken monosyllable. "Both?"

"Both," she said brightly, picking up the 'phone. "Get me the police, will you, please? No, don't move, Mr. Adams; I assure you this gun's most definitely not a prop . . . You see," she went on, regarding me with a sort of kindly distaste, "I'd had the replica delivered to me only that afternoon; I popped it in the safe beside the genuine piece, intending to deposit the real one with the bank next day; but I never got the chance. The same night, as you know, this flat was burgled and both original and replica were stolen together. See?"

I sat there numbly in the slow, agonizing throes of what might laughingly be called readjustment. So Barney Rossman had lifted them both, the old rogue! Not only that, but after selling the authentic piece to McGraw, he'd tried to palm the fake on to me as the real thing . . . No wonder he'd been satisfied with a tenner! Lord, what a supreme, what

an incomparable idiot I'd been. And there was something else, too, that was gnawing at my mind; something which would doubtless put the final touch to the drab picture of my own folly, but which I nevertheless had to ask her. "Look," I managed to say; "look, if that's what happened, then what's all this malarkey you've been giving me about knowing McGraw, and selling the bracelet and——"

"My dear Mr. Adams," she said with dignity, holding the receiver before her like a burning brand, "no actress worth her salt can resist the chance of a good impromptu part. And you offered me a beauty."

And that was that; my "sordid and over-devious mind," as His Lordship succinctly phrased it, earned me a tidy little sentence. McGraw, who figured briefly at the trial as a witness, affirmed that he knew nothing of Miss Ribbens or her bracelet. To my surprise, though, old Barney Rossman, who was awarded a five-year preventive stretch, maintained to the last that there'd been only one bracelet—the fake—in the safe that night. Naturally, nobody believed him.

Except me, perhaps . . . You see, I've been doing a good deal of thinking about my conversation with Miss Ribbens that day, and especially that part of it that touched on friend McGraw; and in retrospect, one thing strikes me as, to say the least of it, decidedly peculiar.

It's this: *How the devil had she known McGraw's first name was Reggie?* I'm absolutely certain I never mentioned it . . .

THE FLYING FOX

LAWRENCE PETERS

Illustrated by Jennifer Gordon

IT ALL STARTS on a dark, moonless night with Dilky Poacher soft-footing home at two in the morning with his pockets bulging and feathers dangling. He comes by the church and what he sees there sends him rushing off to the Vicar, dragging him from warm sheets to tell about the face that peered over the top of the tower.

"Be off with you!" Vicar shouts down from his window. "Bringing people out of their beds at this hour. You've been drinking, man."

"Here's my breath," says Dilky. "Be coming and smelling. Clear and sweet, for never a drop this night."

And as the Vicar said next day, "White and staring in the face, so I think that perhaps the man is sick and I come down to him."

"I comes to you, Vicar," Dilky tells him, "for it's on the roof of your own church that I sees what I sees."

"Out with it, man!" Vicar says impatient-like.

"Coming back from the valley," says Dilky, "and going past church with everywhere quiet and folks asleep, I hears a slithering and a sloithering for all the world like paws scrabbling fer a grip, and I stops and looks up and there it is, a-peering at me from over the edge of tower, as plain as plain for all it was darkish."

"You saw what?" Vicar asks, more impatient still.

"The fox. The old fox from the weather thing on top of steeple. It's come down and there it is, staring me straight in the eye . . ."

"Nonsense!" Vicar cries then, and smells Dilky's breath, but it was as sweet as ever it was, which isn't saying much, but with no tang of ale. So then he gets dressed and they go to the church.

And that was the way of it, with all the village finding out about it the next day, for sure enough, when the sun rose, the old fox was gone from its perch at the very top of the spire.

Talk there was, and wonderment; and the Vicar hard-pressed trying to answer questions. At the start he tells Dilky to keep the story to himself, but by half-eleven, with three pints behind his corduroy waistcoat, the story's all over the village and the kids scared of even going near the church . . . Like Davey, rising eleven, and a great friend of Ewart who runs the carpenter's shop. Always hanging round the place and getting his black curls dusted with sawdust and shavings.

Excited as anything is Davey when he goes flying to the shop. And where else would he go to find reasons for old fox taking it into its head to come down from steeple than Ewart, who is chock full of such stories?

Like that about the cow that tried to jump the stream but fell in and blocked the way, so that before they could get her out the whole of the bottom valley was flooded. And, a long time ago, how the Roundheads came and dug up the churchyard after treasure, which everyone knows couldn't have been there, for the Vicar has records to show that Milton Pudsey was never rich enough to have gold plate on the altar. Ewart tells how the bones and skulls were piled in heaps and how the people spent weeks in trying to sort them out and get them buried again, in the right places. Only, of course, they couldn't, for one bone looks much like another.

Many more tales he tells over his bench, and his favourite, the one he speaks of with one eyebrow cocked and his soft brown eyes a-twinkle is of the bronze fox on the steeple, and how every night at midnight, when it hears the clock chime the hour, it comes flying down the steeple to have a drink at the stream that runs by the church, and then climbing the walls again so that when morning comes round there's nothing to show for its journey.

And when his listeners gape and stare, Ewart winks and nods his yellow curls and says that of all the stories he tells this is the one with the most truth. Which if you care to sort it out is right enough, and some of the older boys catching on that metal fox can never hear clock chime anyway . . .

Take any village and there you have Milton Pudsey. A church and

an inn; a handful of shops and spreading green fields and the mountains behind. Stone cottages and rich hawthorn hedges. And the carpenter's shop, a place of sweet-smelling wood and drifting sawdust, where Ewart fashions cupboards and shelves and between-times makes wonderful model boats.

Twenty-five he'd be at this time, small and given to whistling while he drives in the nails with quick, sure strokes, the youngest of two brothers. although to see them together you'd never take them as such. Lewis is tall and massive in the shoulder, with a matt of black hair for a chest and his shirt usually open to the waist whatever the weather while he swings heavy hammers in the smithy, with the forge—electric, mind, and all up-to-date—glowing violet and white.

The days of ploughshares and horse-shoes have gone; now it's wrought-iron for gates and lamps, and the arch over the gate that leads to the churchyard.

Ewart with the softness of the valley and the gentle flow of the slow stream; Lewis with legs apart, solid-rooted to the ground, with his eyes set on the anvil and only lifting them to the mountains when there is climbing and showing-off to be done. Like some three months ago, after the night of the big blow, when haystacks were scattered and strewn the length of the valley. And the tin roof was torn from the village hall. And worst of all, the weather-vane, the fox of which the Vicar is so proud, was lifted from its socket and left dangling between North and West.

The Vicar passes the haystacks and nods; a click of his tongue for the roofless hall. But when he stands and looks up at the steeple, then his face is long and anxious. For it seems that the very next gust must bring down the spread-eagled fox.

"It must be seen to," he says. "And right away."

On the phone to the builder in the next village.

"Sorry, Vicar. Tiles off galore. Phone ringing all morning. Weather-vane you say? On that steeple of yours? Now that's a long job. I'm afraid it means putting up a scaffold . . ."

And Vicar knows that means money. And there is little enough in the kitty. Then along comes Lewis, sleeves rolled to his shoulders, hair matted, face red and streaming, for it's turned warm after the storm and he's been working over the forge into the bargain.

"What you want, Vicar," says he importantly, "is some bright boyo to be climbing up there and dropping old fox back in his hole."

"Only a minute's job," he points out. "And once up there to be taking it by the nose and tail and dropping it in as clean as a whistle."

And the Vicar, sixty if he's a day, white-haired and a fragile reed of a man looks narrow-eyed up to where the steeple pierces the sky and wants to know: "Who? Tell me that, Lewis—Who?"

But it's open for all to see that there is only one man that Lewis has in mind. And he's out for his fun first.

Ewart is there, with his green apron and sawdust on his shoulders.

"How about it?" Lewis roars at him. "Not much weight there you're carrying. How about slipping up yonder and pushing old fox back in his place?"

And that's a cruel jibe to be flinging in his brother's face, for there are many who haven't the head for heights and Ewart is one. So much so that to even stand and look up at steeple sets him swaying on his feet.

He stays silent saying neither one thing nor the other and Lewis laughs mightily and is tightening his leather apron, flexing his wrists and asking someone to take his hammer back to the smithy and fetch the coil of rope that hangs by the door.

A grand sight then, for he scorns the easy way of climbing up to the belfry and out on to the flat roof of the tower, gripping instead the drain pipe, and shinning up like a monkey, for all his bulk.

Up to the tower, one leg at a time over the top, a pat on the nose for the devil's head at the corner, a wave to the crowd—and how he likes an audience—then off up the steeple itself, with the rope coming into use round the steeple and shortening in length for each foot he climbs.

Not a word from the Vicar, but his eyes are closed and his lips moving as though he is wafting up a prayer to be following Lewis on the last few yards.

Then one arm round the base of the socket, the rope tightened into a cradle and Lewis sitting as easy as you please while he reaches out to



grasp nose and tail and bring the old fox sliding home.

And the job done he doesn't come right down, for there is an audience, and so he looks round the countryside as if admiring the view, then he wraps one arm round the fox's neck, rubs it's back as though it were a spaniel dog alive and kicking he has up there with him, then down he comes with the rope sliding as neat as can be, and him playing it out like the manner born.

The Vicar to shake his hand and the story about it in the paper next day saying how "Village craftsman turns steeple-jack" and then going on to tell how proud the village is of its weather-vane and that it is hundreds of years since human hand last touched it, and that way back there had been strange stories about the bronze fox and at one time the women would cross themselves when they passed in it's shadow, and the men take off their hats . . .

Lewis the talk of the place after his climb, what with his picture in the paper and all. But Ewart subdued, and people turning to look sideways at him after the way his brother had mocked him.

Then three months later comes the night when Dilky sees the fox peering at him from the top of the tower as though it were just making sure the way was clear before coming right down to the ground.

Davey goes running to where Ewart is sending the soft shavings of wood a-curling to the floor. "Ewart!" he cries, all breathless. "You'll have heard? You'll have seen?"

"Ay," Ewart says laying plane aside. "I've heard Dilky's story and I've seen the empty spire."

"'Tis the fox come down for a drink like you said!" Davey cries excitedly. "And maybe couldn't get back."

"Maybe so," Ewart says thoughtfully. "Maybe so."

Most of the village has gathered at the church. The Vicar in his cassock, his white hair adrift in the morning breeze. Lewis there, too, offering ideas for what they are worth.

"First we must be sure there was no sudden gust of wind last night," he says importantly. But Dilky is there and knowing everything about the weather. "Not a leaf stirring," he calls out, "not a ripple on the water."

"Then this is something beyond understanding," Lewis says, his voice tinged with awe. "For I'll swear that there is something unnatural in what has happened."

"I saw it," Dilky quavers. "Peering at me with such a knowing look." He shudders. "Staring me straight in the eye . . ."

The crowd stirs and gasps. The morning is filled with their thoughts—the fox has come alive and climbed from its perch.

And Davey, quivering with excitement at the back of the people, slips away to the stream that runs by the side of the churchyard. He works his way along the bank, pushing the reeds aside, as far as the little stone bridge. But there's nothing to be seen. Then just as he's thinking of coming away he stoops and looks under the bridge, and there it is—the bronze

fox with its nose to the water, tucked away in the shadows and seeming to the boy's eyes to be looking back with cunning on its pointed mask.

And now he is afraid, and bolts back from the stream, feet slipping



and sliding on the muddy bank, then runs to Ewart's shop so that he can be the first to hear where the fox may be found. Ewart thinks at first that it is over-wrought imagination. But as he sees the way Davey is panting and his eyes staring, he lays aside his tools and they go together to the bridge.

While the boy huddles fearfully at one side, Ewart drags the fox from its hide, heaves it to his shoulder and staggers back with his load, and Davey, courage regained, running ahead.

Ewart sets his load at the Vicar's feet and the crowd drew back as if it were red-hot. There is muttering and shaking of heads, and the smell of fear is strong in the air. The old Vicar looks round the white faces of his parishioners. Then he touches the fox with his foot. No questions asked, no explanations offered. "This must go back to the spire," he said tonelessly.

And when his eyes search out Lewis it takes the big man a moment or two before he steps forward, for it almost seems that he has caught the infection of fear. He stands looking down at the fox, glinting dully in the sun, then he stoops and touches it with his finger.

"No use asking Ewart," he says with a return of the old bravado. "So it's up to me again. And to show how I feel about it I'll get it cleaned and polished before I take it back up. So tomorrow I'll climb the steeple again and set it back in its place."

Then he ups with it as if it were a feather, and with it balanced on his shoulder straight away through the

crowd, with them falling back as if afraid to be anywhere near.

Ewart goes back to his shop, and Davey follows.

"It must have climbed down by itself," the boy persists. Ewart doesn't answer. He draws up a stool and sits down and thinks. After a while Davey starts to play among the tools, and so deep in thought is Ewart that he never says a word when the boy gets to running his thumb over a chisel.

So there's a cut, and a flowing of blood, and a bandage made from a handkerchief. And by that time it seems Ewart has finished his thinking.

He takes the boy between his knees. "Something I must do, Davey," he says earnestly. "And not for you to be asking the whys and wherefores. For this is grown-up reasoning. But asking you to help for all that."

"And what is it I must do?" Davey asks, wide-eyed and nursing his thumb.

"I have to take the fox back up the steeple," Ewart tells him. And then he shudders, for there is a greater fear inside him than ever there was in the crowd when they had stepped back from the fox.

"And how can I help?" Davey asks, excited again.

"I want you to wait outside the smithy till my brother goes for his dinner. Then you are to come and tell me, for then I must take the fox."

"He says he is to clean and polish it," Davey pointed out.

"Ay," Ewart nods. "So he says. But this is work that must be done

right away. And without Lewis knowing."

"Is it because of what he said about you being afraid to climb the steeple?" Davey asks in his child-like wisdom.

"Away with you," Ewart tells him. "And let me know as soon as Lewis goes for his dinner."

And at one o'clock Davey comes panting to say Lewis has gone. Now the village is deserted and everyone sitting down to their food.

"Time for you to be getting back to your Mam," Ewart says.

But Davey has set his mind on seeing the thing through no matter what his Mam might have to say. So after Ewart has slung the fox to his shoulder, the boy follows on carrying the rope.

The street is empty, the shops closed. In through the church door they go, up the stone stairway that leads to the belfry and the tower platform.

Pale and tight is Ewart's thin face now as he keeps well away from the edge. Only a few shreds of cloud in the sky, a light breeze, and the village already a toy beneath. The world is an empty place and Ewart the loneliest man in it, climbing slowly up the spire that seems to him to sway at every touch.

Half-way up his rope catches on a loose tile and he hangs between heaven and earth for a terrifying moment with the skies reeling and his feet scraping for a grip.

Neither up nor down dare he look, for both are the same to him. Forgotten the small white face that stares

up from the tower below; forgotten the solid comfort of his bench and tools.

And at last his fingers touch the base of the socket on the very peak of the lonely spire. Now it's tightening the rope until it is taut enough to hold him while he leans back, so very slowly, to take the load from his back. Up with it, then, hands straining beneath the bronze belly until the rod is over the socket then slipping inside.

And as it falls with a metallic clang, so the breeze takes it, swinging it so that his forehead is cut by the tail. For a moment he clutches emptiness, then the rope bites into his back and he starts the climb down with trickling blood mingling with the sweat.

By this time the first curious eyes have seen the small figure clutched to the steeple and people have left their half-eaten dinners to be out and marvelling.

Davey is waiting at the tower, taking the rope so proudly, his face aglow as if he had been the one that had climbed. Ewart spares a moment to fight back his breath and steady the trembling of arms and legs. And while he leans against the spire, Davey, happy as anything goes wandering round the other side of the platform and calls out in amazement. For there, flat on the floor so that it cannot be seen from below, is a second bronze fox.

And while Davey marvels at it, Ewart nods sagely as though he had expected it to be there.

"A secret for you, Davey," he says gravely. "And I want you to promise

me now that you'll never breathe a word about this second fox."

"No buts," he says, the old smile coming back. "This is a secret, man to man. All right, Davey?"

And Davey promised, and he kept his promise. And because there was none to overhear when Ewart had his talk with Lewis, nobody ever came to hear the full story. Instead there was a seven days wonder at how the younger brother had set about refuting the slur of cowardice laid on him by Lewis, and another legend to the saga of the bronze fox of Milton Pudsey.

That same afternoon Ewart goes alone to the smithy.

"I had to take the fox back," says he. "You know why, don't you?"

"Being a hero?" Lewis sneers. "Trying to prove you've the makings of a man after all?"

Ewart is surprised. "Oh no. It's not that at all. It's just that I put things together and came up with an answer. The gold plate which was hidden and never found. Only it wasn't buried, it was melted and recast. And when you went up the tower that day it didn't take you long to discover the fox was solid gold."

"A likely story," Lewis blusters, but worried for all that.

"You set to and made a similar one of bronze," Ewart tells him. "And when it's ready you pick the first moonless night. You lower the fox on a rope, but Dilky comes along and interrupts. So you wait till he's gone then you carry on, hiding gold fox under bridge then coming back

ready to hoist bronze one in its place. Only now Dilky is back with the Vicar, and they stay so long that it's getting on for dawn and you have to give up . . . ”

“It's solid gold, man,” Lewis snarls. “It's worth a mint.”

“It's altar plates and a crucifix,” Ewart says. “And once people remembered that and would take off their hats at the sight of it. It belongs to the church and to history. It's right that it should stay up there.”

“But why go to all that trouble of putting it back?” asks the disgruntled Lewis.

“Think,” Ewart says quietly. “If we gave it to the Vicar he'd know what you had in mind. And you are my brother. Far better as it is, with another story to be told through the years . . . ”

And there it stays to this very day; a weather vane of solid gold, nearly half a hundredweight, surely the only one of its kind in the world. And only Ewart, his fears conquered, and Lewis, a quieter one now, know of it. And neither will breath a word. And Davey—the finding of the second fox was soon forgotten when the fishing season came round.



O earth, so full of dreary noises!
O men, with wailing in your voices!
O delved gold, the wailers heap!
O strife, O curse, that o'er it fall!

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING.

One leak will sink a ship, and one sin will destroy a sinner.

JOHN BUNYAN.

MURDER IN PLAY

ALISTER KERSHAW



SELF-CONFESSED gangster, drug-trafficker, gun-runner and secret agent, Alain Guyader was shot in the back on the afternoon of Thursday, December 9, 1948, by his friend Claude Panconi in the wood of Malnoue. In the vicinity was Bernard Petit, who certainly provided the revolver which Panconi used and who possibly assisted in other ways in the carrying out of the crime. Two motives were advanced in explanation, both of them equally banal. Panconi himself contended that he had been impelled by jealousy over a girl, Nicole Illy, whom he believed Guyader intended to seduce; against this, it was suggested that the murderer had been more interested in robbing his victim of the large roll of dollar bills which the latter boasted of possessing.

There were a number of facts which transformed this seemingly commonplace killing into the most controversial and debated murder case in the present century. There was, to begin with, the startling discovery that all Guyader's talk of drug-trafficking, activities in the secret service, gun-running, vast profits and the rest was nothing but invention.

Then, and more remarkable, there was the fact that the four people most directly concerned in the case

were variously aged sixteen, seventeen and eighteen.

The press nicknamed the case "l'Affaire J3" from the code designation of that age group on French wart-time ration cards, and the leading characters were inevitably referred to as products of the violent, unstable epoch in which they grew up, as victims of parental mismanagement, tragic children and so forth.

So much also was made of the malignant influence on the killer's psychology of Gide, Sartre, Camus and others, that certain of these literary gentlemen were put in the comic position of having to state their conviction that they had never influenced anyone in the slightest!

Alain Guyader himself was born on November 15, 1931, the second son of a Paris municipal official with literary leanings. There was a strong mutual affection between Monsieur Guyader and his son, yet the father was reputedly a family disciplinarian. This has been advanced as an explanation of the boy's outstanding tale spinning, for among his contemporaries Alain devised a secondary existence where he was the boss, anarchic, ruthless. A phial of powdered chalk did duty for cocaine; a heap of Nazi anti-American propaganda pamphlets which bore on one side the reproduction of a dollar bill made a very passable display of illicit wealth; he often carried a re-

volver—incapable of functioning, it is said. These toys, in conjunction with his chatter about Hélène, the mistress whom he had installed at the Crillon, about his contacts with Russian generals, had its intended effect of inspiring in his comrades a flattering compound of awe, envy, resentment and fear.

To what extent did the others believe these fables? “When we were together it all seemed true” one of them attested at the trial, “When we thought about it alone we knew he was just a bluff.”

To what extent did Guyader himself believe in his fables? When one of his teachers asked him why he told his grotesque lies, he replied, “They (his schoolmates) are so stupid.” But among his papers was found a letter addressed to “Monique” who seems never to have existed outside his own imagination. His intentions, therefore, may initially have been to impress his associates, but mere repetition of his boasts eventually gave this second self a monstrous reality.

A prolonged psychiatric examination of Claude Panconi resulted in his being sagely written down as “highly emotional and suffering from an inferiority complex due to his physique.” A similar diagnosis could have been reached by any layman after a casual glance at the too-full lips, the unaggressive chin, the myopic eyes and drooping shoulders.

In the newspaper reports of the murder, with certain noteworthy exceptions, Panconi was consistently represented as an intellectual; that

indeed, was the front he presented to the world. But at some point he deviated from the normal development of the “intellectual type”, and where, outside of the works of William Faulkner or Sartre, most of his kind show a nice distaste for all violence, Panconi killed.

The question then arises as to whether there was not simultaneously a second psychological being within Panconi’s structure. His actions, after he had murdered Guyader are oddly cold-blooded and composed for a dreamy youth “in a permanent state of psychic disequilibrium.” And, most significant of all, there was his peculiar choice of associates.

Nicolle Illy, for instance: at the trial, Président Dejean de la Batie voiced the general astonishment that this commonplace little girl should have attracted one whose opinions on Stendahl and La Bruyère were currently being headlined in the press. Panconi hedged adroitly: “It is extremely complex. To define it would be to destroy its charm. I prefer to guard the mystery.” Portentous utterance!

And how was it that a devotee of “Stendhal for the psychological interest, Flaubert for style” formed an intimacy with Bernard Petit, whose interest in literature stopped short at Jules Verne and the thrillers of the *Série Noir*? Once again Panconi was ready with his solemn explanation: “Bernard was so powerful in the material world where I was completely unarmed.” Nobody laughed.

Finally what was the bond between himself and Alain Guyader? He

spent much time with Guyader and was generally supposed to be on the best of terms with him; but on Panconi's side there was a concealed jealousy which later he was alternately to confess and deny.

The reasons for his envy are numerous. Guyader was strong and good-looking, Panconi weak and unattractive.

There was a real financial and social difference between the two households and Guyader's airy references to the purchasing of cars, to black-market millions and suppers at the Crillon increased the distinction still further in Panconi's mind.

More important than any of the foregoing was the sexual element in Panconi's feelings of inferiority. By his own statement he had remained a virgin. "From prudery or timidity?" the President of the Court asked him at the trial. "From timidity, I think," Panconi answered.

Before one can decide whether or not Panconi's jealousy centred on Guyader's relations with Nicole, it is essential to establish his own feelings for the girl. At the trial, Panconi affirmed it was the most vehement passion of his life, love at first sight, he wanted to marry, to mould her in his own image (sic).

There is yet another, uglier possibility; it is that he represented a trivial flirtation as a grand passion in order to substitute jealousy for the squalid motive of theft.

Bernard Petit's sullen contempt extended, as far as one can gather to everyone he knew except his father. For Monsieur Paul Petit, *Inspecteur*

Principal of the *Police Judiciaire* and a man of considerable distinction in his profession, Bernard had a single-minded respect.

In his rôle of *dur*, tough-guy, crook, Alain Guyader was committed to a disdain and hatred for the police and, as the son of a detective, Petit came in for a good deal of Guyader's skilful mockery. Petit's only resource was to give expression to his loathing for Guyader in conversations with Panconi.

This enmity did not prevent all three from remaining on terms of apparent friendliness and it is doubtful if Guyader ever knew how poisonously his jibes worked in Petit's mind, just as it is doubtful whether he ever fully suspected the festering envy of Panconi.

It was not his only distraction. There was the cinema ("once a week"); the reading of thrillers. There was also, by some accounts, revolver practice at Malnoue where his family had a cottage.

Apart from these diversions he had his membership of the "Club du Trèfle". The aims of the club remain somewhat obscure, but it seems mainly to have concerned itself with the iniquities of non-members and the course to be followed by members in the event of a Russian invasion. With one exception the adherents were all males and all students at the Cours George Sand.

The one exception was Nicole Illy, sixteen years old at the time of Guyader's death. Nicole's own chosen nickname is the most revealing thing about her. Leaving poetry,

dope-peddling and the Quai des Orfèvres to the males, Nicole opted for the part of *femme fatale*, cruel, smiling, irresistible, and baptised herself Scarlett, after the heroine of "Gone with the Wind".

Despite the implication of beyond good and evil which emerges from her choice of name, medical evidence was given that she too remained a virgin. She, like the others, had a disdain for actuality.

Concurrently with the formal charms of a routine teen-age engagement, Nicole, incorrigibly sprightly, was enjoying the attentions of both Guyader and Panconi. Her relations with these two are of paramount importance, in view of Panconi's line of defence, but, naturally, the evidence either way is bafflingly sparse.

As a matter of prestige, efforts had been made at different times to induce Alain Guyader to accept membership of the Club du Trèfle, but he understandably declined to associate himself with an organisation which was clearly nothing but a group of children at play. The members, therefore, in addition to Panconi, Petit and Nicole, were limited to four other students from the school—Gérard Bureau, Roger Yakoubovitch, Paul Rosenbaum and Jean Guiard. On November 18, 1948, the problem before the members was a serious one. What was to be the attitude of the Club du Trèfle in the event of a Russian invasion?

Speaking long after the meeting, Gérard Bureau summed up not only his own but the probable reactions of every other member when he con-

fessed naïvely that, once the Red Army moved, he would "hop on my bicycle and beat it." But on that November afternoon, with troop concentrations no more menacing than usual, it was possible to take up rather more heroic attitudes. They would establish a resistance group, in the arid Causses region.

All subsequent denials and contradictions aside, it is certain that at this point someone—"perhaps myself," Panconi admitted during his trial—raised the question of Alain Guyader. In recent days he had referred to his friendship with a Russian general and had indicated that, if the Communists took over, he, Guyader, would play "a double game." The possibility of his discovering the patriotic schemes of the Club du Trèfle and betraying them to one of his highly-placed friends in the Soviet service was apparent to everyone present. "Someone" protested that the only logical method of dealing with this dangerous enemy was to kill him. Human memory is subject to inexplicable lapses and, towards the end of the J3 case, no one had any clear recollection of the happenings at the club's last meeting; but, at one point during the investigation, all except Petit were agreed that Guyader's fate was put to the vote and that he was unanimously sentenced to death.

With Nicole's assistance, a letter announcing his departure for abroad was to be obtained from Guyader; the place of execution was finally planned for the wood of Malnoue; all means of identification were to be destroyed, the victim decapitated, his

fingerprints burnt off, his papers removed. The carrying-out of the execution was entrusted to Panconi and Bernard Petit was to provide the revolver and otherwise assist in the operation. After two alterations, the date was fixed for Thursday, December 9, 1948.

On the Wednesday, Nicole Illy received a letter from Guyader.

Nicole: I won't be able to come and say good-bye personally, because I have so many things to do before Saturday.

Here is my address in Canada: Alain Guyader, 1981, bd. Rosemont, Montreal.

As doubtless we will never meet again, there is nothing more for me to say but good-bye. So, Nicole, good-bye.

"Alain."

While Panconi (if not Petit) moved dazedly towards the dreadful culmination of his game, Guyader also continued his puerile acting, choosing a vain-glorious variation of his rôle which enabled his joke and that of Panconi to merge together. A consignment of arms was due to arrive from Belgium and the trafficker, Guyader, was seeking somewhere to cache it. Panconi suggested the woods of Malnoue.

He and Guyader met about 1 o'clock on the afternoon of December 9 at the Café Terminus, Place de la République. From there, by metro and bus, they went to the wood of Malnoue which they entered about 4.30 p.m. Bernard Petit (running an errand for his mother, he was later

to inform the court) followed them by the next bus.

The circumstances of the killing necessarily remain obscure. Panconi's definitive version, given at the trial, leaves several points to be explained. By this account, he and Guyader were in the wood of Malnoue when the latter began to speak of Nicole in



a way which the romantic poet found intolerable. Guyader announced his intention of abducting Nicole, taking her to Canada with him. If she resisted, he would rape her and then throttle her. Panconi was properly shocked and protested.

"Alain was in front of me . . . quite close," he told the Court. "He drew his revolver. But it was only loaded with blank cartridges. And he knew it. It was at this moment he became aware that I, too, had a gun in my hand. He saw it. He turned and fled. He fled. . . ." And at this point the confession ended in a sob. He could not have picked a better point.

For, after all, the real question remains unanswered. Why did Panconi fire on Guyader if the latter was running from him? Clearly not from fear; and the circumstances greatly lessen the likelihood of a murder impelled by sudden anger.

Yet he did fire and, moreover, when Guyader fell, the murderer

sprang forward and clubbed him across the head with the butt of his revolver. Finally, he turned the body over and went through his pockets. It is, at least, reasonable to suspect that he was looking for that roll of dollar bills. He found 250 francs!

When Panconi left Malnoue he was, by his story, going to get help, but was unaccountably prevented from returning. It is possible he actually believed Guyader to be already dead. If so, however, he was in error; for Guyader managed to drag himself to the edge of the main road where he was later found and taken to a café whilst someone telephoned for assistance. Owing to bureaucratic difficulties Guyader did not reach hospital until 7 p.m.

He died the same evening having first made a statement which introduces still another mystery into the case. He made no reference of any sort to Panconi, referring only to his having had a rendezvous with Petit.

Guyader's mention of Petit had an immediate effect on his questioners. They recognised the name as that of an inspector of police and contacted him the following morning. Accordingly, when Bernard returned home from school with Panconi, M. Petit took Bernard aside and asked him what had happened. He replied, "Panconi has shot Alain." "Why?" "Over a girl."

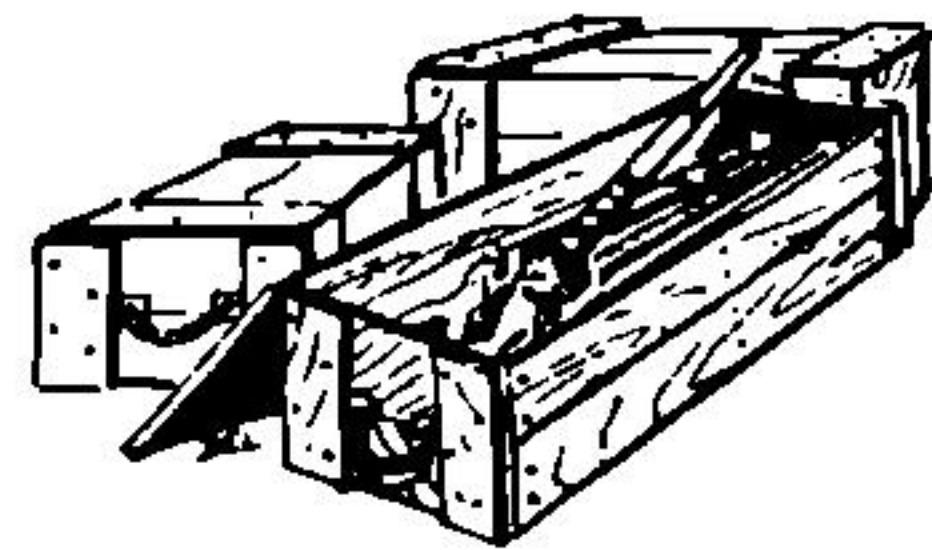
The Inspector then turned to Panconi who was utterly crushed and put handcuffs on him. "It might be thought," the Inspector added, "that this was somewhat absurd."

The story which Panconi told

Inspector Petit was substantially the same as that with which, after frequent amendments and *voltes-faces*, he ended up. Guyader had wanted to take Nicole away to Canada—there had been a quarrel—he had shot Guyader. He further stated that he had removed Guyader's papers at the victim's own request.

Panconi's story at the outset sounded acceptable enough. He repeated it to the *juge d'instruction* and was insistent that he had no accomplices. But there were too many unexplained points in his neat version and, in the course of subsequent questioning, Panconi made references which resulted in not only Petit but also Nicole and two other members of the club being questioned.

On January 11, 1949, Panconi startlingly reversed his previous statement and admitted to a carefully planned execution in which both Petit and Nicole had assisted. These



two were immediately arrested and Panconi wrote to his mother "At last I have relieved my conscience of an enormous burden. At last I have told the truth. I hope the others will do likewise."

Panconi was emphatic that Nicole had known in advance of what awaited Guyader. Moreover—a pretty touch—he asserted that on learning of Guyader's death, Nicole had exclaimed ecstatically, "It was

really for me that you killed him?" All of this she denied.

Panconi also alleged that it was Petit who had proposed Malnoue for the killing, Petit who had seen the necessity to hack away all identifying features. It was Petit, even, who had first hinted (to put it mildly) at the possibility of killing Guyader. To all this and more, Petit returned an unqualified, "It's untrue."

These squabbles—in the best tradition of criminal desperation—caused an inevitable forgetfulness of caution and there emerged finally the belief of all the accused that Guyader had been a secret agent, a gun-runner and so on. This belief had such an air of authenticity that it became immediately the concern of the D.S.T., the counter espionage branch of the Sûreté, who then cross-examined the J3s.

At the conclusion of the police investigation, Claude Panconi was remanded for trial on a charge of premeditated murder and theft; Petit and Nicole Illy were cited as accomplices but the latter, being a minor at the time of the murder, would not stand in the Assizes but appear before a children's court.

The case opened before the *Assises de Seine-et-Marne* at Melun on May 7, 1951, in the presence of an unusually distinguished audience. The contrast between Panconi and Petit as they stood in the dock revealed itself still more clearly in their replies to the *acte d'accusation*. "First of all," announced Panconi graciously, "I want to say how profoundly I regret my action, for which I alone am

responsible." "I deny everything," Petit said briefly with the curious grin he wore throughout the trial.

Unreality was the key of the defence. Panconi's counsel contended that Panconi was jealous of Guyader, there had been a quarrel, Panconi had fired; all the rest, the plotting and the planning of the execution,



belonged to a "film" having no relation to what actually occurred.

Even on the first day it became clear that nothing would be extracted from Panconi but a succession of desperate hedgings, nothing from Petit but a stolid re-affirmation of guiltlessness. Notwithstanding frequent contentious exchanges between Panconi and Petit, both were agreed on one point. "I attest that Nicole and Bernard are in no sense responsible," Panconi declaimed to general applause, "I—and I alone—am guilty; and I alone should be punished." Petit concurred.

Chivalrous Panconi! It is distressing to have to recall that any denial of his sole culpability would have inevitably implied premeditation and carry a correspondingly heavy sentence. The meeting, the death sentence, the alibi, even the borrowing of a revolver—these were fragments of a game; then occurred the killing—that, Panconi conceded, was reality. There was no premeditation.

But the President of the Court observed, "When one has spoken for some weeks of killing someone, and then actually does kill, it bears a marked resemblance to premeditation. It is even the legal definition."

It is perhaps accurate to say that no single fact was established through the questioning of Panconi and Petit: the difference between them was that Panconi fretted over the complicated mess into which his replies landed him, whereas Petit's consistent denials caused the speaker no embarrassment. From time to time, he enjoyed the exasperation he caused.

"At the meeting . . . everyone voted Guyader's death—except me."

Counsel reminded him that the other members had given evidence that Petit also had cast his vote.

"Untrue!"

"Rosenbaum asserts it."

"He lies."

"Yakoubovitch asserts it."

"He lies."

"Guiard asserts it."

"He lies."

Counsel had omitted one name; Petit raised an admonitory finger. "Don't forget Bureau, mon cher maître; he lies, too!"

Gerard Bureau, in one of the most precise testimonies of the case, said that Panconi had told him of his wish and plans to kill Alain Guyader. "As he often told lies, I paid no attention to what he said . . ." Meeting Panconi the day after the crime, Bureau was

told that Alain had been shot because he wanted to take Nicole away and again did not believe Panconi. Bureau's evidence continued: "Then Petit asked him, 'Have you the revolver? I was afraid you'd panic and throw it away. I looked for you at Malnoue and couldn't find you.'"

There was little satisfaction in Nicole's testimony. She had not voted for Guyader's death, she had not asked him to write his tragic last letter to her . . .

It took the jury 50 minutes to reach one of the most weird yet commonsensible decisions on record. Panconi was found guilty of murder but not of premeditation or theft. Bernard Petit was found guilty of complicity but not of having lent the revolver in knowledge of the use to which it was to be put.

The fact is, of course, that if there was no premeditation, then, clearly, Petit could not have been in any way involved and should have been acquitted; but to have written in premeditation on Panconi's part as a means of penalising Petit would have required a heavier sentence for both than was desired. The Court winked at the legal absurdity for the sake of a moral and intelligent achievement and accepted a decision which was harmoniously strange, fitting neatly with the quality of the whole case.

For Panconi, ten years "de réclusion"; for Petit, five; for Nicole, three years' imprisonment.



THE VICTORIAN UNDERWORLD

HENRY MAYHEW

The first of a series of extracts from Henry Mayhew's LONDON LABOUR AND THE LONDON POOR, first published in 1851.

To Henry Mayhew we are indebted for probably the best eye-witness commentary of the Victorian underworld available, the result of patient observation and reflection over a long period. Mayhew's self-imposed task was, he states, undertaken to "contribute some new facts concerning the physics and economy of vice and crime generally, that will not only make the solution of the social problem more easy to us, but . . . make us look with more pity and less anger on those who want the fortitude to resist their influence; and induce us . . . to apply ourselves steadfastly to the removal or alleviation of those social evils that appear to create so large a proportion of the vice and crime that we seek by punishment to prevent." Our first extract deals with the methods of the common thief of the time.



THE COMMON THIEF is not distinguished for manual dexterity and accomplishment, like the pickpocket or mobsman, nor for courage, ingenuity, and skill, like the burglar, but is characterized by low cunning and stealth—hence he is termed the Sneak, and is despised by the higher classes of thieves.

There are various orders of Sneaks—from the urchin stealing an apple at a stall, to the man who enters a dwelling by the area or an attic window and carries off the silver plate.

In treating of the various classes of common thieves and their different modes of felony, we shall first deal with juvenile thieves and their delinquencies, and notice the other

classes in their order, according to the progressive nature and aggravation of their crime.

In wandering along Whitechapel we see ranges of stalls on both sides of the street, extending from the neighbourhood of the Minories to Whitechapel church. Various kinds of merchandise are exposed to sale. There are stalls of fruit, vegetables, and oysters. There are also stalls where fancy goods are exposed for sale—combs, brushes, chimney-ornaments, children's toys, and common articles of jewellery. We find middle-aged women standing with baskets of firewood, and Cheap Johns selling various kinds of Sheffield cutlery, stationery and plated goods.

It is an interesting sight to saunter along the New Cut, Lambeth, and to observe the street stalls of that

locality. Here you see some old Irish woman, with apples and pears exposed on a small board placed on top of a barrel, while she is seated on an upturned bushel smoking her pipe.

Alongside you notice a deal board on the top of a tressel, and an Irish girl of 18 years of age seated on a small three-legged stool, shouting in shrill tones, "Apples, fine apples, ha'penny a lot!" You find another stall on the top of two tressels, with a larger quantity of apples and pears, kept by a woman who sits by with a child at her breast.

In another place you see a costermonger's barrow, with large green and yellow piles of fruit of better quality than the others, and a group of boys and girls assembled around him as he smartly disposes of penny-worths to the persons passing along the street.

Outside a public-house you see a young man, hump-backed, with a basket of herrings and haddocks standing on the pavement, calling "Yarmouth herrings — three a-penny!" and at the door of a beershop with the sign of the "Pear Tree" we find a miserable looking old woman selling cresses, seated on a stool with her feet in an old basket.

As we wander along the New Cut during the day, we do not see so many young thieves loitering about; but in the evening when the lamps are lit, they steal forth from their haunts, with keen roguish eye, looking out for booty. We then see them loitering about the stalls or mingling among the throng of people in the

street, looking wistfully on the tempting fruit displayed on the stalls.

These young Arabs of the city have a very strange and motley appearance. Many of them are only 6 or 7 years of age, others 8 or 10. Some have no jacket, cap, or shoes, and wander about London with their ragged trousers hung by one brace; some have an old tattered coat, much too large for them, without shoes and stockings, and with one leg of the trousers rolled up to the knee; others have an old greasy grey or black cap, with an old jacket rent at the elbows, and strips of the lining hanging down behind; others have an old dirty pinafore; while some have petticoats. They are generally in a squalid and unwashed condition, with their hair clustered in wild disorder like a mop, or hanging down in dishevelled locks—in some cases cropped close to the head.

Groups of these ragged urchins may be seen standing at the corners of the streets and in public thoroughfares, with blacking-boxes slung on their back by a leathern belt, or crouching in groups on the pavement; or we may occasionally see them running alongside of omnibuses, cabs, and hansoms, nimbly turning somersaults on the pavement as they scamper along, and occasionally walking on their hands with their feet in the air in our fashionable streets, to the merriment of the passers-by. Most of them are Irish cockneys, which we can observe in their features and accent—to which class most of the London thieves belong. They are generally very acute and



ready-witted, and have a knowing twinkle in their eye which exhibits the precocity of their minds.

As we ramble along the New Cut in the dusk, mingled in the throng on the crowded street, chiefly composed of working people, the young ragged thieves may be seen stealing forth; their keen eye readily recognizes the police-officers proceeding in their rounds, as well as the detective officers in their quiet and cautious movements. They seldom steal from costermongers, but frequently from the old women's stall. One will push an old woman off her seat—perhaps a bushel basket, while others will steal her fruit or the few coppers lying on her stall. This is done by day as well as by night, but chiefly in the dusk of the evening.

They generally go in a party of

three or four, sometimes as many as eight together. Watching their opportunity, they make a sudden snatch at the apples or pears, or oranges or nuts, or walnuts, as the case may be, then run off, with the cry of "stop thief!" ringing in their ears from the passers-by. These petty thefts are often done from a love of mischief rather than from a desire for plunder.

When overtaken by a police-officer, they in general readily go with him to the police-station. Sometimes the urchin will lie down in the street and cry "let me go!" and the bystanders will take his part. This is of frequent occurrence in the neighbourhood of the New Cut and the Waterloo Road—a well-known rookery of young thieves in London.

By the petty thefts at the fruit-stalls they do not gain much money—sel-

dom so much as to get admittance to the gallery of the Victoria Theatre, which they delight to frequent. They are particularly interested in the plays of robberies, burglaries, and murders performed there, which are done in melodramatic style. There are similar fruit-stalls in the other densely populated districts of the metropolis.

In the Mile End Road, New North Road and occasionally other streets in different localities of London, common jewellery is exposed for sale, consisting of brooches, rings, bracelets, breast-pins, watch-chains, eye-glasses, ear-rings and studs, etc. There are also stalls for the sale of china, looking-glasses, combs and chimney-ornaments. The thefts from these are generally managed in this way:

One goes up and looks at some trifling article in company with his associates. The party in charge of the stall—generally a woman—knowing their thieving propensities, tells them to go away, which they decline to do. When the woman goes to remove him, another boy darts forward at the other end of the stall and steals some article of jewellery, or otherwise, while her attention is thus distracted.

These juvenile thieves are chiefly to be found in Lucretia Street, Lambeth; Union Street, Borough Road; Gunn Street and Friars Street, Blackfriars Road; also at Whitechapel, St. Giles's, Drury Lane, Somers Town, Anderson Grove and other localities.

This is done by the same class of boys, generally two or three, or more, associated together. It is committed

at any hour of the day, principally in the evening, and generally in the following way: One of the boys throws his cap into the shop of some greengrocer or other small dealer, in the absence of the persons in charge, another boy, often without shoes or stockings, creeps in on his hands and knees as if to fetch it, being possibly covered from without by one of the boys standing beside the shop-door, who is also on the look-out. Any passer-by seeing the cap thrown in would take no particular notice in most cases, as it merely appears to be a thoughtless boyish frolic. Meantime the young rogue within the shop crawls round the counter to the till, and rifles its contents.

If detected, he possibly says: "Let me go; I have done nothing. That boy who is standing outside and has just run away threw in my bonnet, and I came to fetch it." When discovered by the shopkeeper, the boy will occasionally be allowed to get away, as the loss may not be known till afterwards.

Sometimes one of these ragged urchins watches a favourable opportunity and steals from the till while his comrade is observing the movements of the people passing by and the police, without resorting to the ingenious expedient of throwing in the cap.

The shop tills are generally rifled by boys, in most cases by two or more in company; this is only done occasionally. It is confined chiefly to the working-class districts.

In some cases, though rarely, a lad of 17 or 19 years of age or upwards



will reach his hand over the counter to the till, in the absence of the person in charge of the shop.

In various shopping districts of London we see a great variety of goods displayed for sale at the different shop-doors and windows, and on the pavement in front of the shops of brokers, butchers, grocers, milliners, etc.

Let us take a picture from the New Cut, Lambeth. We observe many brokers' shops along the street, with a heterogenous assortment of household furniture, tables, chairs, looking-glasses, plain and ornamental, cupboards, fire-screens, etc., ranged along the broad pavement, while on tables are stores of carpenters' tools in great variety, copper kettles, brushes, and bright tin pannikins, etc.

We see the dealer standing before his door, with blue apron, hailing the passer-by to make a purchase. Upon stands on the pavement at each side of his shop-door are cheeses of various kinds and of different qualities, cut up into quarters and slices, and rashers of bacon lying in piles in the open windows, or laid out on marble slabs. On deal racks are boxes of eggs, "fresh from the country", and white as snow, and large pieces of bacon, ticketed as of "fine flavour" and "very mild".

Alongside is a milliner's shop with the milliner, a smart young woman, seated beneath an awning in front of her door. On iron and wooden rods, suspended on each side of the doorway, are black and white straw

bonnets and crinolines, swinging in the wind; while on the tables in front are exposed boxes of gay feathers, and flowers of every tint, and fronts of shirts of various styles, with stacks of gown-pieces of various patterns.

A greengrocer stands by his shop with a young girl of 17 by his side. On each side of the door are baskets of apples, with large boxes of onions and peas. Cabbages are heaped at the front of the shop, with piles of white turnips and red carrots.

Over the street is a furniture ware-room. Beneath the canvas awning before the shops are chairs of various kinds, straw-bottomed and seated with green or puce-coloured leather, fancy looking-glasses in gilt frames, parrots in cages, a brass-mounted portmanteau and other miscellaneous articles. An active young shopman is seated by the shop-door, in a light cap and dark apron, with newspaper in hand.

Near the Victoria Theatre we notice a second-hand clothes store. On the iron rods suspended over the doorway, trousers, vests and coats of all patterns and sizes and of every quality are dangling in the wind; and on small wooden stands along the pavement are jackets and coats of various descriptions. Here are corduroy jackets, ticketed "15s. made to order". Corduroy trousers warranted "first rate", at 7s. 6d. Fustian trousers to order for 8s. 6d.; while dummies are ranged on the pavement with coats buttoned upon them, inviting us to enter the shop.

In the vicinity we see stalls of workmen's iron tools of various kinds,

some old and rusty, others bright and new.

Thefts are often committed from the doors and windows of these shops during the day, in the temporary absence of the person in charge. They are often seen by passers-by, who take no notice, not wishing to attend the police court, as they consider they are insufficiently paid for it.

The coat is usually stolen from the dummy in this way: one boy is posted on the opposite side of the street to see if a police-officer is in sight, or a policeman in plain clothes. Another stands two or three yards from the shop. The third comes up to the dummy and pretends to look at the quality of the coat to throw off the suspicion of any bystander or passer-by. He then unfastens the button and if the shopkeeper or any of his assistants come out, he walks away. If he finds that he is not seen by the people in the shop, he takes the coat off the dummy and runs away with it.

If seen, he will not return at that time, but watches some other convenient opportunity. When the young thief is chased by the shopkeeper, his two associates run and jostle him, and try to trip him up, so as to give their companion an opportunity of escaping. This is generally done at dusk, in the winter time, when thieving is most prevalent in those localities.

In stealing a piece of bacon from the shop-doors or windows, they wait till the shopman turns his back, when they take a piece of bacon or cheese in the same way as in the case alluded to. This is commonly done by two or

more boys in company.

Handkerchiefs at shop-doors are generally stolen by one of the boys and passed to another who runs off with it. When hotly chased, they drop the handkerchief and run away.

These young thieves are the ragged boys formerly noticed, varying from 9 to 14 years of age, without shoes or stockings. Their parents are of the lowest order of Irish cockneys or they live in low lodging-houses, where they get a bed for 2*d.* or 3*d.* a night, with crowds of others as destitute as themselves.

There are numbers of young women of 18 years of age and upwards. Irish cockneys, belonging to the same class, who steal from these shop-doors. They are poorly dressed, and live in some of the lowest streets in Surrey and Middlesex, but chiefly in the Borough and the East End. Some of them are dressed in a clean cotton dress, shabby bonnet and faded shawl, and are accompanied by one or more men, costermongers in appearance. They steal rolls of printed cotton from the outside of linen drapers' shops, rolls of flannel, and of coarse calico, hearthrugs and rolls of oilskin and table-covers: and from brokers' shops they carry off rolls of carpet, fenders, fire irons and other articles, exposed in and around the shop-door. The thefts of these women are of greater value than those committed by the boys.

The mode in which they commit these thefts is by taking advantage of the absence of the person in charge of the shop, or when his back is turned. It is done very quickly and

dexterously, and they are often successful in carrying away articles such as those named without anyone observing them.

Another class of Sneaks, who steal from the outsides of shops, are women more advanced in life than those referred to—some middle-aged and others elderly. Some of them are thieves, or the companions of thieves, and others are the wives of honest, hard-working mechanics and labouring men, who spend their money in gin and beer at various public-houses.

These persons go and look over some pieces of bacon or meat outside the butchers' shops; they ask the price of it, sometimes buy a small piece and steal a large one, but more frequently buy none. They watch the opportunity of taking a large piece which they slip into their basket and carry to some small chandler's shop in a low neighbourhood, where they dispose of it at about a fourth of its value.

We have met some thieves of this order, basket in hand, returning from Drury Lane, who were pointed out to us by a detective officer.

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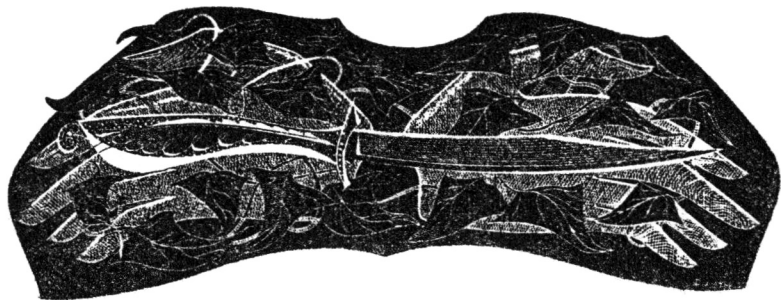
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CROOKS IN BOOKS

A review of some recent crime, mystery and detective books

STEVE AUSTEN

"SAVAGE STREETS", by William McGivern (*Collins*, 10s. 6d.).

McGivern is, according to my taste, good, and this tense, moving and horrifying stripping of the thin crust of suburban civilization is very good indeed. The setting is one of those up-state New York suburban communities for junior- to middle-grade executives which, from *The Organization Man*, *The Status Seekers* et al., we have got to know as intimately as Surbiton or Walton Park. What happens when these ordinary, apparently normal and well-adjusted people, living highly-conventionalized community lives come face to face with fear, violence and lust, with a threat to their not quite complacent, and barely established security? The answer makes a memorable and unusual thriller with a vividness and

perception that adds inches to its stature.

"NIGHT WITHOUT END", by Alistair Maclean (*Collins*, 15s.).

Maclean, author of the best-selling *H.M.S. Ulysses* and *The Guns of Navarone*, is an enigma. His writing is slack, untidy, cliché-ridden, infuriating. Here's Maclean on an unlikely character called Mrs. Dansby-Gregg: "She belonged to a world I knew little about, except for what slight information I had gleaned from my psychiatric brethren, who found rich fishing in the troubled waters of what passed for the younger London society . . ." And the sentence rambles and jerks on for another forty or more words. The plot is melodramatic: Greenland ice-cap, air crash, foreign powers, safety of the world,

violence and heroism at 50 below. And yet, dammit, the book's readable and compulsive. So you pays your money and takes your choice: bad for consideration, good for short (non Polar) hops or railway trips.

"WHAT'S BETTER THAN MONEY?", by James Hadley Chase (*Robert Hale*, 10s. 6d.).

Nothing: except being ruthless and clever enough to get over the disability. That is, provided you've got a honey of an unsuspecting wife and a madly successful engineering business just fighting its twenty-four-hours-a-day struggle to the top and you've also got a past with a nightingale-toned dope-addict blackmailing you out of existence. Chase, as usual, is competent, taut, fast-moving and intelligent in his use of incident and character-sketches. But somehow, for me, the Hadley Chase world never rings quite true.

"THE SALAZAR GRANT", by E. L. Withers (*Harrap*, 13s. 6d.).

Suspense in a ghost mining town to the S.W. of Alberquerque. General air of mystery, helped out by at least one full-blooded eccentric, a couple of murders, some good scenic stuff in the mountains and an easily-intimidated Dutch mining engineer, running to fat and with an inferiority neurosis but doggedly sure of right and wrong in a confusedly, shifting world. Among the *longueurs* and apparent inconsequentialities, there runs a load of excitement, but you've got to dig for it.

"DON'T CALL TONIGHT", by William Campbell Gault (*Boardman*, 10s. 6d.).

Honest P.I., Joe Puma, gets involved in missing call-girl case; Hollywood, Palm Springs locale. Vice in and around the Big City. Not much about call girls, although an actual reference to homosexuality and Lesbianism—but nothing like that about our Puma. Quite bright and readable and run-of-the-mill competent, but, frankly, you needn't call me tonight either.

"AS BAD AS I AM", by William Ard (*Boardman*, 10s. 6d.).

Some people are accident-prone: Fontaine was woman-prone. And each time a woman happened, he ended up in jail. The book begins with his being paroled part-way through his third jail sentence, provided he lays off women. It ends with marriage. An amusing, likeable chunk of light reading with excitement, including a splendid police and court sequence starring an Ivy League Harvard lawyer trying crime in order to get himself out of the deb-circuit and into the show-girl arena.

"THE ALTERNATE CASE", by Joseph F. Dinneen (*Cassell*, 16s.).

A thoroughly good and commendable "built" documentary, i.e. a composite of crooks and crimes—in the guise of a novel, by a distinguished American crime reporter. If you want to know what really goes on in the world of big, organized crime, here it all is, neatly laid out and analysed.

"THE BIG GAMBLE", by George Harmon Coxe (*Hammond, Hammond*, 12s. 6d.).

Fast, craftsmanlike, American murder with motels, night clubs and jazz musicians. Detection by pix editor of newspaper who always carries a camera with him, as well as fists, eyes and some wits. Satisfactory rather than satisfying—and, oh dear, what a dust jacket!

"MAN WITHOUT A FACE", by John Eugene Hasty (*John Long*, 11s. 6d.).

Small-town America; murder and vested interests where everybody knows everybody else and two or three own or run the rest. Against these entrenched powers stands the owner of station WLTS, a newcomer to the town and a man of independent ideas and, according to the rest, of misguided enthusiasms. He sees the murder and has to be taught a lesson. Right triumphs. Not at all bad.

"THE CANDLES ARE ALL OUT", by Nigel Fitzgerald (*Crime Club*, 10s. 6d.).

Variant on country house theme. Invermore in a rough, old gaelic storm. A judge on circuit and actor-manager plus troupe, together with a couple of strangers get marooned at hospitable house across the river. Next morning the bridge has collapsed and the battered body of one of the guests is found in the river. Not a hope of the Guards getting across so the latter-day Irving has to do his stuff. Readable and at times



ERLE STANLEY Gardner

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Evelyn Bagby had a neat figure, plenty of ambition, lots of bad luck—and red hair. She was also caught with some diamonds, which she insisted was a frame-up. In helping her out, Perry Mason wound up in a hellishly complicated murder trial. 12s. 6d.

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Bony breaks new ground, in a lush green valley hidden in the mountains of New South Wales, inhabited by a lusty Irish community—and spends a while spud-digging and whisky-smuggling before ferreting out his murderer. 13s. 6d.

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The hero weaves his way through razor-men, Bayswater pimps and protection gangs on the trail of a murderer all the way from darkest Notting Hill to sunniest Athens. An extraordinary fast-moving and exciting thriller. 15s.

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THE ADVENTURE OF
THE CHRISTMAS PUDDING
AND A
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COLLINS

enjoyable, but not so as you'd stop anything else to finish it.

"THE RECLINING NUDE", by Maurice Watson (*Cassell, 12s. 6d.*).

Another attempt at solving the problem of the British private eye, the character who (in terms of murder investigations) doesn't exist in reality, since we have no P.I.s with licences, guns and a semi-privileged position. Barney Steel, in his sixth-floor eyrie over Piccadilly, does none to badly, either with women or detection. But although moments are good, the whole thing still has too much of an air of unreality. It couldn't happen here.

"EPITAPH FOR A BLONDE", by Ian Mercer (*Boardman, 10s. 6d.*).

Prelude to a Summit Conference with spies and counter-intelligence chaps gathering at Nice. Threat that the lot will go sky-high. Who's going to try it? How? And not much time. British Secret Service to the rescue with lots of gimmicks and long-legged women. All right, I suppose, if you like your fantasy like this, eked out with cosmopolitanisms and a rather tame flagellation.

"THE VEILS OF FEAR", by Geoffrey Mark (*John Long, 11s. 6d.*).

A goodish adventure book taking the wraps off the White Slave traffic in 1960 terms, complete with oil and Cadillac sheiks and politics running counter to humanity. It all somehow sounds credible, and the complex and hideous transport system is particularly clever and realistic.

"CAUSE OF DEATH", by Michael Underwood (*Hammond, Hammond*, 12s. 6d.).

Murder of wealthy widow in picturesque village, ex-Army nephew who grows cucumbers, and Old Borstal boy as suspect. Well worked out, pleasantly written and enough good incidents and characters to make the book highly readable within its orthodox framework. A bonus for two thoroughly convincing court scenes.

"ZERO IN THE GATE", by Stewart Farrar (*Crime Club*, 10s. 6d.).

Murder, mystery and investigation in a newsreel company, still (despite TV) in competitive operation. Skillfully done with a wealth of good technical background and an assortment of cutting-room boys, cameramen, sound recordists and voices; it adds up to a competent Crime Club novel.

"CRY OF THE HUNTER", by Harry Patterson (*John Long*, 11s. 6d.).

An unusual, prettily-written variant of the chase thriller. Speed and conviction in the story-telling, clever characterization and a first-class situation—the old I.R.A. wonderboy called out of retirement to rescue a young and murderous oaf . . . produce a far better than average run for your money. Harry Patterson is a young man to watch and applaud.

"MURDER MAY FOLLOW", by Susan Morrow (*Crime Club*, 10s. 6d.).

It did. An apprehensive but beautiful interior decorator in San Francisco goes to the police because she

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—*Evening Herald*.
10s. 6d.

MACDONALD

fears that someone is after her; and all the rest follows. This is a first novel, and while by no means bad, isn't quite good enough either. A little more authority, a dash of originality and an extra layer of suspense: with these Miss Morrow could be up battling with the best. Meantime, Beta minus.

"DEAD OF SUMMER", by Josephine Gill (*Macdonald*, 10s. 6d.).

Upstate New York lake fishing party ends in murder, by page 11. The rest of the book sorts out the local society, adds another brace of killings and a dash of romance among the dirty dealings. All no doubt thoroughly competent, and tortuous in unravelling, but it never quite struggles off the ground.

"DEAD AGAINST MY PRINCIPLES", by Kenneth Hopkins (*Macdonald*, 10s. 6d.).

Either you like that knockabout team of amiable eccentric academics, Dr. William Blow and Professor Gideon Manciple, or you don't: I do. This is murder and investigation in the light fantastic mode and is a second instalment of Kenneth Hopkins's larger lunacy. Among the septuagenarians weave such delectably recondite figures as the tattooist who specializes in removing scars. Highly diverting for the literate.

"MELORA", by M. G. Eberhart (*Crime Club*, 10s. 6d.).

Miss Eberhart is approximately the transatlantic answer to Miss Christie,

and even our Agatha has been known to nod. Not that this is a nod so much as a slight lowering of the eyelid. Melora, the ex-wife, a sort of living Rebecca, menaces the second marriage and wife No. 2 gets threatening notes; terror mounts, etc.; Melora reappears, and then—guess what?—murder. Adequate for most but below par for Miss Eberhart.

"TO KILL OR DIE", by Jeremy York (*John Long*, 11s. 6d.).

Fast, competent professional thriller—a good read between stations. Sympathetic crook who has unfortunately committed a couple of murders and is blackmailed into attempting a third. He falls in love with the girl, has a change of heart which leads up to a good, tense crisis which occupies the last third of the book.

"PATTERN OF GUILT", by Gavin Holt (*Hodder & Stoughton*, 12s 6d.).

A suspenseful, competently written thriller with some loose ends rather negligently knotted in the last pages, rather as if the author had suddenly decided to bring the book to an abrupt conclusion. I felt that his original intention was to write a better book.

"SO DEAD THE ROSE", by M. E. Chaber (*Boardman*, 10s. 6d.).

Surely Mr. Chaber is one of the most endearing writers of run-round-Europe thrillers. For me, *The Splintered Man* was the gem, with, as far as I can trace, its first use in this class of fiction of lysergic acid to destroy personality. *So Dead the Rose* is an-

other cracker, with the mercurial multilingual Milo marching through the machinations of Moscow with his customary merry murderousness. On one point only do I quarrel with him. He prefers gin to vodka, but I suppose with his unfortunate experiences of the latter's manufacturers, this is only to be expected.

"THE DELICATE DARLING", by Jack Webb (*Boardman*, 10s. 6d.).

Jack Webb again, in the shape of the odd alliance of Sergeant Sammy Golden and Father Shanley. This time they investigate the disappearance of one Juan Alfredo Delicado, scion of one of Cuba's oldest families, gifted poet and darling of the literati. Two of the women in this elusive lecher's life are variously described as "though almost forty, she still had the shape to give men a run for their hormones", and "tough and lost and so naïve it was a little frightening". Readers of discernment need seek no farther for plot, atmosphere, characterization and the acutest writing.

"LESSON IN MURDER", by Stella Claydon (*John Long*, 11s. 6d.).

Well-written, conventional detective story by a newcomer in the field. The staff of a girl's grammar school seethes with tensions and skeletons in the cupboards, presided over by a nicely evil headmistress whose murder no one can regret. Miss Claydon has taken trouble with her characters and plot, though perhaps next time she will avoid the hoary chestnut of murderer's confession.

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Thrillers of the Month

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LUCILLE

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BLINDFOLD

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