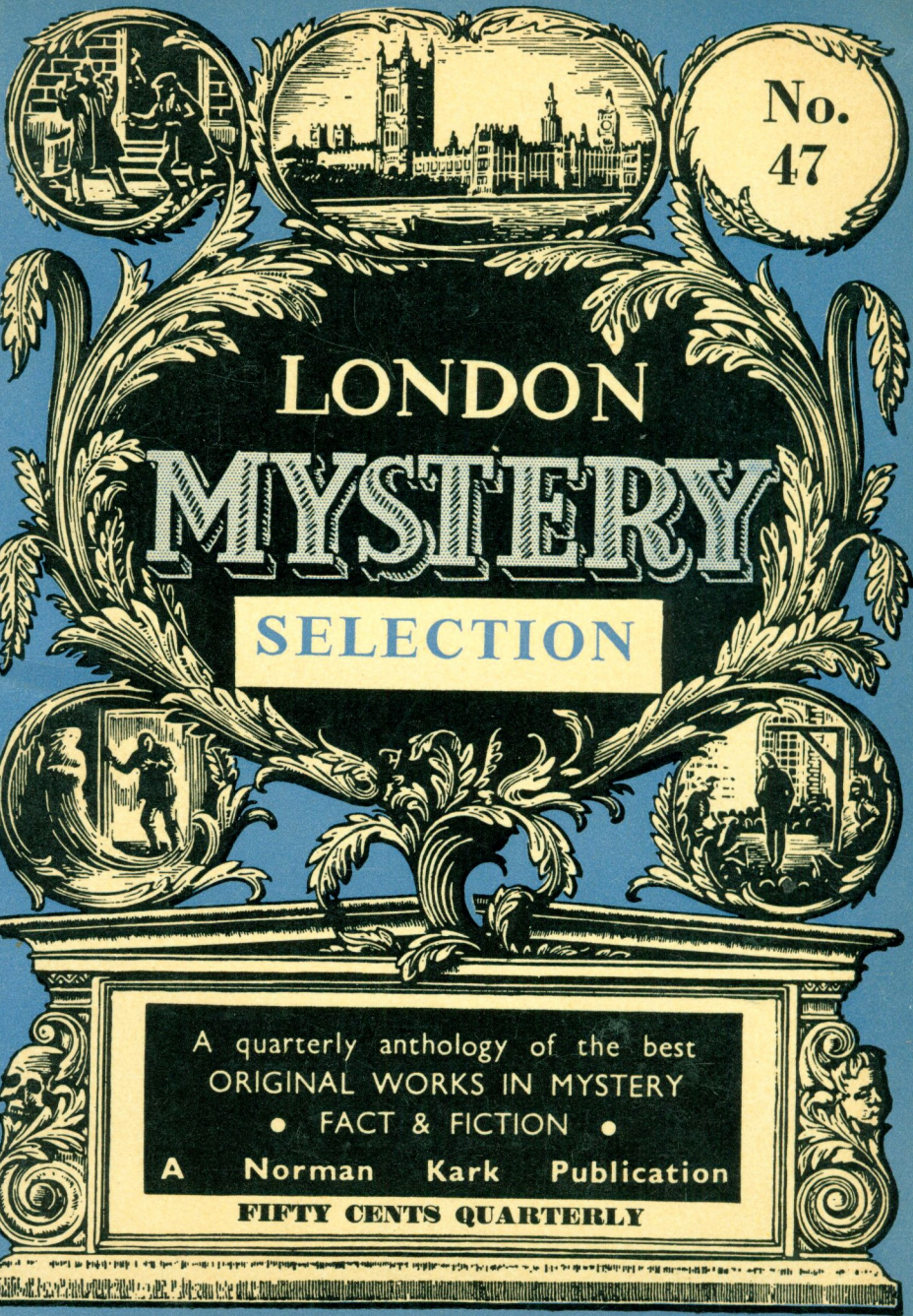
No.
47
LONDON
MYSTERY
SELECTION
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THE LONDON MYSTERY SELECTION

It's the season of the year for spooks and spooky stories, and if it takes a spine-chiller or two to "make" your festivities, your appetite will be satisfied by this, the 47th issue of LONDON MYSTERY SELECTION.

Perhaps the biggest mystery of 1960 has been the lost summer; Holmes himself would have had difficulty tracing it. On reading "The Rainmakers", we wondered whether L. P. Davies might not have stumbled upon the solution; we leave it with you.

Among other things, 1960 hasn't been a good year for cultivating mandrakes, but after digesting Morgan Evans's contribution perhaps you won't regret it. At the moment we're keeping a watchful eye on some dubious specimens in the greenhouse. Two of our tales return us to the days of our youth, to school and college. For many, those formative years are a memorable highlight, for others, a not-so-happy phase. In "The Happiest Days", by G. K. Thomas, we learn what happened when a former unhappy pupil was persuaded to cast his mind back to those long days in the classroom, while in "The Raggers" Ivor Smullen gives us a psychological piece about an unpleasant occurrence involving a timid house master.

There is a nice element of fantasy about "Blow That Horn", by Robert Blake, but you may not feel quite so easy after reading Leslie Vardre's "Tea-time"; however, we are nothing if not catholic in our selection, and if you are left feeling in need of something a little less boundless you can enjoy the adventurous "Frontier" or take yourself off for a dramatic interlude on the Italian coast with "The Siren". EDITOR.

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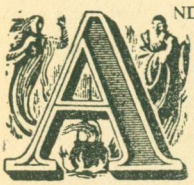
MANDRAGORA SAPIENS

MORGAN EVANS

Illustrated by Woodward



ND WHEN THE ambulance had taken Dora away and the house had fallen into its customary quiet, they went into the conservatory, but the plant was dead, its leaves brown and withered, the flower a crumbling, brittle horror.

Mr. Vance took his trowel and dug the tuber up. But like the foliage it was dead—soft and rotten—pulping into a soft, revolting mess when his fingers tried to take hold of it.

It was for all the world, he thought, like a potato that had rotted in the ground once its work was done, its purpose achieved.

Its purpose achieved . . . ?

Nearly six months ago it had been. In autumn, with spring a long time away, but bulbs to be bought for all that.

Dora didn't mind him buying bulbs for the garden. It was only when she said he was wasting money on things that didn't grow that she turned the sharp edge of her tongue on him. Like the parcels of dried roots and corms that he would buy from the little shop in the Portobello Road. More often than not they failed to germinate at all, and when they did, they threw out miserable growths and tendrils that terminated in pale, insipid orchids.

She didn't understand the adventure of such things—the uncertainty. She said that they were a waste of time and money; that the conservatory could be put to better use. Like growing tomatoes . . .

"Something special, Mr. Vance," the little Greek said that day. He had parcelled up an assortment of hyacinths and tulips, then brought out the battered cardboard box from somewhere under the counter.

"From South America. The Anderson Expedition. You maybe 'ave read about it in the papers? These I get from my good friend Jakos, who was with the party. 'Ow he get them I don't ask. But for them I pay five because he say 'e is short of money. For you, Mr. Vance, I ask the same. If anything good is coming from them, you are gentleman, and you let me know, and then per'aps you pay more . . ."

And while Mr. Vance—bowler-hatted, small in stature, with a peaked city-white face and precariously balanced gold-rimmed spectacles—knew that this was only a line of sales-talk, he still prodded at the dried roots with an adventurous forefinger and thought about the heavy, odiferous jungle—smelling the moist heat and the exotic perfume of the steaming Amazon basin. But five pounds . . .

Mr. Vance took out his wallet.

As usual, he called at the club be-

fore going home. While he was hanging his coat in the vestibule he peered through the glass panels into the lounge. Masters was there, his feather-white hair deep over a book.

A silent, retiring memory of a man, Masters; one of the oldest members. But with a string of letters after his name that testified to past honours and degrees. And among other things he was a Fellow of the Royal Horticultural Society.

Mr. Vance took his little bag of roots from his coat pocket and bore them with him into the lounge, to set them on the table near Masters' elbow. Then he coughed and remarked that it looked like being a cold autumn.

Masters said: "Huh?" without looking up.

Mr. Vance emptied his trophies on the table-top and stirred them with his finger. "Brought these from the little shop in the Portobello Road," he offered tentatively.

Masters raised his watery blue eyes over the top of his book.

"Cypripediums," he observed dispassionately, and returned to his book, to look up a moment later.

"No," he corrected. "These, yes; this and this, no . . . Palæonophis, probably. This one—tuber of some sort; Solanacæ, probably. Don't recognize it . . . Where did they come from?"

"The Portobello Road," Mr. Vance repeated patiently.

"Ah," said Masters heavily. "Junk, most of 'em. But this is a stranger. Parasite, perhaps . . . I wonder." He stroked his chin. "Good solid tuber, well noduled. Something about the shape . . ." He became mildly excited, picking up the tuber and holding it close before Mr. Vance's eyes. "What does it remind you of—the shape, I mean?"

It was about two inches long with a large nodule at one end, and four smaller, evenly set out, two to each side. Mr. Vance wondered why he hadn't spotted the resemblance before.

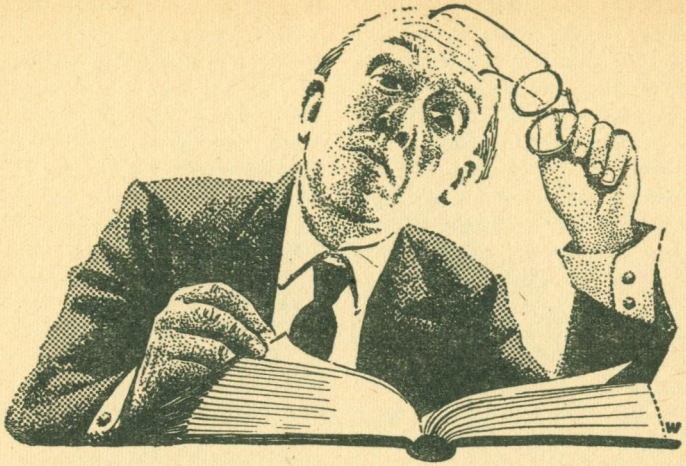
"A toy?' he offered. "A small toy bear?"

"Or roughly the shape of a man," Masters qualified. "Now, there's your clue . . ."

"Mandrake?" Mr. Vance asked. "But I thought there was no such thing."

Masters became incensed. "And you call yourself a hot-house gardener. Mandragora; poisonous, narcotic. Most of them, anyway. Read it up, man! Use plenty of damp heat. Rich humus—get a steam drip going. It should grow. As I remember it bears a flower. Bit of a problem for you there. Propagates by root division, so really no need for a flower. Let me know how it goes on . . ."

On his way home Mr. Vance dropped in at the library and spent quite a time sorting out a book that contained information about the Mandrake. It was all very sketchy and unsatisfactory. He found it to agree with much of what Masters had said. It was poisonous and derived its name from the peculiar shape of the root. The book went on to say: "Many strange tales and fancies have arisen from this close resemblance to the



human form, the most popular being that the plant emits shrieks and groans if it is pulled from the ground. Several species are listed, but it is believed that many more are in existence. In 1872, Dr. Holgrave discovered and described the *Mandragora Vulgaris,* the *M. Holgravus,* and mentions in passing the as yet unknown—at least to the civilized world —*M. Sapiens.*"

Vaguely disappointed, Mr. Vance returned the book to its shelf and concentrated upon the more immediate problem of breaking the news to his sister that he had spent five precious pounds on a small bag of shrivelled roots.

From time to time, when this problem arose, Mr. Vance would regret that he had never married. Dora was an excellent and comfortable housekeeper, but was inclined to be dictatorial.

At thirty-five, and five years younger than he was himself, she gave him the impression of being much older, taking care of him almost as a mother would have done.

A wife, he told himself, would have been a much different proposition. He could have picked for himself a quiet, retiring woman who would have allowed him to indulge in his hobby without constant protest. He was a peaceful man by nature, avoiding at any price the exchange of bitter words. Except where acquisitions for the hot-house were concerned, and there he did try to stand up for himself.

It would be pointless to conceal his purchase. There were five pounds to be accounted for. Dora was strict on the household budget. Walking up the drive, his bowler hat set square on his thinning hair, Mr. Vance regretted his purchase.

Some time later, his ears still burning, he sought refuge in the conserva-

tory. He was aware of Dora glowering disapprovingly from the lounge as he busied himself preparing the pots for his latest acquisitions.

She had been more annoyed than usual. Five pounds, it appeared, was quite a tidy sum when the rate demand had just come and a new carpet needed for the best bedroom. Especially when it had been wasted on a heap of withered rubbish.

"Horrible things," she had said, shuddering. "Those are just like dried spiders. And this fat one . . ." She had become lost for words.

Mr. Vance brooded over the mixing of the compost. He wondered absently, as he had so many times before, why she had never married. She had been attractive enough not so long ago—still was for that matter, if only she wouldn't dress in clothes that put years on her age. Nice oval face, level eyes, neat black hair. Once she had worn it low on her neck, but now it was scraped back in a bun.

Years ago, when he had come to know Mary, the quiet girl at the tobacconist's shop at the corner, Mr. Vance had first broached the subject of marriage. She had thought he was suggesting that she get married. She had told him the idea was revolting—that she had no intention of ever getting married. Then he had mentioned Mary.

That was when she had had her first attack. The hastily summoned doctor had put it down to her heart. She was to be kept quiet, not upset in any way. And she made quite a rapid recovery. But marriage, it seemed, was out of the question. For both of them.

Mr. Vance planted his orchids first and set the pots in a row against the glass. Then he took the tuber and went over the instructions that Masters had given. He chose a fairly large box and filled it with a rich mixture of compost. Then he placed it in one corner next to the pipes and arranged a drip nearby so that the constant water on the pipes filled the conservatory with steam. Then he planted the tuber.

Some three weeks after planting, the first shoot appeared. It came through the soil like a bent finger, thick, and pale-green. Dora, the five pounds now forgotten, followed him into the steam-filled conservatory.

"What a fug," she said, fanning vigorously. "How on earth do you stick it, Henry? It's difficult to breathe . . ."

Then she saw the new shoot.

"Just like a snake uncoiling itself," she shuddered. "What a horrible thing. What on earth is it?"

"I'm not sure," he replied truthfully. "It may be a Mandrake. But we'll have to wait and see." He felt pleased with her interest.

She seemed revolted and at the same time fascinated, reaching out a long finger to touch it, then immediately drawing back with a grimace of distaste.

"It's warm!" she cried.

He explained that that was because of the humidity. Then he touched the shoot himself and was surprised to find it much warmer than he had expected.

It was on the morning that he saw the first signs of a bud, that Mr. Vance noticed something else. When he had originally planted the tuber he had set it in the precise centre of the box. Now he suddenly saw that it was in one corner, close to the hot pipes and the source of steam. His interest in the bud on its stalk, rising from the centre of the top rosette of leaves, was lost in wonderment at how the plant could have been moved. And it wasn't until he was leaving the house on his way to work that he recalled something else. When his finger had probed the soil to test its looseness, the plant had swayed back. There had been no breeze, not the slightest movement of air, but the plant had bent away.

That same evening he made a point of cornering Masters in the club.

He told him first about the bud that was forming. Masters was mildly interested. "Showing signs of flowering? Good. But don't expect anything spectacular. You say the leaves are similar to that of the potato?"

Mr. Vance agreed that that was so. Then he laughed a little. "A funny thing, but the plant seems to have changed its position . . ." The other looked up sharply. "Grown sideways, you mean?"

Mr. Vance shook his head. "It's straight and erect. No. The whole thing seems to have moved. And the soil round it was loose . . ."

"No likelihood of it having been lifted and replanted?"

Mr. Vance shook his head again. "There's only my sister and myself who go in the place," he explained. "And she wouldn't move it . . . At least"—thoughtfully—"I don't think she would."

"You don't sound very certain," Masters pointed out.

Mr. Vance started to tell how Dora had changed since the plant had grown. "It seems to have some sort of fascination for her," he finished slowly.

Masters became intense. "*Mandragora Sapiens*," he said, more to himself than the other. "I wonder . . ." He was lost in thought. Mr. Vance waited patiently.

"I wonder if I can come and have a look at it?" Masters asked after a while. "If I see it, then perhaps I can tell you more about it. Although, if it is the *Sapiens*, then so far as I know it has never been grown in this country before. But the flower may give us an indication . . ."

Mr. Vance was startled at the sudden interest. "Of course," he agreed, "come round whenever you like. At the present rate of growth it should flower pretty soon . . ."

And when Masters laid his hand on his arm and said quietly, "And keep your sister away from it," Mr. Vance was even more impressed.

On his way home he called in again at the library. He re-read the section under "Mandrake" again, but learned no more from it that he had the first time.

But the word *sapiens* stuck in his mind, teasing with its familiarity. It was not until he was nearly home that the context came to him. *Homo Sapiens*—Intelligent Man; *Man-*

dragora Sapiens—Intelligent Mandrake . . .

The stem-bearing bud was reaching up; it had grown almost two inches since the morning. Dora was as anxious for him to see it as if she had planted the tuber herself.

"I wonder what the flower will be like?" she thought, reaching out her fingers to touch the stalk. Mr. Vance noticed that it swayed forward to meet her hand. Despite the heat, he shivered.

After tea he went out to the potting shed and found a trowel. The idea of pulling the plant up with his hands was repugnant. He found himself hating the furry leaves as if they were laden with poison. He had made up his mind that it must be destroyed. It was evil . . .

He poised the trowel over the soil, and a thin screaming filled his head. His hands trembled, the trowel slipped from his grasp and the screaming stopped.

Then came a quietness, and a thought. That what he had tried to do was wrong; that he had, after all, promised that Masters should see the flower and that until the promise had been fulfilled it would be wrong to destroy the plant.

But he had agreed that Masters should see the plant. So the sooner that was done the better. Then he could get rid of the thing. Tomorrow —that was it. He would ask Masters to come down tomorrow, then perhaps the two of them together could dig up the plant.

Before setting off to the office the next morning, Mr. Vance paid his usual visit to the conservatory to find the bud as yet still unopened, but reaching up almost to eye-level. The stem was almost four feet high, towering well above the rosette of foliage. It looked ungainly and top-heavy; the bud was a tight green ball some three inches in diameter.

Coming out of the steamy atmosphere, he looked for the key, but it was not on its usual hook by the door. Dora said she had no idea what had happened to it; it had been so long since it had been used, she pointed out. "But why now?" she wondered. "Why do you want to lock the door now?"

"The plant is coming into flower," he told her. "I don't want any heat to escape." He felt it to be a poor excuse.

Dora looked quite pretty with her hair tumbling about her shoulders. She patted his cheek affectionately. "You and your precious plants," she laughed. "I'll look after them for you . . ."

Increasingly uneasy, and deciding to leave nothing to chance, Mr. Vance took the precaution of phoning Masters half-way through the morning to make sure he would be able to come and see the plant that same evening.

"It should be in flower by then," he excused. "I want you to see it before I dig the plant up."

With the passing of the days the hoop uncoiled itself to present a tight cluster of flaccid green leaves which opened rapidly, getting darker in colour. They were much the same shape and texture as a potato leaf,

only much larger. Mr. Vance felt that Masters' guess at it being a member of the Solanacæ family was probably right.

He watched its progress with much interest and satisfaction. Masters inquired about it from time to time in a desultory manner as if only out of politeness. But Dora had taken to watching its growth with an interest that she had never shown before.

Mr. Vance, pleased at her attention, found himself, all the same, trying to analyse her expression as she hovered over the box in the corner. Her face was a mixture of revulsion and fascination, hard to define. He felt vaguely uneasy.

"The leaves move, all by themselves," she said one day, coming to the other side of the conservatory where he was potting cyclamen.

They went together back to the plant.

"They're still now," she puzzled. "That's funny. A minute ago when I was looking at them, they were swaying."

Mr. Vance looked closely at her. "It's the heat," he explained. "You're not used to it. Perhaps it made your head swim . . ."

"Yes," she agreed with some relief. "That's what it must have been . . ."

But still she stayed near the plant in the corner.

And the next day she bought herself a new dress.

Winter came and melted into spring. Busy now out of doors, Mr. Vance found himself with less spare time to spend in the conservatory. But Dora had taken to sitting in a chair, close to the plant, sewing or knitting, seemingly oblivious to the heat.

She had also started using make-up, and had untied her hair so that it floated loose, taking years from her age. Mr. Vance watched the metamorphosis with puzzlement and much anxiety.

The plant was now some four feet high; a thick, luxuriant growth, with heavy, thick leaves. He found their texture irritating to the touch, but Dora, when invited to test them, closed her eyes for a moment and said she found them smooth and silky.

The tuber itself appeared to have grown, too, projecting even above the surface of the soil. It was a smooth, brown hump, perhaps two inches across, and rising an inch or more above the black soil. Smooth, Mr. Vance discovered, apart from too indentations on a level with the surface that reminded him of the eyes of a potato. Only these looked more like eyes in every sense of the word.

And once, with vague ideas of pinching out the side shoots to stimulate the main growth, he reached out his hand, and a voice inside his head said: "No . . ."

Which again, he later consoled himself, was only his gardener's instinct. All the same, he found himself losing interest in the plant, finding instead a feeling of revulsion.

There was, he felt, something wrong about it.

With the change in her appearance, Dora's manner had improved. Now there were no longer complaints about him over-spending or staying too long at the club. And she spent

more and more time in the conservatory, asking questions, admiring the orchids and always finishing up at the plant in the corner.

And one Saturday morning, working in the garden and having occasion to pass by the conservatory on his way to the kitchen, Mr. Vance, seeing a shadow of movement inside, stopped with his face to the glass, to watch with amazement at how Dora, her eyes closed, pressed her face to the rich leaves, and they leaned towards her, folding her face in a green embrace.

He told himself again that it had been a trick of the light. After all, the place was filled with the humid heaviness, the glass steamed and distorting. But that evening he suggested, in the kindest possible way, that perhaps it wasn't good for her to spend so much time in such an atmosphere . . .

Dora patted his cheek. "Do I look ill?" she wondered. Her eyes were shining, her cheeks flushed. He went back thoughtfully to the garden.

But when Mr. Vance and Masters arrived that evening the flower was dead. The door connecting the lounge with the hot-house stood open, with the heat gone, and most of the orchids drooping in the cold.

Dora lay face upwards on the floor by the strange plant in the corner. And at first sight, Mr. Vance thought that her face had turned yellow. Until he came to kneel by her side and discover that a thick layer of golden pollen covered her lips, cheeks and forehead, even lying thickly in the hollows of her closed eyes. She was breathing stertorously.

The ruins of his collection were forgotten as Mr. Vance tried to revive his sister and Masters spoke urgently into the phone.

And after the doctor had gone and Dora had been carried into the ambulance, Masters and Mr. Vance inspected the shrivelled remains of the plant, and while the guest looked on the other took a trowel and dug up the rotting remains of the tuber.

The flower itself was dried and brittle, crumbling at the touch. Stamens and pistil were dried strings and more of the golden pollen still lay on them.

"Strange," Masters brooded, "that it should die so quickly. And such a pity that we missed seeing the bloom . . ." He busied himself with a hand magnifier.

Mr. Vance watched him unhappily. The sight of Dora's face, the memory of her sprawled on the stone flags, was troubling him. Masters laid his hand on his arm.

"Don't worry," he consoled. "She'll be as right as rain in a few days. The doctor was right when he said it was only the heat that had overcome her —that, and possibly the heady fragrance from the flower, for I think we may assume that it was perfumed . . ." He sniffed, his nose in the air. "Traces of it still remain; interesting, most interesting."

Later that evening Mr. Vance phoned the hospital. The news was promising. Miss Vance, they told him, was still sleeping, but the possibility of a heart attack that had been the reason for the doctor's sending her to the hospital, must not be ruled out. But she was comfortable, they reassured. There was nothing to worry about.

Mr. Vance presented himself at the hospital the next day, but was not permitted to see Dora. The doctor who spoke with him was not prepared to commit himself, but did say that the patient had come out of the sleep, only to have an attack of hysterics before falling into a state of collapse. He said that she would be kept under constant observation and told Mr. Vance not to worry.

Mr. Vance fended unhappily for himself for a fortnight, and when Do Dora still showed no signs of improvement, engaged the services of a housekeeper. He phoned the hospital each day and visited every Saturday. Once they allowed him to see her, but she didn't recognize him, her eyes staring widely at the ceiling.

"She's eating well," the nurse comforted him, "she's putting on weight. I shouldn't take it too much to heart . . ."

But one morning when Mr. Vance made his usual telephone call, the message was different.

"The doctor would like a word with you, Mr. Vance—" The voice was faintly hostile. "We've had to move your sister to another ward."

Mr Vance was alarmed. "Not the—?" He jibbed at using the word that lurked at the back of his mind.

But the reply came back loud and clear. "Oh, no; nothing like that. We've moved Miss Vance to the maternity ward . . ."

THE RAGGERS

IVOR SMULLEN

HE NEW ENGLISH teacher for the Lower Sixth was a nice fellow, and accordingly we killed him. I remembered him as I dressed for the Old Boys' reunion party last night—the first I had bothered to attend.

He came to us freshly out of university. Pale, with dark bushy hair. And his eyes had a hurt look. Those were the war years, but the rumour was that he was medically unfit for military service.

In view of the bedlam that was the Lower Sixth at English it is surprising that I learned more from Loftus about our language than from any of his predecessors. It doesn't make me feel particularly noble to think that not only did I help to kill him but that even now I am turning his story to profitable use. I can only hope that his shade is not *too* disturbed by any clumsiness of style.

The class ragged him pitilessly. I myself did not join in—but neither did I protest, so I can claim no purity of conscience.

We all listened regularly to the radio and, lacking any original humour of our own, conscientiously lifted the catch-phrases and puns and aped most of the characters that made us laugh, just as today's teenagers spout all this so-called beatnik dialogue they have picked up from the movies and American magazines.

Young Johnson was the most fervent copyist. He made a point of being late for each English lesson, bursting open the door on his eventual arrival, after some considerable and loud fussing with the knob, and then shouting in his coarse voice, "Can I do you now, sir?"

Johnson was large and brutal and a fool. He was the ringleader in a vicious campaign against the innocuous Loftus.

Even Gallant joined in the mass persecution. Gallant was a slightly-built artistic boy who drew surrealistic cartoons inside the covers of his maths books. He was quiet and sensitive and had a wry sense of humour.

He also had some strange views, including, I recall, an insane theory about crime and punishment. He was strongly opposed to the death sentence. "Psychological punishment is the thing," he would say during our many arguments on the subject.

"Suppose," he went on, "a man were to kill old Morton (Morton was the school caretaker). Well, then, you hang him and his punishment is short, sharp, swift—over and done in a flash. That won't do at all. No. I should make the man take over Morton's job—after all, he was responsible for the vacancy. Then every moment of the rest of his life he would be inevitably reminded of how

the man he had killed had spent his living days. He would never be able to forget Morton. He would *be* Morton all over again—the killer and the killed at the same time. It would be a form of self-destruction—a sort of mental *hara-kiri*. See what I mean?"

I rarely did. Gallant's ideas were usually so crazy they could only have been concocted by a highly intelligent but untrained mind. The mind of a schoolboy who thought too much.

Why Gallant participated in the shameful treatment of Loftus I could never guess, because it was quite inconsistent with his character as I saw it. Perhaps he was over-eager to be "accepted" by the others. Frankly, I don't know and don't particularly care. The fact remains that he would devise some peculiarly nasty torments for the man who had been given the thankless task of bringing poetry and beauty into our lives.

Once Gallant brought Loftus what he described as a Wordsworth quotation he had tumbled on in a novel. Could Loftus identify its source? Loftus spent many evenings trying to track the lines down. He was wasting his time, of course, because they were a figment—though admittedly a brilliant figment—of Gallant's imagination.

When we were discussing the characters in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Gallant rose to ask Loftus if he could tell us all about the advantages and disadvantages of the married state. The question was ignored. But what could Loftus have said? It was well-known throughout the school that he was having a pretty rotten time with his wife, a girl who, I believe, had been one of his fellow-students at the University, an obsessed neurotic who made a habit of pawing any man within her immediate orbit and who I suppose the psychiatrists would say was overwhelmed by a feeling of sexual inadequacy for which she was trying to compensate.

The only occasion I saw her was a very revealing one. It was the annual sports day, and after the various events the boys mixed with the spectators, among whom was Mrs. Loftus.

She was a thin and intermittently vibrant woman with coppery hair. Her walk was stiff and repressed, but her manner was at odd moments effusive. It was as though she had a store of secret energies which she was only willing to set free at moments of her own choosing.

It looked as though she was on the verge of one of those moments when I saw her with Rogers, the tall, blond school captain, behind the tea-tent. He had chalked up a school record for the 440 yards half an hour earlier and Mrs. Loftus was whispering what may or may not have been congratulations in his ear, simultaneously stroking his cheek with her forefinger.

Rogers, his hands soldier-like by his sides, seemed both tense and bewildered and looking back on the incident today I can imagine the electric effect the touch of this oddly beautiful woman must have had on a youth for whom, until then, sex had meant shifty glimpses of the nude pictures in pocket magazines.

Incidentally, there was another

spectator of this disturbing scene. And I think I must have begun to realize then in my own groping, adolescent way why his eyes always bore that hurt look.

The look was there the next morning he entered the classroom to find a message chalked for his benefit on the blackboard. It said, "Who was that gentleman I saw Mrs. Loftus with last night?" It was in sickening enough taste to be Johnson's work.

But Loftus was himself partly to blame for the perpetual chaos in the classroom. Matters would never have reached this fearful stage if he had only smiled now and again at one or two of our minor and less offensive japes. But he never did. His obvious vulnerability was a target few schoolboys could resist.

As a disciplinarian he was hopeless. He never even tried. The result was that often his lectures were merely a dull and almost inaudible background to the almost hysterical babble of the boys. As I hinted at the beginning, he was too nice.

When he drowned himself in the school baths on the last day of my final term my first reaction was one of excited interest. There were no feelings of personal involvement.

It was only weeks later, when I was already in my first job, that the first stirrings of conscience came. In the years that followed I often wondered if any of the others had lost any sleep over the affair.

To be fair, I ought to say that the newspaper report of the inquest had quoted the coroner's comment on "the financial worries of the deceased", but this fooled nobody. Even the oafish Johnson must, if not then, at least in later years, have realized that we, with the able assistance of Mrs. Loftus, had killed the man . . .

The Old Boys' reunion was an occasion of much good cheer. I picked Johnson out without any difficulty. The years had amplified his essential grossness. He was as gigantic as a baboon and as loathsome. I was curious, however, to learn of his progress since leaving school, and I squeezed my way over to his corner.

It turned out that he ran a multiple confectionery business and I only hoped (silently) that he had an efficient accountant, as I recalled what his maths had been like. As I expected, his academic training had washed over his big, blank mind and dried without leaving the smallest spot of culture. His wife was a most engaging woman and I wondered not for the first time why such scum are always lucky in marriage.

But all the evening I had been unable to forget Loftus. I wanted to know what his death had really meant to the others.

"Remember old Loftus?" I said.

"Loftus? 'Course I remember Loftus!" said Johnson. "Sad case, y'know. You were there when he committed suicide?"

"It was my last day."

"A tragedy. The coroner talked about financial trouble but it was all a cover-up. Fellow couldn't stand the ragging the boys gave him."

Had I misjudged this gormless ox? Had he been astute and sensitive

enough to realize the harm he had wreaked?

"Yes, a sad case," he went on. "Y'know, I often blame myself for sitting back and letting the lads get away with it the way they did. Should have given them a good talkin' to. They listened to me, y'know. As you'll remember, I never said a wrong word to the feller meself. But that kind of neutrality never did poor old Loftus any good. Still, no use brooding over these matters, eh?"

I was too astounded to reply. So this, I thought, is how *he* has made his peace with himself. He *believes* every word of it, too. Loftus! thou shouldst be living at this hour . . .

Now I wanted to know about Gallant. "Is he here tonight?"

"Not met him yet? Come along. I'll introduce you—or re-introduce you, I should say. He's with his wife, too."

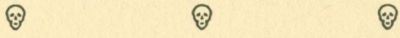
Gallant seemed much taller than I remembered. He held his cocktail glass with exaggerated delicacy. He looked as artistic as ever. I was not surprised to learn he was a small-town librarian. He hadn't quite made it. I think I knew as a boy that none of us in the Lower Sixth ever would.

His wife was an angular woman with an irritatingly nervous giggle. But most noticeable was the fact that she was obviously several years older than Gallant. Gallant, I thought, would, of course, be searching above all for intellectual maturity. Had he, though, achieved it here?

There was something distractingly familiar about Mrs. Gallant, but I didn't really place her until she simpered to her husband, "I think your little friend's cute," and pressed her hand against my cheek. Her glance was direct and inviting. She was too old to be coy. She appeared to be slightly tipsy but I knew she was perfectly sober, just as she had been behind the tea-tent.

I looked uncomfortably at Gallant. And I noticed for the first time the hurt look in his eyes.

What was that old phrase of his—"mental *hara-kiri*?" Well, I thought, we all make our peace in our different ways.



O weary life! O weary death!
O spirit made desolate!
O damned vacillating state!

ALFRED LORD TENNYSON.

THE RAIN-MAKERS

L. P. DAVIES

Illustrated by Vera Jarman

NCLE HABEOUS SAID I ought to write it all down—that I ought to keep a record like they did the other time this sort of thing happened. He said that one day, all being well, it should make good reading.

He was just letting the pigeons out again.

I said, "Where shall I begin?"

"Now that's the question," he said absently. The pigeon window was inclined to stick a bit, but he got it open and pushed the reluctant birds out. "Off you go, my beauties," he told them.

I wondered if they'd get safely back again.

"You'll have to paint in a background," he told me, stroking his beard thoughtfully. "Just touch on it, you know. You'll have to say how I knew about the Mbini and how poor Brewster went with me on that first trip. You'll have to make it clear that we were the only two white men who had ever set foot in Lubonga until those two, the murdering devils, persuaded Brewster to take them there.

"Tell them about the rain-makers, and how Nboto was the only one left. Tell them how I was the greatest explorer of all time . . ."

Never a modest man, my uncle.

I started to write it all down.

All about Uncle Habeous first, just like he said. For it was through him that we came to be here.

He wasn't the greatest explorer—there was Stanley and Livingstone, although by all accounts they didn't ever get to the Mbini country—but he was one of the greatest contemporary travellers. When I was still a schoolboy and living in the suburbs he would descend unheralded upon my bewildered parents from time to time, spending a few hectic days and filling the house and my head with hot desert sands and steaming jungle; with the roar of the lion, and the pale moon over Indian temples.

And then he would go again, leaving a clutter of spears and assagais, gaudily-painted clay bowls and grinning idols, not to mention bags of withered and dried bones and unhappy shrunken heads. The place would be all the quieter, and all the more dull and uninteresting for his passing.

He looked every inch an explorer. Quite the largest man I have ever known, with a huge weather-beaten face and shoulders like a tree. With a lion's mane of hair—in those days it was still golden brown—and a nose that jutted like a rock. And with hands so monstrous that one

of them could engulf my buttocks in a mighty grasp when he swung me up to the ceiling.

He once boasted that he had set foot in every country known to man, and two that were unknown except to the people that lived there. Certainly, up to the coming of Mullard and Spooner, he and Brewster were the only two white men who had set foot in the Mbini country. That had been some time in the late 'thirties, when he was still in his prime and able to crack a coconut by clenching his hand on it. Brewster was a small, ineffectual man, but with a vast knowledge of languages and customs. In their David and Goliath partnership, my uncle supplied the brawn and the initiative and Brewster the brains. He was a walking text-book, but a dreamer and visionary. In a way it is easy to understand how he fell for Mullard and Spooner's idea.

But that was many years after the expedition that uncovered the rapidly-dwindling rain-makers of Mbini.

They found the village—a poor place of mud-and-wattle huts—on the banks of a river that so far as my uncle knew had never been mapped nor named. A peaceful, intelligent tribe, doomed to annihilation through the ravages of their more fearsome neighbours, the crocodile hunters of Limpodo.

They were fine names in the ears of of a schoolboy, these remote African tribes, and they rolled from my uncle's tongue like the rumble of drums. And when he spoke of how they had caused the waters to rise, then his eyes would flash and he would point one massive arm ceilingwards.

For it seemed that after a few weeks' stay in the village the time came for them to move on, and when my uncle and Brewster launched their boat and started off down the river they found their way blocked by boulders in the river bed.

The natives said it was because there had been so little rain. They said there was no need for portage. One of them, Nboto, went into his hut and came back to the river bank with two tall drums. He set up a throbbing on their dried skin tops and within a few minutes the clouds had gathered and it started to rain.

And when they considered that the water in the river had risen sufficiently, Nboto took his drums back and returned with two smaller. These he set up in a scooped hollow under the lee of a towering sand-stone cliff and started playing a different rhythm. Gradually the rain subsided, the clouds parted and the sun broke through. And Uncle Habeous and Mr. Brewster sailed down the river and finally came back to England.

"Where exactly shall I begin the story?" I asked my uncle. "Way back when you first saw Nboto make rain, or when you gave that lecture in Birmingham?"

It was getting dark again and he was having some trouble in closing the window behind the pigeons. Most of the doors and windows, being made of new wood, were inclined to stick.

"I hope them birds get back all right," he said. "Start with the lecture.

Tell them how Mullard and Spooner were there and how they came to my hotel afterwards. Put down how they wanted me to lead an expedition to the Mbini country just to bring back the drums and the secret. And tell how I told them to go to the devil once I knew what their game was."

I never did get to see either Mullard or Spooner. Uncle Habeous described them as snivelling apologies for men, with jellied backbones. But that was before they murdered both Brewster and Nboto.

He said that Mullard, the spokesman of the two, was a bundle of bones and a sprig of yellow hair, with a face like a weasel. Spooner, he said, was short and stoutish, with shivering jowls and a way of talking through his nose. Uncle Habeous said that the moment he saw them he knew they were not to be trusted.

In his hotel room where they bearded him after the lecture, they said they were interested in the rain-makers. They wanted to know if my uncle would lead another expedition to the Mbini country to bring back the rain-making drums.

It was a good lecture; he called it "The Mbini of Lubonga." It was worth thirty guineas and expenses and he always gave his audience their money's worth.

He always finished on the same note. But of course he had a fine appreciation of the dramatic.

"They beat on the drums, and the skies opened and the rains came. They beat out another tempo, and the clouds withered, the rain ceased and the sun shone . . ."

He would fix his listeners with a fierce stare. "Magic you say? You find it hard to believe? But the answer is simple. This uncivilized people has merely discovered the secret of sound vibrations. One day that same secret will be made available to the Western world. That is something at which imagination boggles. But consider an electronic device that, at the turn of a switch will produce rain—one turn, a shower; two turns, a downpour. Controllable weather—the dream of scientists through the ages . . ."

In his hotel, Mullard and Spooner offered Uncle Habeous five thousand pounds if he would lead them to where the drums could be found. And when he pressed for their reasons they told him that it was their intention to form a company to exploit the discovery. They offered him a partnership in the concern and, foreseeing how such a thing could be abused in the hands of what he considered unscrupulous men, he turned them away.

But back home again, on the farm where we lived together—my parents died many years ago when I was still in my teens—he spoke of another reason why he had refused the offer. It seemed that there was more to the rain-making than he had seen fit to tell his audience. When I asked what, he waved me aside with an impatient hand and sat for a while in deep thought.

Despite his years he was still an agile and powerful man. His lion's mane of hair had turned from golden-brown to white, but his face was still as dark and unwrinkled as ever.

We had hard work to make the farm pay its way and five thousand pounds seemed a lot of money. I mentioned this and for the only time in my life Uncle Habeous lost his temper and roared at me. It seemed I was talking about things of which I had no knowledge. It would be better if I kept to my fields and cattle.

And when he had finished with me, he started on himself. He was a fool to have ever given that lecture at all. He might have known that some day some clever types would get the idea of exploiting the rain-makers.

In all fairness he was harsher with himself than he had been with me. And when the storm had rumbled by he said that he would have to go up to London that same day. It seemed that in his lecture he had told how Brewster had been with him and it would be the easiest thing in the world for Mullard and Spooner to find him.

Uncle Habeous said that he had to see Brewster first. He had to warn him, just in case. He felt sure, anyway, that his dreamy ex-partner had no notion of the potential dangers that lay behind the secret of the Mbini.

He threw a few things into a bag and caught the afternoon train. But he had wasted a day and a half. When he returned the next day he was quiet and subdued and seemed to have aged overnight.

The two men had reached Brewster first, and apparently he had fallen for their offer. They had already started off.

"Brewster will go about it in the same way as when we were together," he told me gravely. "They'll travel overland to Marseilles and fit out the expedition there. Then they'll cross to Egypt and strike down the Nile valley. Not because it's the nearest route, but because it's the one we always used. I must get after them as quickly as possible."

But it seemed that however important it was that he should set off after the three, there was something even more important to be started here on the farm. And for that reason, when I volunteered to accompany him, he told me that I was to stay and superintend the work he was about to put in hand.

He worked all through the night and when morning came I found the floor littered with plans. At eight o'clock he started phoning, first to a building contractor, then to the local carpenter. He roared furiously into the phone, promising unlimited sums of money if they would drop all other work in hand and concentrate upon what he wanted them to construct.

He roared with some effect, for later that day first two men in bowler hats appeared, to be followed later by a lorry loaded up with timber. The workmen gathered in an interested group about the plans which my uncle spread on the ground. And once I caught one of the blue-overalled workmen tap his forehead and look significantly over Uncle Habeous's broad shoulder at one of his mates.

I wasn't told what the construction was to be. I was ordered only to see that the men "kept at it." Uncle

Habeous told me there was no need for me to know just what the construction was about. He said there was no point in alarming me. Which, of course, really got me worried, so that I spent a while talking with the workmen, but they too were in the dark as to the nature of the work.

Uncle Habeous stayed only long enough to see the start of his project in the big disused barn beyond the cow-sheds before setting off on his last trip to Africa.

He left on a Monday. The next day another batch of workmen arrived, and the whole place echoed to the sound of hammering and sawing. Timber was stacked everywhere and wood-shavings littered the fields. And later the pungent smell of boiling bitumen drifted as far as the village.

There came a telegram from Marseilles. "Sailing tonight. Tell them to put double glass in the windows." There was another from Cairo. "Moving off tonight. Tell them I want best oak throughout."

After that there was no word for four months. I did the spring sowing and later harvested a crop of hay that with the barn being used now had to be stacked out of doors.

By the end of August the number of workmen started to dwindle. And I still didn't know what it was that Uncle Habeous had had built in the barn. It wasn't for want of trying. Most every evening after the workmen had gone, I would sidle into the narrow space left between the crumbling barn wall and the towering wooden sides of the almost completed erection. If I had been able to step back and view it from a distance then I would have known right away. But I could only guess. There was something vaguely familiar about the general shape. Something that took me back to the days when I was a child. But, of course, I told myself that what I had in mind was hopelessly impossible.

The last thing the workmen did before leaving was to remove the huge double doors of the barn. I wondered why they hadn't done that in the first place. They said it had been the express orders of my uncle that the contents of the lofty old building should be kept secret for as long as possible.

Walking in the cool that same evening with the swallows flying high —a sure sign that the fine weather that had persisted for nearly two months looked like continuing—I came by way of the now door-less barn, and suddenly the shape of its contents became clear. That night I lay awake all through the darkness, deciding one moment that my uncle's mind was unhinged, and the next, fearful of what was to happen if the thing in the barn was ever needed.

The next day he came home. Thinner and quieter, with his face drawn and tired. He looked suddenly a very old man. He had let his beard grow and it straggled untidily over his travel-stained coat. His hair floated about his head like a halo.

He went straight out to the barn and there was certainly an urgency in the way he inspected the wooden erection. Once he turned to look at

me. "I suppose it's caused some amusement?"

I said that some of the workmen had laughed. "Let them," he said forcibly. "They'll laugh the other side of their faces . . . You've guessed what it is?"

I said I'd guessed.

Then he told me the story of his last expedition to the Mbini country. How he had chased Brewster and the others across the Continent, and always a week behind. And when he reached the river with its pathetic collection of miserable huts that housed the last of the rain-makers, he had found, first, Brewster's bloated body bobbing face down in the reeds, with two bullet holes in its back, and then Nboto, the last of his race, dying from a wound in his chest. And from the dying rain-maker he had heard how Mullard and Spooner had first murdered Brewster, considering him an unnecessary burden once his work had been accomplished, and then had tortured the old native until he had divulged the secret of the drums. They had taken the drums with them —and the secret of how they were to be played.

"I followed them back to Cairo," he said. "But after that I lost trace. It's certain that they've got back to

England and that they have the drums with them."

I tapped the wooden wall by my side. "But why this?" I asked him. "I still don't understand."

"You'll see," he promised, and we went out into the open. The sky was as clear and cloudless as it had been most of the summer. "You'll see," Uncle Habeous said, and went unhappily to bed.

When next day dawned bright and clear he simply said, "Not yet," and got some of the workmen back again, hastily putting on yet another coat of paint.

"If only I knew where to start looking," he mourned. "If only I could get to them in time."

The workmen looked at us, and laughed among themselves. I think that now they had come to think of me to be as mad as my uncle. But that evening the clouds started to build up on the horizon and before morning came I could hear the steady drumming of the downpour.

"I wonder?" Uncle Habeous mused. "I wonder if this is the start?"

We watched all day from the window as the river filled and then started to overflow its banks. By evening the lower field was a swamp. The workmen had ceased both their work and their laughter.

"This is it," Uncle Habeous said with finality. "Now they've started."

And when I still couldn't see why he should be so worried, he said: "They've got the drums to start the rain, and they're using them now. They've got the other drums that will stop it, but there's only one thing they don't know."

"And what's that?" I wondered, with the first feelings of fear.

"They can only work if used in the one place . . ."

"Where?" I asked, the fear crystallising into a tight knot.

"In a scooped hollow below a sandstone cliff," he said. "Where the rock acts like a sounding-board. In the Mbini country, by a river, in the very heart of Africa."

And then I saw it all. The reason for the thing in the barn, the reason why my uncle had tried to get to the drums first.

"Rather they had been destroyed than for this to happen," he said.

We worked in the pouring rain, knocking down part of the old brick wall of the barn so that the ark would be able to float out without fouling its superstructure. We dropped the gangway, and we took aboard as many animals as we could. He said to be sure and not forget the pigeons.

The next day, with the rain a solid grey sheet, the valley had gone and now there was only a lake. During the morning some of the workmen came to stand on the far bank and shout across, asking if they could come aboard. But there was no way for them to cross. The farm—what there was left of it—and the barn were isolated on a hill. It was then that Uncle Habeous thought of something else. Something very important. But, of course, by then it was too late.

We slept on dry straw in the hold of the ark, with the warm, steamy breath of the animals in our nostrils

and the eternal rain beating down over our heads. And half-way through the night I was awakened by the first movement of the floor. A gentle swaying movement that soon was to become part of our life.

When morning came we were alone in a grey sea that stretched unbroken from horizon to horizon.

And that's how it is now. It's been raining for nearly two months and we've eaten most of the food. Soon we shall have to start on the beasts. And after . . .

Uncle Habeous is very worried—but then, so am I. He says that this is a much more serious flood than that other one.

Each morning he lets the pigeons out, but they always come back with wet feet and bedraggled feathers. He thinks now that it will never stop raining, but for all that, he thinks I ought to write it all down, just in case.

But as I tell him, it will never be read by anyone. Even if the rain stops and the floods subside and we reach dry land. There's my uncle, and he's nearly sixty, and I'm not so young. And although we took sheep and cows and even horses on board we forgot about the female of our own species.

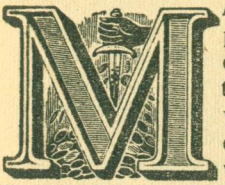
Not that it matters. It will never stop raining.

Farewell happy fields
Where joy for ever dwells: Hail horrors, hail
Infernal world, and thou profoundest Hell
Receive thy new possessor: one who brings
A mind not to be changed by place or time.
The mind is its own place, and in it self
Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n.

JOHN MILTON.

DISGUISE

W. H. BOORE



AÎTRE DIJON paced up and down my lawn in the hot June light, while I sat in a deck-chair and watched him. He liked being watched; his courtroom manner never left him. With his flapping cloak, his old felt hat at an impossible angle, his long, lean figure and great beak of a nose, Maître Dijon cast a most excellent shadow—always.

"I tell you about the Neurisse emeralds," he said, "because, sometimes, you have the accidental idea; truth happens to you when the logic, the intuition, the genius of Maître Dijon cannot discover it."

"Carry on," said I, "the build-up suggests that you've come unstuck again."

He took not the slightest notice of me; he had a tremendous capacity for being utterly unaware of anything he did not want to notice.

"The Comte de Neurisse," he went on, "was of an old, noble family, returned to its ancient château after the revolution, where it had stayed ever since—son succeeding father and bequeathing to son as quietly as the ticking of an old clock; and, like a clock, the house of Neurisse was slowly wearing away; spending itself until nothing was left but the old Château and the one old man-servant; and, of course, the Neurisse emeralds. Just like a book, you understand me?"

"Your reading," I said, "must be a century behind the times."

"Now the Neurisse emeralds were kept in the bank of the village of Neurisse, in a box in the strongroom, with a key to the box held each by the bank manager and the Comte—no one else, you understand me? And these emeralds were, in a way, the living of the Comte, because everyone knew of them—and the Comte lived on credit. If ever his creditors got a bit impatient, the Comte—who was greatly the gentleman—would say, 'Certainly, gentlemen, you must be paid; it is your right; unfortunately, I am a little short of the fluid cash at the moment, but I have the insurance premium put by for the Neurisse emeralds. I am afraid I must transfer that money to you; it is, after all, yours; it is only a little on account, but I hope it will help. It is, I fear, necessary to let the insurance on the emeralds lapse. Have you heard about all the bank robberies lately?' "

Maître Dijon paused in his pacing and turned towards me; I thought there was a certain quivering of the full, drooping lips; and a gleam—could it be laughter?—in the eyes so dark and deep below the shaggy, grey brows.

"It was like that, always; but the emeralds were the security; if anything happened to them, what would happen to all Neurisse, where the

Comte was owing so much to so many? And the creditors would bow themselves out and apologize for the intrusion, assuring Monsieur le Comte that they had no wish to incommode him; and the insurance, ah! that must certainly be paid."

"Why didn't he sell the ruddy things?" I asked.

"Not ruddy," said Maître Dijon gently. "Not ruddy; green; emeralds, I told you. No one ever suggested that they be sold; I think they had by now become almost a myth, a legend; and one does not realize on legends without a danger of disillusionment. Like fairy gold. Besides, the Comte paid something to everybody as time went on; the grape-harvest, the sale of an odd pig, or a pair of calves; there were still pickings from what was left of the estate. And the Comte was fifty; unmarried; the last of his line. One day the lot would be sold up and the creditors might get some nice things cheap when the time came; and the emeralds would always pay the debts."

Maître Dijon had resumed his pacing now; his head was thrown back as if he were overlooking history.

"Then the Comte was taken ill; took to his bed; no doctors for him—didn't believe in 'em; a few leeches, that he could apply himself. The house of Neurisse, you understand, lived before the revolution."

Here my old friend paused and rubbed his hands together; he was coming to the crux.

"'Ah!' said the tradesmen, 'the end approaches.' Indeed, nothing was heard from the Château for several weeks; it had its own few cows; its crops; the Château had become something of a subsistence-farm; providing for its owner and his servant. And the Comte of Neurisse had always let it be known that he was not prepared to accept homage except by appointment. Those were not his words, of course; but that was what it amounted to. So the villagers—particularly those who were owed money—used to stroll along the lane that led by the place and have a look at the ancient flag of the House of Neurisse to see whether it was at half-mast or not, then return home satisfied that they had taken all possible steps to protect their interests."

A pollen-laden bee lurched by and it seemed to make the sound of the burden Maître Dijon carried.

"But, indeed, the Comte was soon among us again, and more often than he used to. But he was changed. You do not know the French villages, my friend; how we live more by habit than vision; how things may change but never alter. It was the illness, we said; the poor Comte was taking the air because he had been so long laid up; he was more distant with us all, because he still felt a strangeness after his long sickness; and he had let his beard get a little out of hand because he was not well. Little differences there were; he would slap his thigh suddenly, which was quite unlike the gentility of Neurisse—and then he would look self-conscious as though he knew he had made a mistake; and when one would speak with him, he would grunt curtly and wave the

fellow away—even me, I have been so treated. It did not occur to any of us that there was more to it than mere change; it did not, for instance, occur to anyone that the Comte was, in fact, someone else."

A soft wind stirred through the bushes of my garden; and there were cold fingers in it; they touched me.

"This went on for some time," Maître Dijon went on, "until the Comte became, as it were, increasingly seen and less noticed day by day for several weeks. And gradually we took his differences into our way of thinking of him, until we were no longer surprised when he was out of character; after all, the changes were so little. In a way, the most surprising thing was that the Comte now did his own shopping—what little shopping he did; no longer did the ancient retainer perform the errands."

The speaker tugged at his collar for a moment as if he had suddenly grown impatient with himself. "What fools we were."

"Oh! I don't know," I said, for there is only one thing that can deflect Maître Dijon from his narrative, and that is a burst of self-pity, at which he is most eloquent, most touching and most insincere. "After all," I added, "one does not expect such a nobleman to commit a crime."

"But it was not he who . . ." began Maître Dijon; then he looked at me hard, and I could see a question rising in those old, deep eyes. But he shrugged his shoulders and continued.

"It was the business of the emeralds that intrigued us all, however. One day this man, this Comte that we were recognizing so often about the place, this fellow"—the word fellow as pronounced by Dijon stains the very air it is spat upon—"this fellow went to the bank with a request that the Neurisse emeralds be handed over to him forthwith. The manager hummed and hawed; and he suggested they had better have the agent of police to supervise the transfer; to which the Comte—the so-called Comte—agreed most readily. He signed a written request for them; and he signed a receipt. And off he went, under the eyes of the bank manager and the police—off with the Neurisse emeralds."

Maître Dijon gave me a rheumy stare. "The fellow has not been seen from that day to this—and what he has done with the emeralds . . ." he shrugged his shoulders.

"But," said I, "if it were the Comte?"

"Three weeks later, the Comte and his servant came back to Neurisse. The Comte had been away, it seemed, for many months for his health. Oh! yes, he had been ill in the first place; but then he had gone away for his health."

"Why," I asked, "why did he not tell what he was doing?"

Maître Dijon looked sheepish. "Naturally, he did not put it this way, but the fact is, of course, that when a gentleman who owes a lot of money in a district goes away, he tends to do so rather quietly, is it not?"

I got up and adjusted my deck-chair to its most upright position. "And you want me to give you any

ideas I can about where the robber went."

Maître Dijon nodded. "It does not matter to the village of Neurisse any more," he said, "after all, the Comte collected the insurance money and paid up his bills; a new manager was placed in the bank, and the Comte now lives by cash instead of credit."

"I bet he does," I said. "I bet he does."

Slowly Maître Dijon pivoted on one long, lean leg. "What do you mean?" he asked heavily.

I sat upright. "This robber," I said, was like enough to the Comte for you to accept him, and unlike enough for you to suspect him when it was too late."

Maître Dijon nodded.

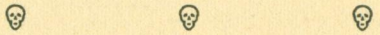
"And his signatures at the bank—they, I suppose, are enough like the genuine signature to pass muster, but sufficiently different to be called forgeries?"

"Indeed, yes," said Maître Dijon; he stood quite still now, as if he recognized that he was on the edge of revelation; as if, in fact, he had already caught some glimpse of the nature of that revelation.

"Very clever," I said, "very clever indeed. Genius, in point of fact; to claim to be oneself while pretending to be someone else—and to get away in due order with both the claim and the pretence, that is, indeed, criminal art at its highest."

Slowly Maître Dijon pulled himself up to his full, majestic height. There was admiration in his eyes. "What skill; what accomplishment," he cried. "To disguise oneself as another is difficult; to disguise oneself as oneself—ah! indeed, only a most noble Comte could deceive so honestly."

He relaxed; I could almost see his flesh settling again around his bones. "I wonder," said Maître Dijon thoughtfully. "I wonder what he did with the emeralds."



Tremble, tremble thou wretch,
That has within thee undivulged crimes . . .
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE.

THE SIREN

PHILIP SPRING

Illustrated by Jennifer Gordon

I NEVER HAVE ANY LUCK. My hands are clumsy and my right foot is in irons. The girls say I always smell of fish. Though I have the eye of the Mother Goddess painted on the prow of my boat, she never brings me luck. "Ugolino," she whispers to me sometimes from the clear blue water, "one day I will drown you. Then you will be happy."

But Stefano, the madcap, was different. He was big and handsome, full-coloured like a ripening grape, not olive and tan like us fisher lads. He worked with Papa Pellegrino at the garage in Via Greco, mending scooters all day, then ripping about the place testing them. He would go up Via Greco like an angry hornet, laughing as he scattered the women and the dogs. He was wild, my Stefano. You could see it in his eye. There was no need for him to run after the girls. They ran after him.

Stefano was my friend. He wasn't a Pescolazzari boy. He came from over the mountains, half-way up the slopes of Etna. His father and mother were killed by a landslide. When he first came to Pescolazzari he was so hungry he robbed pigeon lofts for food, licked the bungs of the barrels of lemon peel on the harbourside. Then my uncle took pity on him, got him to help us bait our lines and help on the boat, unloading fish and nets.

But that wasn't good enough for Stefano. He didn't like the sea. He liked money, and girls and engines. He could nod to any girl and have her. You could put a hundred-lire piece in his hand and he'd spit on it and there'd be two. That's how he got on. He kept his money in a petrol tin. Even the girls he'd jilted burned a candle for his comings and goings. He was the most desired youth in Pescolazzari.

Once, when I was a little boy, I was taken to Palermo and we went to the cinema. There was a film about a big handsome fellow who mended cars and wore oily clothes and a big leather belt round him and a rich girl fell for him. Pappi had said things like that don't happen really. But since then I've seen it happen. It happened to Stefano, who was just like that fellow.

Sometimes we get tourists coming through Pescolazzari; they stop for petrol or repairs, and Stefano attends to them. I've seen pretty girls stare at him from these cars, really pretty girls with low necks and blue stuff on their eyelids, and Stefano stared boldly back at them, laughing, rolling a matchstick between his teeth, not caring a damn. But when they drove away, Stefano would suddenly become angry and difficult.

"What am I doing in a place like

this?" he would sometimes groan. "It's pock-marked with age, Ugolino. Some day, I'm clearing out." Or sometimes he'd come and chat with me on the harbourside in the evenings when I was mending nets and he'd say something like, "There was a French girl in the garage today. Oo-la-la eyes. Fine legs. Could have got both my hands round her waist. Bet she was rich. Bet it was her own car. Santa Maria, the girls here kill me stone dead. Why do I hang about here?" I'd look at the bobbin held between the bare toes of my good foot and wish even the Pescolazzari girls would look at me.

Sometimes old Ippolito, the rope-maker, would hear Stefano talking like this. Ippolito would laugh bitterly and say, "What do you wish for, young fellow? Women—they'll drain you dry one way or another. Money? —Soranzo had a million but it wouldn't buy him a new belly. Or is it life you want? Basta, you're Sicilian, aren't you? And Sicilians are never happy till they're dead."

Stefano was in this mood as we sat one evening drinking in the outer courtyard of the Nettuno. I can only afford cheap Perroni, but Stefano was drinking cognac. He had no nerve at all, but that evening he was badly shaken. There are two cypresses in the Campo Santo on the hillside behind the village, and in one of these he had seen a white bird sitting. This, of all things, is terrible and unlucky. To us it means the mating of youth, or sometimes innocence, with death.

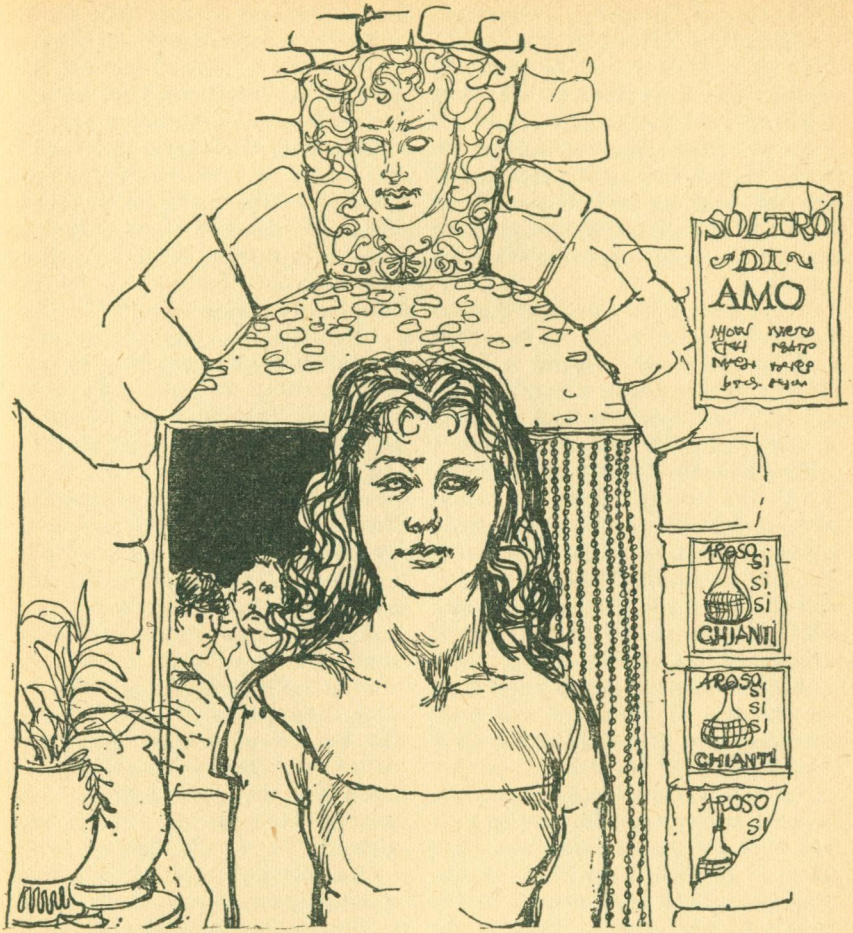
Stefano was wretched. "What can it mean, Ugolino?" he muttered. "What has it to do with *me*?" I tried to smooth him. "You travel about too much, Stefano, and so you see too much. Me, I have never left this little place, and my eyes are always on the sea. But you, always riding away, looking up into those terrible mountains where you were born. What do you find up there, among the prickly pear and the crucified thorns and the terrible shadows always lurking there?"

"Of course I'm always riding away! Who wouldn't, from Pescolazzari? Look, even the church is weeping at it." He pointed across the Corso to Sant' Agnello. A large piece of dried stucco had just fallen from its decayed front, and spatters of dust were eddying from it in the evening sun.

I said nothing. I didn't know what to say. I felt there might be better places than Pescolazzari. Its people were poor, its girls pale and crooked with sweating over their needlework, its streets were dirty and littered with blown paper and straw from the market-place, its buildings faded and crumbling.

While I was thinking this my eyes went to an old, blocked-in archway in the wall of the courtyard facing us. Only part of it was left and it had been mortared into position as part of the much newer wall. Its keystone always frightened me. It was the sculptured head of a woman with vipers curling from her head.

Signor Balboni, the village schoolmaster, had told us as children that this archway was very old. He said the Greeks had been here, then the men of Carthage, then the Romans,



and it had been an unholy place. I never knew what he meant.

But as I sat gazing without much purpose at this archway I suddenly saw a girl standing there. Or rather, first I saw a blood-red mouth, vivid in the sun. Then I noticed bare shoulders and a swirl of black hair, tight and glossy like water going over the edge of a rock; and long, silvery finger nails.

I was so astonished that I took some moments to put these all together into one form or person. Never had a girl like this appeared in Pescolazzari.

"Look, Stefano," I whispered, nudging him. "This girl. Oh, *look*!" He had his back to her and he swung round. I saw their glances meet. Then I looked back at the girl. She didn't smile at Stefano. She was walking towards us, drawing on her gloves, and she just went on looking steadily at Stefano. Then I heard him gasp, as though he had been holding his breath.

There were other youths and some men in the courtyard of the bar; they had all suddenly stopped talking. They were all looking at her. "Beautiful legs," muttered Stefano. "Naked shoulders, too. And what a mouth!"

She had on a white silk blouse, which fell half-way down her shoulders, and a stiff black skirt of some shiny material, which stood off from her like an inverted black flower. A gilt chain was belted round her waist. Her hair was so strange that it half frightened me. It was raven black and it started as an arrow point right on the top of her brow and went sweeping over her head and down her back like a hood or cowl.

All this I saw in a glance as she walked towards us. She never took her eyes off Stefano. She was quite close to us when I saw that her eyelids were green and silver and her eyes long and went upwards at the corners. I thought of the eye of the Mother Goddess on my boat. Sometimes that eye scared me, but this girl's eyes made me tremble. Her mouth was terrible in the sun; blood-red, haughty and cruel.

As she went past our table she looked straight down at Stefano. I heard his seat scrape back on the stone floor. I could now see that her gloves were of fine black net, and through this net I could see her long silvery finger nails gleaming.

Instead of walking on into the bar, she turned aside at the doorway and continued down the Corso, so that we lost sight of her. Stefano gulped his cognac. "I've been dreaming about a girl like that for years," he said thickly. "I'm going after her."

"But, Stefano, you've—she's—" I I couldn't think of anything to say. I was thinking of the girl's naked shoulders. The old women crouched in the doorways would spit at her.

Enrico called across to me from a nearby table. "Ever seen anything like *that*, eh? Enough to knock your eye out. But Stefano, he'll get her. He has all the luck." Camogli then butted in with, "Did you notice? White as marble. She must have walked on the shady side all her life."

"But she wasn't," I said. "She was pink, and peach-coloured." Matteo, the bus driver, a much older man, called out, "Don't be an ass, Ugolino. She got all that out of a bottle." I felt puzzled and annoyed. I didn't know girls like Matteo did, because he gets to Catania and Messina, and sometimes even Palermo.

They went on talking about the girl's mouth and her legs, but I didn't hear much of what they were saying. Now I'd got over the shock of seeing her, I began to think, "Where did she come from?" Suddenly she had appeared against that archway, and to the left of it was a blank wall, and to the right was the open Corso. And

she certainly hadn't come in from the Corso. As I took another drink of beer I noticed my hand was shaking.

Sometimes girls make me tremble like that and my mouth goes dry. Maybe it was this girl making me feel like that now, because part of me wanted to kick the table or beat my fists on it because I knew I couldn't have her. But another part of me was terrified.

I looked at the archway again, and now on the white stucco wall I thought I could see on either side of the arch a long frieze of scarlet mouths like roses or peonies. I closed my eyes. All I could see then was just *her* mouth, wet and blood-red and glistening, and I was Stefano, and her mouth was for me. But when I looked at the wall again the mouths were still there, and the frieze was crooked, and from the mouths long drips of blood fell down the dazzling stucco wall.

I gripped Matteo by the sleeve. "That thing up there, Matteo, that head. What is it?" Matteo shrugged. "Who knows, now? I've heard it called The Fury. Maybe it's Proserpine. I don't know." I finished off my beer quickly and went to look for Stefano.

All the women down the Via Greco had seen them go along. So had Ucelli, the pastrycook, and young Mizza, who works for the barber. The women were standing in groups discussing the girl and one of them called out to me, "Tell that Stefano to have a care. She's no good, that one." Julia Agnesco was there. Stefano had finished with her when she was twenty-five and began to get fat and shapeless. She called out viciously, "Worse than a harlot, she is. Stefano'll get it this time."

Ucelli was rubbing the back of his head and staring at nothing. "Stefano? Yes, yes. He's gone. After the girl. Madonnina mia. What legs, eh? And that blouse!" He ran his forefinger wavily across his chest and rolled his eyes. "Where the devil did *she* come from?"

At the last house beyond the harbour old Maria, the deaf and dumb widow of the barrel-maker, was sitting in her doorway. "Maria," I mouthed frantically, "have you seen Stefano?" She pointed up the headland, uttered a cry like a whipped dog and crossed herself.

I rushed on, past the goat sheds. Near the headland, under a flowering ceanothus, I could see the girl sitting, with her arms straight behind her taking her weight, and her blouse very low over her breasts. Stefano was looking down at her, one foot on a hummock and his elbow resting on his raised knee. He was ruddy and golden in the sun. Except for her mouth, she was all white and black. And suddenly I remembered the white bird in the cypress tree.

Almost blind with fear, I rushed back to my boat. Old Ippolito was near by and I told him what had happened. He shook his head and sighed. Then he said sharply, "Near the Nettuno arch? Describe the girl again. Properly, boy. Stop jabbering."

"Her—her mouth," I stammered. "It's red. Red as blood. And her eyes are pointed. And there's something terrible about her hair. It doesn't look

real. It's like a hood, a black hood of something not like hair, coming down to a point on her forehead. She is white like marble. No, no; Camogli said that. She's *soft* white like . . . like this." I seized a fish from the floor of my boat and stretched its underbelly between my thumbs. "She's got long silver nails. Matteo says she puts stuff on her face. She is beautiful—like a devil."

Ippolito stamped angrily. "Some day your precious Stefano will kill himself, hurl himself into Hades. His lust drives him on. And he will rush to his death. Embrace it, you hear? He has the death wish deep in his bones. I know these things. Old Ippolito tells you so." He stared at me, clawing his beard. "Unless you help him," he said suddenly.

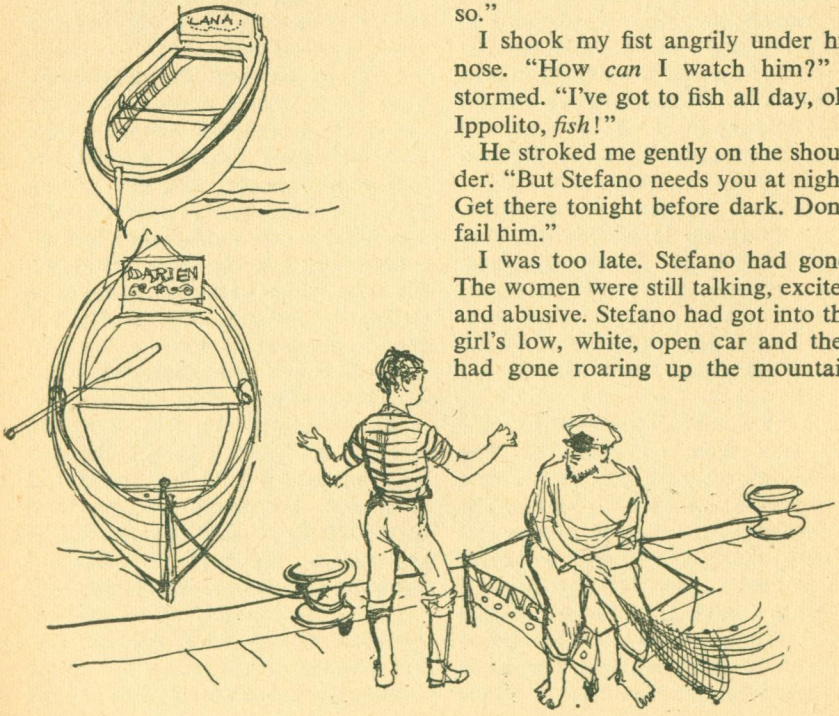
"But what can I do?" I shouted. I was mad with fear and jealousy. "Do you want me to get in between them? Stefano won't listen to me. And *she* wouldn't even look at me."

"Na, na, Ugolino. You're a good boy. You are patient. So watch him." He looked up nervously at the mountains. That's where we hate to look. There is nothing up there but shadows and devils. "You watch him, so."

I shook my fist angrily under his nose. "How *can* I watch him?" I stormed. "I've got to fish all day, old Ippolito, *fish*!"

He stroked me gently on the shoulder. "But Stefano needs you at night. Get there tonight before dark. Don't fail him."

I was too late. Stefano had gone. The women were still talking, excited and abusive. Stefano had got into the girl's low, white, open car and they had gone roaring up the mountain



road. I went to my uncle's house, dumb.

For two days, out at sea, I watched the mountain road. Pescolazzari lies gripped round by iron mountains. Low down they have lemon groves, mimosa and olive trees, but beyond the Campo Santo all thins out to devil's barley and poppies and prickly pear. Then higher up is a Campo Santo of ancient times, its tombs all open like black mouths cut in the rock, and higher still is Proserpine's Gateway, a deep cleft in the mountain. And above all, far away in the background, are the curling death plumes of Etna. I always turned my back on this scene. But now I looked and looked for a white car which never came down.

On the third day Stefano himself ran down to the harbour just as I was casting off. I refastened my bow cable and shouted joyously to him. Then as he came nearer I was shocked. He looked pale and ill. A lot of his high colour had gone, his hair was tangled and his lips swollen.

"Hi, Ugolino," he said, stepping aboard. "I haven't forgotten you. Like to come for a ride?"

I stared at him. "Me? How can I? What's the matter with you? Who with?"

He laughed. "Come on. Don't ask so many questions. Alecto has the car up in the Corso. Come and have a flash round. Just a few kilometres. Up to Malagrotta and back."

Maybe I'm stupid. Maybe my brother was the hated ass. But suddenly I said, "Right. Get up aloft and I'll follow you." I turned my back on him, reached for my gutting knife, belted it round me and covered it with my shirt.

On our way to the Corso I said, "Alecto? That her name? What's she like? What have you been doing? Papa Pellegrino's cross-eyed mad over you."

Stefano laughed in his carefree way. "He can hit himself with a spanner for all I care. I'm off." He blew out his lips as though kissing a wasp. "Boy, I've had a hell of a time. Come on. Tell you all about it later."

She was in the car, wearing dark glasses. All I could see at first was her mouth. It seemed fuller and redder than ever. Then as I came closer I saw she was wearing a fine, black net dress which came up to her throat, and round her throat she had wound a string of pearls, five times round. And under this black net I could see her white flesh, and her breasts almost bare, and her flesh seemed to shimmer like an oyster shell at the sea bottom when black strands of maidenhair seaweed drift over it.

She didn't even smile at me. She took her glasses off lazily, and again I saw her slanted eyes, which were yellow under their green and silver lids. Her silvered nails were so long that they curved over, almost like the claws of a big cat.

Stefano pushed me into the back seat, got into the driver's seat, and we roared off, people everywhere staring silently at us. The girl had a mauve silk scarf covering her hair, but I could see the ends of it, whipping in the wind like serpents and as black as night. She leaned back, lazily

smoking a cigarette, and her lips looked bloody and cruel. She kept darting sidelong glances at Stefano. Though his face was puffy he looked thinner. He talked in an edgy, excited way, and he drove like a madman.

"Hey, Stefano," I shouted suddenly, "you're taking us up to the catacombs. I'm not going past them."

Alecto laughed with a sort of sneer. Stefano half turned to me. "Why not? Alecto and I are coming up here tonight. It's full moon. *She* doesn't mind seeing them, even by moonlight."

I punched him on the shoulder blade. "Stop," I yelled, and my voice meant it. He stopped just under a grey, old olive tree. I got out, clenched my teeth and went round to her side of the car. I had the gutting knife in my hand. "Get out," I said to the girl.

Branches cast crooked shadows on her face. As she tore off her dark glasses I saw her eyes suddenly flame. Her lips curved back and I saw sharp white teeth. Suddenly I felt as though I had cornered a wild beast, and in terror the knife fell from my hand.

Stefano leapt out of the car. "What the devil, Ugolino?" he shouted. "What's the game?" He came at me furiously.

I fended him off. "Listen," I shouted back, but at the girl. "Let him go, let him go. Let him walk back—and when we see him wave down there, you can have me. You can do what you like with me." I bent down, picked up the knife and handed it to her, haft first. "I'm ready. You see?" I stripped open my shirt front and touched my breast. Stefano's jaw dropped.

Alecto put her glasses down. "Come here," she said. I came nearer to her. Suddenly her hand flashed out and her long, sharp nails tore down my cheek. "You theatrical oaf," she snarled. "Get in, Stefano. Leave this fish-stuffed booby to rot."

Stefano looked at me, then at the girl, then miserably shrugged his shoulders. He no longer looked like my Stefano of three days ago. He was under a spell. He climbed back into the car. "Tomorrow, Ugolino," he muttered. Then the car went off like a thunderbolt up the mountain road.

There was no tomorrow for Stefano. Matteo, going up in the early morning bus, first saw the white car all splintered up near the catacombs. The windscreen was shattered but there was no trace of blood. Stefano's body was found close by. It was horribly mutilated and his throat was torn. We were told, though the doctor and the priest tried to hush it up, that he bled to death.

Alecto? Nobody ever saw her again. Some say this was because old Maria and Ippolito poured honey and water into the earth before the blocked-in archway of the Nettuno. I don't know why. Out at sea I turn my back on the catacombs and Proserpine's Gateway and sigh to myself, "Catch your little fishes, Ugolino. You will never taste her blood-red mouth."

TEA-TIME

LESLIE VARDRE

Illustrated by Martin Henley

MELDRUM WOKE with a start, his mouth dry, eyes heavy and smarting. It was a few minutes before he could bring himself to realize that he was in his usual seat in the corner, with the slow-ticking clock on the wall above his head and the heavy-framed pictures of past presidents lining the quiet dignity of fumed oak panels.

He sat quietly, taking in the room without moving his head. It was familiar, so very familiar; and yet in some way strange.

Wilson, silver-white hair as immaculate as ever, his eyes gently humorous, watched him.

"You've been asleep," he offered, smiling.

"Yes," Meldrum said, faintly puzzled. "That's not like me. I mean, falling asleep in the middle of the afternoon."

He turned to look through the window. Outside it was foggy. No—he corrected his thoughts—still foggy. That grey-yellow heaviness had been there earlier, before he had dozed off. He coudn't quite recall having seen it before, but he knew. He must have slept soundly for his mind to have become so cotton-wool heavy.

"It is the afternoon?" he wondered. "It seems different—almost as though I'd been to sleep for a long time."

Wilson folded his hands with an air of infinite patience.

"It's the afternoon," he said. "You've only been asleep for an hour or so."

By his side Bradborn glanced up from his book. "They'll soon be bringing tea in," he said, and returned to his reading.

Meldrum shifted uneasily. "I dreamed," he said, then frowned, rubbing his forehead, taking his hand away and regarding it intently as though seeing it for the first time.

"And what did you dream?" Wilson wanted to know, with the air of one prepared to pass the time in idle conversation.

"I don't know," he replied. "It's gone; but it was so vivid, and somehow, very important . . . you know?" He was anxious that the other should understand. "There was something I ought to remember . . ." It was like a cloth had been swept across a blackboard, leaving faint traces of what had been written there.

He rose stiffly from the leather depths and went over to the mirror above the dark, heavy sideboard, his feet soundless on the thick richness of the carpet. His face stared back at him.

"My eyes—?" he wondered half aloud. "This my hair? . . . my nose?"

They were as they had always been.

Thick, red-brown hair, thin, straight nose, slanting grey eyes. The face of a very ordinary man. He caught a glimpse of Wilson's faintly-smiling face reflected over his shoulder. He turned, embarrassed.

"In my dream I was different," he explained haltingly. "I looked the same, felt the same, but who or where . . ." He passed his hand again across his forehead. "There's something I ought to remember," he brooded. "Something that seems very important . . ."

Bradborn laid aside his book, yawning and stretching, and turning to stare through the window. "Damned fog," he said bleakly.

He was still young, about thirty, Meldrum guessed. Good-looking in a rakish sort of way. Like everything else in the room he was both familiar and strange at the same time.

He tried to shake the feeling off. He'd never felt like this before. It was as if an arc light had suddenly swung on the room and its contents, pin-pointing the high-lights, brilliantly lighting up each nook and cranny, deep-etching the furrows on the older man's face, lining Bradborn's dark, crisp waves.

"It must have been quite a dream," Wilson said, watching him intently. "I know just how you must feel. That's the worst of dozing off in the middle of the day. Especially when you're not used to it."

"Yes," Meldrum agreed. "Yes, that's how it must be." He returned to his chair, feeling its texture with careful fingers. Bradborn laughed out loud, sharply and suddenly—a quick spurt of mockery. "You're not with us, old man," he said breezily.

Resenting the familiarity, Meldrum sat down again, frowning a little, then suddenly coming bolt upright.

"I was reading a paper," he cried. "That was my dream. But what was so important about that . . . ?" He left the question in mid-air. The older man took it, his smile gone.

"A newspaper," he said, looking at Bradborn. "Now that's a new one."

Meldrum closed his eyes, concentrating, ignoring the others.

"There were the headlines," he said slowly. "I remember those—something about trouble in Africa . . . Then I turned the paper over. There was something on the back page . . ." He snapped his fingers in triumph. "I remember now; it was the 'Missing Persons' column . . . I was reading that, and then I woke up . . ."

"No," he corrected himself thoughtfully. "That must have been when I fell asleep."

Wilson's features relaxed. "And what's so important about the 'Missing Persons' column?" he asked in the tone of one humouring a child.

"I had a theory," Meldrum explained. "That must be why the dream seems so important. I mean I must have been worrying about it when I dozed off." He looked round. "Are the papers still here?"

"A theory?" Wilson wondered, and caught Bradborn's eye over the top of his book.

"That's it," Meldrum continued happily, openly pleased that he had solved his mystery. "It couldn't have been the dream I was trying to recall.

It's what I'd just been reading before I dropped off. It must have stuck in my mind."

"You said you had a theory," Wilson reminded. "About missing persons."

"That's right," Meldrum agreed. "Haven't I mentioned it before?" For a moment the frown returned. Then, "Perhaps not. Well . . ."

He relaxed deep in his chair, his hands resting on his knees.

"I was reading this paper, he said, "and instead of putting it aside after I'd read the news, such as it was, I started on the smaller stuff—you know, the small paragraphs that one usually overlooks."

"It was the weather," he said apologetically. "It wasn't fit to go out and there was nothing else to do. So I read the damned paper from start to finish; adverts, the agony column, the lot. I think it was the first time I'd ever read that pathetic little section that deals with missing persons. Mind you, I'd sort of given it a glance in passing, but never to study it closely—The clothes they were wearing, their ages, descriptions.

"There were ten of them: five men, five women. Their ages ranged from twenty to sixty. They seemed to have come from every walk of life. I remember thinking that it was a small section of humanity as a whole. Ten living, breathing people, very ordinary people that one passes every day in the street. They just walk out of their homes, and are swallowed up . . ."

He closed his eyes again. "But this wasn't today, of course. I mean, when I first read about them. This must have been some time ago. I've thought a lot about it since, on and off. But why has it all come back now . . . ?"

A piece of burning coal clattered into the hearth. Bradborn, nearest, laid aside his book again, and busied himself with a small shovel. His hands were shaking a little and the muscles at the corner of his jaw shivering under the skin.

"It must have been quite some time ago, Meldrum considered. "I read that column fairly regularly after that. I even took other papers and compiled a list. I've always been interested in odds and ends of information . . . " He glanced up quickly. "Odds and ends. Men and women. Perhaps I shouldn't talk of them like that. There were hundreds of them, from all over the country. All vanished into thin air."

He fell silent, and Wilson stirred. "Interesting," he said softly. He met Bradborn's eye, shaking his head when the other seemed about to speak.

"I got to wondering first, whether many of them were ever found. I even went to the trouble of contacting one of the editors concerned."

"And—?" Wilson prompted.

"It appeared he was only concerned about printing the information he received. What happened as a result of the publicity held no interest unless there was a story involved. He was singularly disinterested. And later, when I had a word with the local police constable, his manner told me that he considered me a crank. But he did admit that so far as

he knew the files on missing persons were voluminous, to say the least.

" 'Where do they go?' I asked him. 'Who knows?' he said. 'South America?—the Pacific Islands?—anywhere where they can find sunshine and quiet.'

"He was pleased to be facetious; I think he was telling me to mind my own business. There was no doubt he considered me to be an interfering busybody.

"That was his theory: escapism. But I knew that couldn't be so. Money is required if one is to travel. These people invariably disappeared just as they were, without any previous preparation. They had no luggage, no money. Only the ordinary workaday clothes in which they had left home. It was as if a giant hand had reached down and whisked them away to another world."

He fell silent, and Wilson coughed. "And that's your theory?" he commented, smiling a little.

Meldrum pressed his palms to his eyes.

"I forget," he said. "I know I puzzled it out and just when it seemed I had the answer, it went. That's when I must have fallen asleep. That must be what I have been trying to remember . . ."

He took his hands away. "Stupid of me. But it's so damned annoying when it's on the tip of your tongue . . ."

"It'll come back," Wilson comforted gravely. "Don't worry."

Bradborn looked at the clock, then up at the ceiling. "I'm getting hungry," he complained. "They're late with the tea today."

"I wish I could remember," Meldrum mourned. "It makes you feel such a fool. I must be getting old."

"Don't worry," Wilson said again. "We all have fits of mental aberration."

"We're none of us perfect," Bradborn put in. "As specimens go, we're rather poor specimens."

A silence fell on the room. Wilson looked sharply and disapprovingly at the younger man. The fire crackled, the clock ticked steadily. The fog beat soundlessly against the window. There was no sound of traffic.

"Specimens," Meldrum said softly. "Specimens." He toyed with the word. "I seem to remember something about—"

"When I was a child," Bradborn said quickly. "I collected stamps and grubs and postcards. And butterflies; all pinned out as neat as you please on lovely white sheets of cartridge paper."

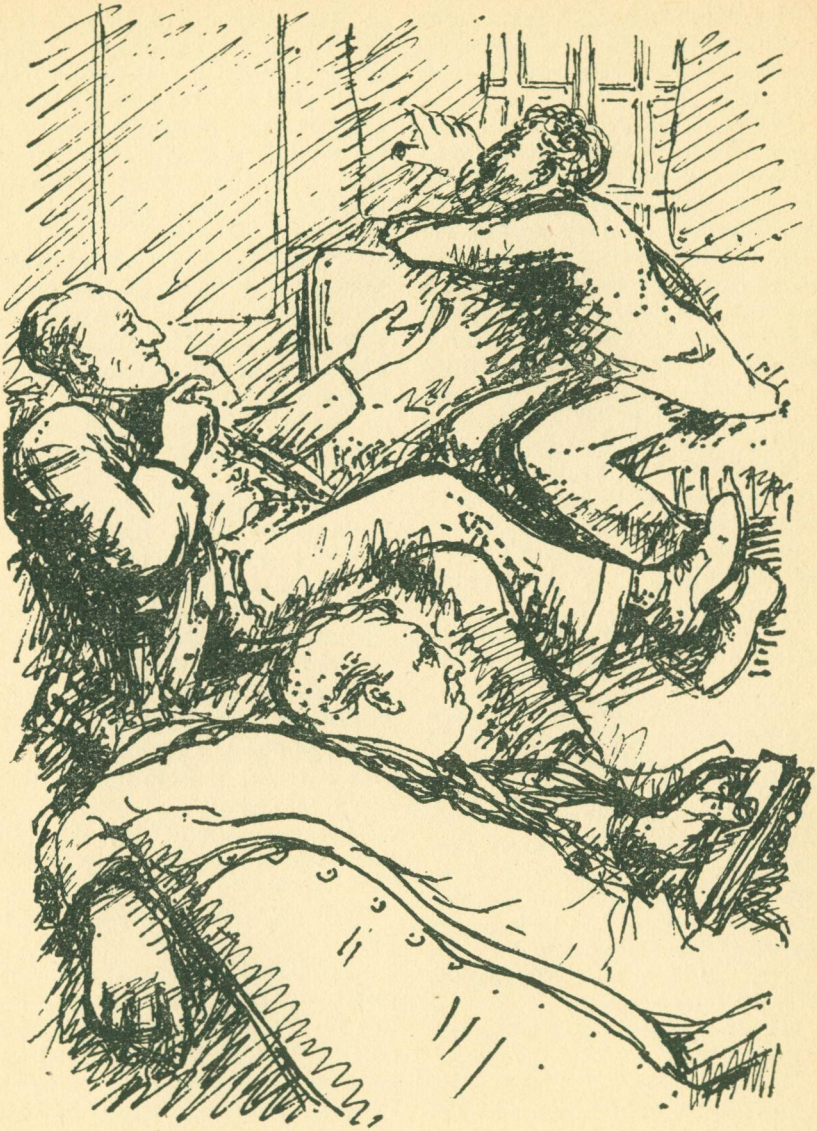
He smiled. "I had one of the finest collections in the school. Red Admirals, Blue Chalks, the lot . . ." He sighed riminiscently.

"All pinned out on sheets," Meldrum echoed.

"Most of them," the other agreed. "Some I kept alive. In jam-jar prisons. Fluttering their lives away, battering futile wings against the glass walls."

"Jam-jar prisons," Meldrum said. "Rows of glass cylinders set out on a window-sill. I used to collect them, too."

"Everyone, at some time in their life has collected something," Wilson



said comfortably. "It's one of the frailties of mankind. I've spent hours going round antique shops, Jade, you know."

"There are collectors and collectors," Bradborn said. "Your expert takes care of his specimens, caging them properly, feeding them and studying them in their natural environments. All very carefully reproduced . . . Then maybe he writes a treatise about them, finishing up with a string of letters after his name. I wonder just what is being written about——?"

"It's getting late," Wilson broke in sharply. "Time tea was coming."

"It's funny how we got round to talking about collecting and specimens," Meldrum brooded. "I have a feeling that in some way it's linked with my theory . . ." He frowned deeply.

"I do wish I could remember," he added peevishly. "It's so damned frustrating . . ."

"Your missing persons?" Bradborn said with artificial levity. "No doubt they've been whipped away and caged for investigation. Kept nice and clean and healthy—fed at regular intervals with suitable food. And every now and then carefully removed to some white-walled laboratory to be dissected and probed, and their secrets laid bare." His voice cracked.

"No," Wilson warned sharply. "Not yet. Give him time."

"Time?" Meldrum wondered. "Time for what?"

"Time for tea," Bradborn said evenly. "When will they bring it? I'm starving."

"There's something wrong," Meldrum said, looking closely at their faces. "I've felt it ever since I woke up. It's just as if I've known you two, and this room, all my life. And yet at the same time it all seems foreign. What is it? What's wrong?" His voice trembled, his hands grasped tightly the arms of his chair.

"The fog's getting thicker, I think," Wilson said from by the window.

Bradborn laughed sharply, his voice rising again. "Getting thicker? That's a good one—it never changes. Day after day . . ."

"Quiet!" Wilson ordered without turning. "Get a grip on yourself, man!"

"There is something wrong," Meldrum stated flatly, fighting down panic. "You've got to tell me."

"There's nothing wrong," Wilson said over his shoulder. His hair glistened into a halo with the light reflected from the window.

"Nothing at all," Bradborn said hysterically. "They'll feed you, and keep you nice and healthy, and what does it matter if from time to time they come and—"

"Take no notice of him," the older man said almost savagely. "He's over-wrought."

"Tell me," Meldrum asked Bradborn.

"You'll find out for yourself. Very soon now." Bradborn stood stiffly beside his chair, obviously fighting for control. "You'll find out what happens to those names in the 'Missing Persons' column. You'll find out where they go to . . ." He laughed,

coldly, fearfully, his eyes dull and glazed. "A giant hand you said? God, man! How little you know how near you came to the truth."

"No!"—as Wilson turned, holding up his hand. "I had to find out for myself; let's help this poor devil to find the truth before they—"

"Missing persons?" Meldrum echoed, panic hardening into a tight chest-wracking knot. "They—? Who are 'They'?"

"That's what we are—missing persons. Wilson and me, and now you. They brought you in this morning. All of us in this room. If you can call it a room . . ." His voice rose almost to a scream. Wilson stood silently watching, his face inscrutable.

There was a sudden stir outside; movements all around. The fog swirled heavily against the window, as if set in motion by a giant wind.

" At last," Wilson said evenly. "They're bringing the tea."

Meldrum turned to look at the closed door.

"Not that way," Bradborn told him, his voice now little above a whisper. "Not that way, you fool. That doesn't lead anywhere; it doesn't open—it isn't even a door . . . Not that way, the ceiling . . . they lift the ceiling off to feed us . . ."

Though this may be play to you, 'tis death to us.

ROGER L'ESTRANGE.

Is it a party in a parlour?
Cramm'd just as they on earth were cramm'd—
Some sipping punch, some sipping tea,
But, as you by their faces see,
All silent and all damned!

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH.

Our torments also may in length of time
Become our elements.

JOHN MILTON.

THE SLAVE DETECTIVE

THE CASE OF THE BURNT VILLA

WALLACE NICHOLS

Illustrated by Juliette Palmer

THE CITY PREFECT sent for the Slave Detective.

"I want your help, Sollius," he said

"What is it, O Gratianus?"

"Do you know the village of Quattuor Fontes—a nest of peace in the country off the main highway north-east out of Rome?"

"I know it—a place of rich men's villas."

"One of those villas was set on fire two nights ago."

"Deliberately?"

"So swears its owner, the noble Publius Catulus. As he is an important man—indeed of a consular family—I am committed to a very close investigation and I admit that I have discovered nothing. It was Catulus himself who suggested, or, rather commanded, your employment. Do your best in this for me."

"Have you no suspect?"

"One I had: a slave named Lusus. He had a grievance. He had expected manumission in his late master's will, but the elder Catulus had not given it to him. Lusus has talked in his cups of revenge against the family. The younger Catulus was unsympathetic: a slave was a slave and Lusus not a favourite with the new master."

"You arrested him?"

"He proved that he was elsewhere and could not have applied the torch. I have no other suspect at all."

"And you are satisfied that it was no accident? Slaves can be careless—*and* their masters!"

"The means of the fire were too crudely laid," replied Gratianus. "A jar of oil and some lamps had been too carefully placed with some rags not to be noticeable. It was planned—and executed."

"Was the villa destroyed completely?"

"A great part of it was saved by the efforts of a neighbouring villa's owner, a certain Marcus Papinius, who was reading late in his library and happened luckily to see the blaze. He gathered his slaves and rushed over. His efforts were really heroic and if the main part of the villa is saved Catulus owes it entirely to Papinius. It was a true neighbourly act, for though the two men are acquaintances they are not in any way intimate. If it were not for Papinius, Catulus would now be homeless."

"Is the villa of Papinius the nearest?"

"By no means; it is some distance away, but fortunately within sight."

"Who lives in the nearest villa?"

"A wealthy ex-proconsul named

Gaius Spiculus. He, too, rendered some help with his slaves, but he was much later on the scene than Papinius. He had been asleep—and Papinius awake."

"And you still believe it was no accident?"

"May Jupiter's thunderbolt blast me if it was!"

"Then I am satisfied, too!" laughed Sollius. "Shall we go out to Quattuor Fontes?"

A two-horsed official chariot conveyed them there with speed. They found Papinius visiting the distressed Catulus. The reek of the burning still lay over the well-laid gardens and the terraced olive-orchard.

"As you wished, O Catulus," said the Prefect, "I have brought the Slave Detective to nose around."

"I shall be grateful for his help," replied Catulus, then shrugged his shoulders in seeming despair.

"I have been thinking," put in Papinius. "I should begin to look, O Prefect, for some fierce and discharged legionary, turned robber to sustain himself, hoping, in the confusion of the fire, to steal what he would. I have seen one such in the neighbourhood myself."

"If so, my good friend, you—and only you—foiled him," murmured Catulus gratefully.

"If I meet with him again I will see that you have him, O Prefect," promised Papinius.

Sollius proceeded to inspect what had been considered as the source of the fire and agreed that it was a true case of arson.

"I still suspect my slave Lusus," stated Catulus bluntly.

"He was not here at the time, O Catulus, and I know where he was," replied Gratianus. "You can erase him from the wax of your suspicion. The case is not as simple, lord, as that, or we should not need the Slave Detective."

"True," sighed Catulus, "and I leave it in his hands."

He turned away to greet a newcomer, arrived to offer any neighbourly assistance in his power.

"Gaius Spiculus," whispered Gratianus behind a hand.

They turned away towards the ruins, and Papinius turned away with them. Sollius eyed him swiftly, and then Spiculus, whom Papinius had passed by without greeting. Spiculus was a handsome man in middle age.

"Which," asked Sollius, "is your villa, O Papinius?"

Papinius pointed to one at some little distance, nestling under the broken shadow of a disused aqueduct, now merely a creepered and picturesque object of landscape.

"It was only that I happened to look up from the roll of Lucian which I was reading—a favourite author of mine—and saw the flickering of the fire."

"You acted with great decision, lord," said Gratianus.

"I am happy to think so," replied Papinius.

Seeing Catulus's bailiff standing near, Sollius went over to him.

"How were you aroused by the fire?" he asked.

"I was waked by one o' the slaves and heard the fire already roaring high, then the lord Papinius came. I know no more of its beginning than I do o' the Mysteries o' the Goddess Isis."

"Do you suspect the slave Lusus?"

"Not clever enough," replied the bailiff, shaking his head decisively.

Feeling that the man really knew nothing relevant, Sollius was turning away when his curiosity prompted a question which he took for idle in the present investigation: but anything unexplained always unendurably teased his mind.

"Is there bad blood between the lord Papinius and the lord Spiculus?"

The bailiff stared, then winked.

"You are not miscalled the Slave Detective, I can see," he said. "It is true there is bad blood between them. The lord Papinius has a young and handsome second wife and the lord Spiculus is too aware of it. It is the chief local gossip, Slave Detective."

Sollius nodded and rejoined Gratianus who was still talking with Papinius.

"Do you wish to see more or to question anyone?" asked the Prefect.

"What time in the night did you notice the fire?" Sollius asked Papinius.

"About the third hour after midnight, I suppose. I cannot be exact."

"Are you usually a bad sleeper, lord?"

"I am indeed not a good sleeper."

"For once luckily, lord!"

"I rejoice!" replied Papinius, raised his brows to invite further questions, received none, saluted Gratianus and returned to his own villa.

"I am told," said Sollius, "that he has a young and handsome new wife —and he sits late, reading!"

"The thongs of even the red imperial sandals can come undone," drily returned the City Prefect, "then why not his? But are we investigating morals?"

"By the goddess Lucina's favour, happily not!" laughed Sollius.

"Well?" asked Gratianus a little more crisply. "What have you seen or heard of any use? I can see nothing more than I saw yesterday— and that was nothing to the point."

"I feel," replied Sollius carefully, "that this is a case with a background different to the visible one. It is one not to be built up sculptured stone by sculptured stone like a triumphal arch in the Forum, but by imaginative insight. At the moment all is mist: give me time, both to think—and to imagine. There is nothing more I wish to see here."

"I am for facts," said Gratianus. "Yet your imagination, my friend, like a poet's, can create truths just as real. May Apollo inspire you here!" he laughed, and clapped the Slave Detective on the shoulder. "I await the result confidently."

"Without clues?" wryly returned Sollius. "You ask much! And yet the absence of tangible clues may be itself a clue," he murmured to himself.

Dusk was falling; it was time they returned to Rome.

"I shall leave a guard," said Gratianus, "though to no purpose, I daresay. All that was to happen has happened."

They climbed into the chariot and drove off.

"Come to me again in the morning," commanded the City Prefect, and so, after a restless night of thought and imagination, Sollius once more presented himself at the headquarters of the Urban Cohorts. Gratianus received him with a sardonic quirk of the lips.

"We are driving out again to Quattuor Fontes at once," he announced, and led the way to the same two-horsed chairot which they had used the previous day, Sollius lamely hurrying after him and breathlessly asking for information.

"Has another villa been burnt down?"

"A man has been killed," replied Gratianus as he gathered up the reins. "I know little more than that. One of the guards I left came in with the news. We shall learn the facts together."

He drove rapidly, keeping silence. Both men were busied with their own thoughts, and Sollius for his part was content to have his first impressions of the apparently new situation unimpaired by previous discussion. He was surprised to be driven, however, not to the villa of Catulus but to that of Papinius.

"Who has killed Papinius?" he cried, completely disconcerted.

"Nobody," rasped the pre-occupied

Prefect. "Papinius himself has killed someone," and as he drew up Papinius came out to them.

"I have solved your mystery for you," he said, "though I nearly lost my life in doing it."

"Let me have your deposition," answered Gratianus coldly. "You should not have taken the law upon yourself."

"How much do you know, O Prefect?"

"As yet—nothing," was the grim answer. "A man has been killed—by you. That is all I know."

"Come into my orchard," said Papinius, and he led them round the side of his villa into his garden and through a white gate into an orchard beyond. Between a pair of apple trees lay a huddled figure. A soldier of the Urban Cohorts was standing on guard beside it.

"Tell me the facts," ordered Gratianus.

"I was again reading late in my library—Cicero upon the gods, but you will not wish to know that—when, what with the heat of the night and the depth of my cogitations, I felt the need for air and space. I went out into the garden and suddenly saw in the light of the moon a man skulking among my orchard trees. I pretended not to have seen him, but returned, as though meditating, indoors, to arm myself with my sword. Then again I went out and this time challenged his presence, at which he came at me. He, too, had a sword, a legionary's stabbing-sword. By the gods, it went hard with me to protect myself! In the end he tripped over a root and I ran him through."

"He attacked you first?" asked Sollius.

"When I challenged him. I told you, O Prefect, that there might be a disbanded legionary who might set fire to a villa in the hope of gain in the confusion. I have no doubt he was lurking in this orchard before setting fire to my own villa, but I forestalled him and killed him in self-defence when he showed fight."

The Prefect and Sollius went up to the sprawling figure and examined it closely. It was probably, as Papinius had suggested, that of a disbanded legionary; it still wore some of the usual leather military equipment. Sollius knelt down, half-turned the body over and disclosed attached to a belt, a money-bag, filled with more coins than a vagabond might be expected to carry. Sollius and the Prefect glanced at one another. The Prefect poured out the money into his hand and counted it.

"He had no need to go thieving," he muttered.

"Greed begets greed," said Papinius. "That is probably Catulus's money."

"It is a pity," murmured Sollius, "that you killed him, lord, and that he is beyond question."

"I assure you," asserted Papinius, "that I had to fight for my life. You can see where the ground is beaten by our feet."

"I do not doubt, lord," replied Sollius with a smile, "that you fought with him and killed him."

"The body can be removed," snapped the Prefect. "Since he attacked you, lord, you had the right to defend yourself. Yet I wish you had a witness to his attack."

"Ah, but I have," promptly replied Papinius. "Come hither, Spendius!" he called. "Tell His Excellency the City Prefect what you saw."

An elderly slave shambled forward and quaveringly spoke:

"Since the fire at the lord Catulus's villa our master ha' made us keep an hour's night-watch in turn. During my own watch I saw him go out to the garden and then to the orchard. A man seemed to rise from the ground and talk to him vehemently; suddenly the man drew a sword and attacked my master. By the time I could reach them, my master had already killed him."

"Did you," asked Sollius, "see your master go out twice, returning once into the house?"

The slave shook his head.

"My version is only fuller," interrupted Papinius. "He at least witnesses that I was attacked."

"That, lord," humbly intimated Sollius, "I do not doubt. The mystery," he added, turning to Gratianus, "lies in the money."

"Stolen!" affirmed Papinius. "How else should such a man hold such a sum?"

"He may have earned it," suggested Sollius mildly.

"He was not asking for work from *me*!" grunted Papinius.

"Have you seen the dead man before—lurking in the fields hereabout, for instance?" Sollius asked, turning again to the old slave who again shook his head. Then once more Sollius addressed Papinius. "You suppose that he was in your orchard to enter your villa and rob you?"

"I have no doubt of it," Papinius answered.

"At least you have saved your villa from burning," smiled the Prefect.

"And others hereabout," returned Papinius, "did you only believe me."

"There is no evidence of that," grumbled Gratianus over his shoulder as he turned away, beckoning Sollius to follow. "What do you make of it?" he asked as soon as they were out of earshot.

The Slave Detective's answer halted the other's strides.

"How well, O Prefect, do you stand in the Emperor's favour? Well enough to risk a public blunder?"

"What is in your cunning thoughts?"

"Will you make a blind arrest?"

"And you?" snorted the Prefect. "You have no official position to lose."

"Leave me to invent a tale: if it misses the target, ill; if it hits, well!"

Gratianus frowned and hesitated, but so great was his trust in the Slave Detective's powers that at last he nodded.

"Whom do I arrest?" he asked.

At that moment Catulus and Spiculus were seen approaching in an excited manner. Sollius and the Prefect walked a few paces to meet them.

"What is happening in our quiet retreat?" cried Catulus. "First, my villa is set on fire and now I hear that my friend Papinius has had his life attempted. Was it the same villain? You, Slave Detective: do you know?"

"Make the arrest—now!" whispered Sollius.

"But whom?" demanded the Prefect. "Spiculus—or Catulus himself?"

"Papinius," replied Sollius.

"Papinius!" gasped the Prefect. "But he *saved* the villa. . . ."

"Papinius," repeated Sollius. "Look how unwillingly—even scowlingly—he greets Spiculus. Don't you understand?"

"By the gods, nothing!" muttered Gratianus, but closed in upon Papinius, nevertheless, beckoning one of his men to follow. "Marcus Papinius," he said formally, "in the Emperor's name . . ."

"What is this?" cried Papinius, swinging round in sudden perturbation.

"You are under arrest, lord," said the Prefect.

"For the murder of an unknown vagabond," put in Sollius.

"But he attacked me—it was in self-defence—I have a witness to it!"

"You made a fatal error, lord," Sollius went on calmly. "You should have taken back the money."

"Taken back the money? I do not understand this," stormed Papinius.

"The Slave Detective," said Gratianus, with a slightly malicious glance at his friend, "will proceed to explain."

"By the gods, let us hear his explanation!" laughed Papinius. "I al-

ways took him for a clever man. Is he losing his wits?"

"It is true, so I think, that you were attacked by the dead man—"

"Ha, I thank you for that!"

"But," imperturbably continued Sollius, "he had a reason. Shall I tell you what it was, O Papinius?"

"I should be amused to hear!"

"It was because you refused to double the money that was found on him."

"Are you mad?"

"What, by Castor and Pollux, is this?" cried Catulus in a bewildered voice.

"It is not a long story," answered the Slave Detective. "It was the wrong villa which was set alight by the man the lord Papinius has killed and whom he bribed to burn down the villa of the lord Spiculus—who will probably understand why without my telling him. Hence the great and remorseful efforts of the lord Papinius to save the villa wrongly ignited. When the man—certainly, I think, a disbanded legionary in straits for his livelihood—came to collect the balance of the bribe he found an angry man ready to kill. Perhaps, O Papinius, you always meant to kill him when he came for his final payment. He may have attacked you first when he learnt you were withholding the rest of his hire. I grant it. But the murderous intention was in you. His face, Prefect, is the last clue. Come, murder or arson, what remains is but the process of the law."

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

ROGER L'ESTRANGE

THE HAPPIEST DAYS...

G. K. THOMAS

HEY CALL THEM THE happiest days of our lives; if Joe Laskin had ever heard the expression he would have disagreed.

Frail and thin, narrow-faced and with close-set watery eyes, he looked over the rim of his tankard and winked at Charlie behind the bar. By his side, Mr. Jessop, tall, white-haired and dignified, as befitting his position as a local savant, lifted his glass with one finger delicately crooked.

The sun shone outside, but it was weak and without strength. The bar of the "Rose and Crown" was warm and comfortable.

"Any fresh notions about they flyin' saucers, Mr. Jessop?" Joe wanted to know, and winked again. Not that he really thought of the dark-faced Charlie as a friend, but he was the only other inmate of the little room.

He'd known him for as long as he could remember. An unpleasant type, Charlie Bispham; a bully at school—that was something that Joe would never forget—overbearing in his job as landlord of the village pub.

Jessop took his parrot's beak of a nose out of his glass and, ignoring the proffered bait, dabbed genteely at his brown-tinged moustache with a silk handkerchief.

"Poor," he mourned. "Very poor. And the price of it, too. Disgusting—used to be fourpence a pint; and it was beer in those days."

Charlie glowered from under bushy eyebrows. "My beer's as good as any you'll find," he grumbled, ready for an argument. "You're goin' back a bit when you talk about fourpence a pint. Them days'll never come back."

"That's what you think," Jessop said mildly, and set his glass down with a flourish.

"This beer ain't so bad," Joe pointed out, reluctantly siding with Charlie. "And it'll never come down in price."

"I know it won't; never said it would. You young fellows don't listen properly."

"I'm listenin' now," Joe told him, and rested his elbows on the counter.

"What I tried to say was that it isn't impossible to go back to the fourpence-a-pint-days."

"Yeah." Joe grinned. "That's what I thought you said." He glanced at the clock; half an hour to closing time. Just long enough to get old Jessop into a right good argument. Get him going on one of his hobby-horses and there'd be no telling what he'd come out with.

"Time-travel," Jessop said heavily and significantly. "That's the answer."

Joe snickered, and Charlie, busy with a stained mopping-up rag, rumbled deep in his throat.

"It's easier than you think to travel in time," Jessop added, his voice far

away. "But not forward, mind—only backwards. But that's something for you to think about."

"Where's your machine?" Joe wanted to know. "In the garden shed?"

Jessop ignored the flippancy. "It's in here," he explained, tapping his forehead. He pointed to Joe's head. "It's in there, too; we all time-travel a little each time we recall happenings of the past."

"It's easier of course," he added thoughtfully, "if there's an intensity of emotion involved in the memory. Love, perhaps, or hatred. Fear, too, that's the strongest of all."

Joe laughed, and Charlie leaned on his beer-pumps, pulling at the corner of his loose mouth with a grimy thumb and finger.

Jessop rang his empty glass with his thumb-nail. "I can prove it," he offered mildly, looking at Joe. "Prove it any time you like."

Charlie said, "Anyone could put anythin' over old Joe. I should take 'im up on that; good fer a laugh anyway."

"Well what about it then?" Jessop persisted. "Here and now?"

Joe wriggled his embarrassment, and Charlie grinned at him with blackened teeth. "I've got a quid 'ere that says he can't do it."

"Now that's an inducement," Jessop wheedled. "Ready, Joe?"

"Damned nonsense," Joe said, frightened and fierce at the same time.

"Go on, be a sport." Charlie leaned across the counter, his face close to Joe. He nodded to Jessop. "Go ahead. Joe'll do as he's told."

Jessop laid his hands on the narrow shoulders, turning Joe so that the two were face to face. "Lived in the village all your life?" he asked, his voice monotonous and soothing.

Joe nodded, trying to avoid the compelling eyes.

"You went to school in the village?"

"Just across the road from 'ere," Joe replied sullenly. School, he thought, that's an 'ell of a time to pick.

"Good." The treacly voice was very soothing. "There's nothing like school-days for leaving lasting impressions. Now I want you to concentrate. You're a small boy again, back at school. Try and pick on one memory; think—there's bound to be one . . ."

Joe licked his lips nervously; uncanny the way the old buffer had brought up his school-days, almost as if he knew. And the memories were there right enough, although he always did his best to forget. And that wasn't easy with Charlie's ugly big mug leering over the counter of the "Rose and Crown" every day. Pity it was the only pub in the place.

What had Jessop said? "Fear, the strongest of all . . ." That was true enough, and that was the memory . . . fear.

The long, hot days of summer; the stuffy classroom with all the windows tight closed because they'd been painted over and nobody could open them now. There was the day when he'd had the trouble with the map.

He'd just been telling Little Ted about the dream he'd had the night

before, and while they were talking Charlie came in. He was the biggest kid in the school, spotty face, brown corduroys and a bully into the bargain. Charlie always had it in for him; barely a day passed but what he'd be waiting for him when he came out of school. There was the corner by the playground gates—that's where he always waited. Made life a misery he did . . .

There was the map on his desk—the one he'd really taken trouble over painting; hours he'd spent on it last night. And then Charlie came over and pushed Little Ted out of the way, and taking the inkwell he'd upturned it over the open page of his book. And he couldn't, daren't say a word; Charlie would only have it in worse for him if he did.

He could smell the soft soap and floor polish; the stale heaviness of food and clothes. Dust motes dancing in the slanting rays of sun . . . a stream of blue ink running across the map, down the desk and threatening to drip to the floor. He must get it mopped up before Mr. Clive comes in . . .

Joe forced his eyes open. His hands were clenched and his forehead cold with sweat. It took him a moment to realize where he was. Jessop was smiling gently, and somebody whistling cheerfully in the street. The bar had never seemed so welcome, so friendly. But that memory had been horribly vivid. Thank God it was only a memory.

Charlie grinned. "What's up, Joe? You gone as white as a sheet."

"There you are," Jessop told them. "See how easy it is. A little concentration, a spot of hypnosis and you were well away. And if I may say so, Joe, you make a very good subject. There must be something particularly strong about your school-day memories."

Joe picked up his tankard and drained it's contents. His throat felt parched. He felt relieved that the thing was over; the picture had been too vivid, fearsome and horrifying in it's clarity.

"That was worth watchin'," said Charlie. "Ain't 'ad so much fun in years." He regarded Joe thoughtfully while he spoke to Jessop. "There ain't any chance of 'im agoin' an' not coming back?"

"Oh, no," Jessop said firmly. Then, hesitantly, "No, I don't suppose so; it's not logical to assume that—although I must confess I've never attempted to demonstrate my theory before."

"Pity," Charlie said, still grinning. "I'd like to think of Joe 'ere goin' back to school; some'ow I don't think he'd like that."

Jessop seemed to rouse himself. "Ready for the next stage of the experiment?" he asked Joe.

Joe set his tankard down with a hand that trembled. "You mean you haven't finished?"

"The atmosphere, here in the bar, was too strong," Jessop pointed out. "To really prove my point we must seek sympathetic surroundings. And for that we must take a little journey. Across the road, not far; to the school . . ."

He looked at his watch. "We have fifteen minutes before the children re-

turn; just long enough for our purpose."

"I've had enough," Joe said bleakly.

" 'E's frightened," Charlie discovered with obvious pleasure. "Scared, aren't you, Joe?" He turned to spit in the sawdust. "Always the same as a kid."

"You're not afraid of an old crackpot like me?" Jessop wondered gently. "Come on, Joe. Don't spoil things now. And don't forget that wager."

"I hadn't anything to do with that," Joe protested.

" 'E's tryin' to back out," Charlie cried in high delight. "I knew 'e would; always the same."

"Well?" Jessop urged. "Time's running out; you can't be frightened?"

Joe drew a deep breath; he had no alternative. If he backed out now he'd never live it down. "I'm game," he told them.

"Give my regards to the kids," Charlie's mocking voice followed him to the door. "Don't be late fer school," was the last thing he heard before Jessop's hand guided him across the road and up the shallow, well-worn steps of the school.

Jessop continued to urge him on until they were in the small cloakroom with its rows of pegs and lockers. Then he stepped aside, motioning Joe to lead the way.

The passing of the years came to nothing as he trod the polished corridors; the potted ferns still stood by the door to the hall; the same pictures, Drake, Raleigh and the rest—how could he have forgotten them—still hung on the white-glazed walls.

Automatically he led the way to his old class-room. "To the desk where you used to sit, if you can remember," Jessop breathed in his ear.

It was so small, that desk, and his legs barely fitting beneath. He ran nostalgic fingers over its pitted surface. The fear was still nagging at the back of his mind, but he thrust it aside. Here were his initials, worn now, but the memory of their cutting was still fresh in his mind; the feel of the knife in his palm, the chips of yellow wood as they flaked from the broken blade.

Little Ted—what had happened to him? Of course, he was dead . . . the war had taken care of him. Little Ted used to sit at the desk in front, and they would pass messages to each other. And Charlie, he sat behind, so that there was no escaping from him even in class. He wore heavy hobnailed boots, and sometimes he would put a pin through the leather, so that its point projected, and then he would——

"Close your eyes," Jessop's soft voice broke in on his thoughts. "Concentrate like you did before."

Somewhere in Joe's mind an urgent, insistent voice was jangling a warning. He felt that all this had happened before; he must try and break the thread . . . But the room was getting dark—or was it only his imagination? He was getting tired . . . his eyes were sore, their lids heavy.

Jessop's figure, in the corner of his sight, was wavering and shifting; he

was barely conscious of the dull monotone of the soft, insidious voice . . . "Close your eyes . . . think . . . you are going back . . . concentrate, concentrate . . ."

And now he could hear laughter and voices, faintly at first but getting louder, coming nearer. His desk grew so that he could move his legs freely. There was Mr. Clive's voice in the corridor, that meant it was geography for the next lesson.

And his map; Charlie had ruined his map. Now there'd be trouble.

He opened his eyes to the streaming sunlight; rivulets of blue shining ink streamed across the open page of his exercise-book. He took his handkerchief to stem the flow. Little Ted was trying to help as usual, busy with a piece of blotting, but only making things worse.

Charlie's voice in his ear, low and menacing. "I'm goin' to git you after school, Joe Laskin. An' if you dare say as ow' I spoiled your stupid map, I'll bash you worse'n ever . . ."

Only a few minutes before class starts; just time to get the mess cleared up. If I try hard I can forget that Charlie will be waiting for me after school. Perhaps if I stay on in the classroom he'll get tired of waiting.

"Blimey, Ted, I didn't 'arf 'ave a queer dream last night. Dreamed I was grown-up an' 'aving a pint in the "Rose and Crown." Charlie was there, too, only he was different, grown-up like me. An' another bloke too, with a funny name—Jossop or something. I remembered it a minute ago but it's gone now. 'Ere, stop muckin' about with that blotting, Ted."

Death, in itself, is nothing; but we fear,
To be we know not what, we know not where.

JOHN DRYDEN.

THE STORY OF LEONARD VINCENT

LAWRENCE PETERS

Illustrated by Sheila Walker

IT WAS SURPRISING in a way that his disappearance aroused so little interest, but then, so far as I knew, he had no relations and I was his only friend.

The police took a hand, of course, first searching the still smouldering remains of the workshop—it seemed that the explosion had been followed by a fire—then dragging the ornamental lake. For when the sifting of the charred remains of benches, retorts, microscopes and the tangle of incomprehensible equipment produced not the slightest sign of a body, they turned their attentions to the lake, towing fruitless grappling irons with an automatic lack of interest.

Because Vincent had been something of a recluse, so little was known of him that they had no basis upon which to balance their investigations. With the possibility of his having been killed in the explosion cancelled by the absence of human remains, they went into the routine of murder, suicide, amnesia and the possibility that for reasons known only to himself, Vincent had elected to become a name on the missing persons list.

But the police were frankly puzzled as to the cause and effect of the explosion. For one thing, they were unable to find how it had occurred. And one of them, an inspector with the face of a well-nourished cherub off-set by a stiff grey moutache, said to me, "I would call it a freak—I can't understand. During the war I saw similar effects—walls sucked inwards rather than blown outwards. You know the sort of thing—an artificial vacuum created, collapsing the walls together . . ."

The inspector came to my office to ask his questions. Until he told me, I hadn't heard about the explosion. Mrs. Brownlee, thin-faced and tearful, had given my name when the police asked about relatives. As his solicitor and friend I had been in the habit of spending occasional weekends at the low, rambling house set in the trees. Mrs. Brownlee told them that I had been the only visitor, and so they brought their questions to me.

I listened, I remember, in a shocked silence while the inspector reeled off his routine litany. Had he any enemies? Suicidal tendencies? What sort of work had he been engaged on? What had the workshop been used for?

There were many more questions in a similar vein and I answered them as best I could. And it was surprising, when I came to assess the facts, just how little I knew about Leonard Vincent.

Once the inquisition was over, I gathered from the inspector's remarks that his own idea was that Vincent had simply packed up his work and

walked out into the world. "You'd be amazed just how often that happens," he said. "They usually turn up after a while, as large as life and with no apologies for having caused so much trouble. His housekeeper tells me that he spent the last three days in his workshop, even sleeping there. Maybe he got worried about the work he was doing—you know how these types are—touchy to a degree. I can just see him storming out, slamming the door behind, saying "To hell with it"—then, without a word to a soul, going off to some hotel to spend a few quiet days."

That wasn't Vincent, I was sure of that. And there was something else, something that could be linked with his disappearance but so wild a theory that for a staid family solicitor to even mention it as a remote possibility would have been unthinkable. Instead, I hinted, "And the explosion?"

"Ar," said he, stroking his moustache. "That's got to be linked with his going—too much of a coincidence, else. Maybe he left some machinery still running and it got overheated. Maybe he left it running on purpose so that it would blow up..."

"One thing is certain," he added. "Mr. Vincent wasn't in the place when it went up, or we'd've found something."

After he'd gone I laid my work aside and thought about Leonard Vincent. I remembered first how nearly ten years ago he had come to see me in my office. At that time he was barely twenty; tall and slender, with thick black hair that was high on forehead and low on neck. With eyes of a peculiarly deep brown—the eyes of a visionary, set in the smooth, oval face of an æsthete. He had the soft, curved lips of a woman and the spatulate fingers of an artist.

And later I came to find that his appearance hadn't belied his character: he was an artist, a sculptor, poet and philosopher. A young man of enviable gifts and of many parts.

He was considering the purchase of the house called "Maltdene", set deep in the heart of the Surrey countryside. The house was in the hands of a London estate agent and I was their solicitor. So they sent him to me and he sat patiently listening with a kind of bemused pathos to my talk of leases and mortgages. It soon became clear that he had a reluctance to deal with monetary matters; not that they were above his head, but that there were more important things in life to be considered. I soon found myself advising him on other matters apart from the purchase of the house.

He was grateful, inviting me in the same breath as his thanks to spend a few days with him as soon as he had settled in. And because I was so intrigued by his personality and the prospect of a few days away from the city sounded so pleasant I accepted.

From then on I became a regular visitor. His housekeeper always went out of her way to make me welcome. But then I had been responsible for her getting the job in the first place. When Leonard had been vague about his household arrangements I made

inquiries at the local pub and was given details of Mrs. Brownlee. She was a small, wiry and reliable person, with arms and legs that seemed mounted on springs so eternally active were they. A typical country widow, with washed blue eyes, bun-tight colourless hair and a thin, brown face. With the responsibility, as I later found, of a semi-imbecile daughter.

The house itself was one of those small manors that sprinkle our English countryside with luxuriant freedom. Low, yellow-washed walls, but tall, high-gabled roofs and fluted chimneys. Set in a nest of trees with a winding gravel drive in front and a cobbled yard behind, leading to a sprawl of outbuildings. And a carriage house, with a roof that matched the house itself and which Leonard was to convert into a workshop.

When he first told me of his intention I questioned the advisability, thinking of the expense that would be incurred. But he was adamant, setting the work in hand right away. A little later, as I came to take over control of his affairs, I found that with an annuity left him by his father, and the income from royalties of several patented inventions, he had a satisfying steady income. I never did find out anything about his past; there was a curious reluctance on his part to discuss his family. I gathered that he was an only child and that both his parents were dead. The reluctance may have stemmed from his attitude towards life. Creation was the big thing; what was dead and past was finished and not worth the mention. But with one qualification. There were times when he seemed to live in the past, but the creative past of Italy of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. But then, he was an artist above everything else.

Considering the difference in our ages we got along together famously. Mainly, I think, because my profession had taught me the art of listening. And Leonard had much to talk about. His modelling, his painting, his inventions. Although I was never invited into the workshop, I spent many hours watching him at work in the converted bedroom that served as a studio.

I'm no great judge of art but I found his work pleasant to look at, and satisfying in a strange, almost familiar way. I have still in my possession pages ripped from his drawing books; scrap they were to him, quickly drawn, unfinished studies of hands—clenched, open, pointing. Arms and legs with their muscles so vibrant that one could almost see the ripple of flesh. They were patently the work of a master, but his main interests lay in other fields. His favourite word was "theory".

I go back to a still summer night, with the french windows standing open, and the dusk creeping gently across the lawns. Leonard, in faded blue shirt and paint-stained grey flannels, was sprawled in an easy chair. His eyes were dreamy, his hands fluttering nervously, painting pictures in the air.

There had been talk of painting. Masaccio and Lippi, I remember; da Vinci and Giorgione. In his own way Leonard had tried to explain their dif-

ferent styles and the motive behind their work.

"Each style easily recognizable to an expert," he said. "Rubens for the intensity of shadow, Canaletto for the delicacy of brushwork. And Titian—well you must know that his brilliance of colour is unmistakable. But da Vinci was the greatest of all . . ." His hands fanned palely, white moths in the dusk. "If only I could know that my own work would live through the ages . . ."

And then the spell was broken, for Mrs. Brownlee came bustling in, long, grey coat tight against her angular figure, fastening an unnecessary scrap of fur about her stringy neck.

"I'm going now, Mr. Vincent. I've laid the breakfast and there's milk ready for you and Mr. Haughton when you go to bed. Now don't stay up all hours talking." It was almost a fond mother talking to her son. "I know what you men are when you get together. Well, time an' tide wait for no man—I must be goin'. G'night, Mr. Haughton. G'night, Mr. Vincent . . ."

Leonard smiled at me when she had gone. "The days are never long enough for Mrs. Brownlee," he said. "She is one of those persons for whom time always seems to race . . .

"Time," said he. "It can creep and it can race. For some the days are too short; for others a day is a week. And for all, life speeds up each day that passes.

"Time," he repeated dreamily when I stayed silent. "What do we know of it apart from mankind's purely artificial way of assessing its passing? Seconds into minutes, into hours and days and years."

"The fourth dimension," I suggested inadequately, for want of something to say.

But my comment passed unnoticed.

"Streams of time," he told the open window. "Each of us lives in our own stream of time. And each goes by at a different speed. Imagine a room, a small room that holds a child of six and an old man of seventy. For the child the passing of a day is an eternity; for the old man it goes in the twinkling of an eye.

"Two streams of time in a small enclosed space, and where they touch you will have the eddies, whirlpools of distorted time. In those eddies time itself becomes malleable. Produce the same effect artificially, accentuating the difference, and you will have a means of breaking the barrier . . ."

He peered up over clasped hands. "You see . . . ?"

"Time travel," I said, stifling a yawn.

"Yes," he mused, watching the creeping night. "Yes."

"Into the future," I mused politely. "To peer into tomorrow, the unpredictable tomorrow." I felt quite proud of the phrase.

"No," he said then, and in such a voice that for a moment I felt he had already dealt with the matter. "No. There is no future in which one may travel. Reason itself proves that. Only the past, for that is always there—static and unalterable. But the future is yet to be made, it is intangible, impossible," smiling, "as you say, unpredictable."

"There are possibilities," he said. "I have been working on something along those lines. One day perhaps I'll show you . . ."

And then he smiled, his face lighting, and pulled himself to his feet.

"And now I must obey the good Mrs. Brownlee," he said. "And go early to bed. And tomorrow we will take a walk along the river bank as far as the ford, and you will sit and smoke that foul pipe of yours while I finish my painting."

That was the first and only indication that he was ever to offer as to the type of experiment he carried on in his workshop. An unusually neat and tidy worker, he offered as an excuse for not inviting me inside the converted carriage house the fact that it was "not fit to be seen, and a bit risky with some of the stuff I've got in there . . .

"We mustn't have the family solicitor electrocuting himself," he said like a mischievous schoolboy. "One day when I've got things arranged the way I want them I'll take you inside and show you something that might make you open your eyes."

But that day never came. The only time I was ever to see the interior of his workshop was when I went down to clear up the estate, and pay Mrs. Brownlee what was due to her. But that was after the explosion, and we

stood together looking at the wreckage.

Tearfully, the housekeeper said, "He was one of the kindest men I've ever known. Where has he gone, Mr. Haughton? 'E wouldn't just walk out like that without some good reason. An' the police say they're sure he wasn't in 'ere when it went up . . . Such a noise it made—we all 'eard it in the village. One o'clock in the mornin' it was.

" 'E's in there," she cried, suddenly angry. " 'E must be. 'E just wouldn't leave without a word. 'E's dead orl-right.

"I wish now," she added mournfully, "that I'd let our Lizzie sit for 'im that time. But I thought as 'ow 'e were making fun of 'er. I should've known better; 'e weren't like that at all."

I recalled the incident as she mentioned it, and it tied up with the wild idea that I had already thrust from mind.

It had been only a month before; I had gone down on the Friday evening for a long week-end. It was autumn, with the trees richly russet and littering the ground with their fruits. Leonard was up in his studio, cleaning brushes and palette.

"On my own doorstep," he said joyfully. "You'll have seen the colours of the trees by the gate. Tomorrow I'll set up the easel on the front door step."

But on the Saturday morning the weather had broke to a fine drizzle and when Mrs. Brownlee appeared she was half an hour late and her eyes were reddened and running. She told us unnecessarily that she " 'Ad a cold a-comin' on" and that she felt "Real out of sorts, an' if it's all the same to you, Mr. Vincent, I've brought our Lizzie along to 'elp wi' the washin'-up."

Leonard said he was sorry to hear she wasn't well; he said it was a good idea to bring her daughter. Then he caught my eye, and when Mrs. Brownlee went to bring in the girl who was waiting in the hall, he whispered quickly, "I've never seen her, but Mrs. Brownlee's told me about her. She says she's a little queer."

And then the door opened and the housekeeper brought in Lizzie. The girl would be in her mid-twenties, with a stolid, fat-cheeked face and dull, expressionless eyes. She wore a rusty black dress and her hair was straggle-tied into a head-scarf. She stood with hands clasped, looking steadfastly at the floor.

"So this is Lizzie," Leonard said heartily, and then stopped with his hand half-raised, staring searchingly into the brown, bovine face.

I could sense the feeling of revelation that surged from him. He had found something for which he had been seeking; something had been shown to him and its significance had been understood. There was contentment and fulfilment; it was all there in the eager way in which he laid his hands on the black-draped shoulders, turning her so that the light came full on her face.

"Take off that scarf," he ordered gently, his voice vibrant. The girl started to shake, turning imploring eyes to her mother. And when no-

body moved, he reached forward, flicking away the scarf with a sudden twist, so that the dank, lifeless hair fell to her shoulders.

And then for a moment I almost shared his exultation, for it was as if I had seen this girl before. But not like this. There was an indescribable beauty attached to the memory, but too elusive for me to gather together. Only for a brief flash it lasted, and then it was just Lizzie, the daughter of a country widow who stood almost in tears, clasping her hands and watching the scarf that dangled from Leonard's fingers.

"I would like to paint her," he said without turning, his eyes devouring her face. "Just as she is, now. Can you arrange that, Mrs. Brownlee?"

The mother was suddenly protective, moving forward, cradling one arm about the daughter's neck, looking balefully at the artist.

"A mockery," she reproved. "I would've thought better of you, Mr. Vincent. Making fun of a poor girl. For shame." She quivered with indignation.

Emboldened by the touch of her mother's arm, and by the protection that enfolded her, the girl smiled, an unfolding of pale lips. Her teeth were blackened and broken.

Leonard seemed shocked.

"I intended no harm," he said apologetically after a while. "It was just a fancy I had . . . perhaps we can talk about it some other time."

Mrs. Brownlee seemed ashamed of her little outburst. She sent the girl out to the kitchen, telling her what was to be done, and then came back, towel in hand, to say, "You know how it is, Mr. Vincent. I've had to look after her all her life. She's a poor thing . . . It don't seem right somehow for you to make a picture of 'er . . ."

But Leonard paid little attention to the apology. He was filled with a kind of suppressed excitement, walking quickly and aimlessly about the room, standing now in the window to stare out to the workshop, then striding nervously back, hands clasping and unclasping nervously.

Once he spoke, and not to me, for he was staring up into the rain-filled sky. "A coincidence?" he asked aloud. "No. There could be only the one. And if that is so, then it must be possible for me to—"

And then he became suddenly and furiously active, marching away up the stairs to the studio, absently beckoning me to follow, there to set about cleaning and tidying the place up, for all the world like a man of neat habits setting his place to rights before embarking on a journey.

He threw quick instructions over his shoulder. I obeyed automatically, feeling at the same time that to be stacking canvases in neat piles was a poor job for a solicitor.

Three landscapes he put on one side. "For you," he explained briefly, and then indicated another pile. "These to be burned . . ."

"Don't worry," he laughed into my face. "I'm not mad. I just like to leave things in an orderly way. And I have other things on hand now . . ."

On the Sunday evening we had our last talk together, for after an early

supper I motored back to town, and I never saw him again.

He was in a strange mood over that last meal, talking first of his work as a painter and how there was so much more to be learned, and then going off into details as to how the remainder of his paintings were to be distributed. "Find an expert," he said. "Ask him what he thinks of them. You'll be surprised . . ."

And when I expressed my surprise at the trend of the conversation he became impatiently annoyed, crying, "I know what I'm saying. I've seen the proof. But I don't want this part of my life to pass unnoticed."

I began to have fears for his sanity, for he was talking in an almost unintelligible way, his eyes flashing, his excitement bubbling up, his face unusually animated. There were the detailed instructions for the disposal of his paintings, which publishers should handle a batch of poems. He was most anxious that I should know where everything was, and finally lost patience, jumping from his chair to thrust one hand into his pocket to produce a key.

"I'll put everything in the workshop," he said. "Then you'll be sure of not overlooking anything. And when the time comes you can use this key, and dispose of the things as I have asked . . ."

"The time?" I wondered. "How will I know—?"

"You'll know," he said.

And I know now, but at the time I didn't understand. So I left the gift of three pictures behind, and no doubt they were waiting for me in the workshop, only of course they went up in flames like everything else.

Almost a month later, came the news of his disappearance and the explosion that wrecked the old carriage house.

We mourned together, Mrs. Brownlee and I.

"A fine gentleman," she said tearfully. "I'm only sorry that I wouldn't let our Lizzie sit for him when 'e wanted 'er to. I told 'im as much before he went . . ." She was desperately anxious that I should know she had tried to make amends. "I said as 'ow I thought 'e were tryin' to make fun of 'er, but when I came to think it over then it couldn't 'ave been like that. I told 'im that if he'd set 'is mind to it, then he could paint 'er. But it seemed like 'e'd got other things to do, what with spending all hours that God sends in that stuffy workshop. He said 'e'd carry 'er picture in 'is mind, and that one day 'e'd paint 'er.

"Not as I think 'e meant it," she said. "I reckon 'e was just tryin' to make me feel better. But for all that 'e took such an interest in the girl. Fair upset about the state of 'er teeth 'e was, saying as 'ow they spoilt 'er smile. Wanted me to take her into town an' get them seen to, sayin' as 'ow 'e'd pay. All fixed, it was, but then he goes and vanishes . . ."

I left her still crying and she continued to keep the place clean for over a year, her salary coming from the estate. At the end of that time, when there were no signs of Leonard reappearing, I gave her a reluctant notice and set about the complicated

matter of settling the estate.

And so, at least for the time being, Leonard Vincent passed out of my life. I never saw him again. But there was an echo, a finishing to the story, but this was many years later.

* * *

On my sixtieth birthday I retired from business and celebrated the occasion by taking a trip to the Continent, And in an exhibition in the Palazzo Venetia in Rome I had the first signs of the solution. In Paris, a few weeks later, I knew for sure.

For in the exhibition in Rome, set in one corner, among the miscellaneous items, were some rough drawings—little more than the preliminary details for some greater work. They were of hands and feet, bone structure and sinew. And they were unmistakably the work of Leonard Vincent.

But being no expert, I came away undecided, telling myself that my guesses were too wild for even the slightest consideration.

And in the Louvre, coming upon that most important quiet room that houses perhaps the world's most famous picture, I leaned against the felt-covered barrier, staring at the woman whose face forever smiles enigmatically into eternity.

The world knows it as the Mona Lisa, sometimes called the Gioconda. But to me it was clearly the face of Lizzie Brownlee, the imbecile girl from a Surrey village, and not that of the wife of Zanobi del Giocondo.

I stumbled out into the warm Parisien sunshine and stared unseeingly at the crowds. Leonard Vincent —Leonardo da Vinci. It had to be.

He had discovered the secret of travelling back into time, but hadn't foreseen that the vacuum left would wreck the workshop. I wondered if he had travelled back to that particular time just to paint the girl. . . Or had he recognized Lizzie as the Mona Lisa, and so proved to himself that his experiments were on the right track.

Was the Mona Lisa only a copy—but a copy of itself?

Which came first—the painting which must have been very familiar to him, or the memory of a face that he bore back with him to fifteenth-century Italy?

And I am perhaps the only person who knows why she smiles in the way she does, with lips tightly closed. Maybe if he had had time to get her teeth attended to, the Mona Lisa would have lost her puzzling, enigmatic smile. But then, perhaps she wouldn't have become quite so famous.

FRONTIER

RICHARD BRIDGEMAN

Illustrated by Norman Battershill

THEY STOPPED THE train at the frontier and threw a cordon of soldiers about it. The tall mountains towered ahead, their blue-white caps alive and sparkling in the early-morning sun. Feathers of smoke grew from the two chimneys of the red-roofed toy station and hung motionless in the pine-heavy air. The soldiers, like grey-green beetles, stood stolidly with wooden faces, each with an automatic rifle held slantwise across his breast.

Emsworth leaned from the open window and looked thoughtfully at the wooden platform beneath. One of the beetles stood just below, so that he could have touched the grey peaked cap by stretching out his arm.

His companion came to join him at the window, resting bare arms on the dusty ledge.

"This . . ." Emsworth asked, nodding to the silent circle, "this is usual?"

He spoke in the language of the country, with only the faintest of accents to show that he was not of their race.

"It happens at times," the other told him, "but this would seem something special. One would think that there is a big fish to be caught."

He spat into the dust, barely missing the immobile soldier.

"This will be your first time?" he asked, his eyes on the officer who had come to stand in the door of the waiting-room.

"I have been this way before," replied Emsworth. "But then there was nothing like this."

"Jhasa . . ." said the other, nodding in the direction of the officer. "When the Captain Jhasa condescends to come to a place of this size, then there are indeed big fish."

Emsworth stroked his chin, his eyes on the blue-clad officer. He knew of Jhasa, but this was the first time he had seen him.

"Jhasa . . ." his companion said. "And so early in the day." He clicked his tongue, "A big fish indeed." He seemed to find pleasure in the expression.

* * *

Captain Jhasa, of the Security Police, looked with pleasurable anticipation at the four dirty-yellow coaches. The smooth olive oval of his face showed little sign of the sleepless night that lay behind him.

Still only in his late thirties, his expressionless face concealed a concentrated knowledge of his fellowmen, gathered from the slums and back streets of half-a-dozen mid-European capitals.

Lieutenant Marka, short in stature and with the face of a peasant, came yawning from the waiting-room and stood beside him.

"Now—?" he asked of the captain.

"No. Wait." Jhasa ran his cold eyes along the dimly anxious faces outlined in the windows.

"We know our man is there," he said. "Nothing will be achieved by rushing the job. It is better to wait. Herein lies a lesson for you, Marka . . . It is not good for the nerves, you understand, to sit watching and waiting as they are doing now. You will find that nerves can betray . . ."

He spoke with a knowledge of experience, like a teacher with a willing pupil.

The lieutenant shifted on his feet.

"It is certain that he is there?" he asked.

Jhasa smiled. "Consider, my friend," said he, and, lifting one hand, tapped out the points on his gloved fingers.

"He was followed to the station at Krummer. Because it was not desirable to create a disturbance there, he was permitted to go on his way. My men surrounded the station, and he did not leave on foot or by road. There was only this train that he could have taken, this was the only one that left for the frontier."

"The mountains lie ahead and to our backs; the marshes stretch yonder for as far as we can see. There is no way through, save by this line. It is as simple as that."

He looked at the four coaches.

"Only a very small train," he added, "and not many passengers. Our task will be easy."

"This man," Marka wondered, following Jhasa's eyes. "What is he like?"

The captain spread his hands.

"For myself," said he, "I have yet to meet him. I have a description, for what it is worth. A small man, small but ingenious. An ordinary man, for whom one would spare but a passing glance. He sometimes calls himself Emsworth."

"You will know him if you see him?"

Jhasa smiled pityingly.

"You are truly of a simple nature," he said. "To catch a man of Emsworth's calibre, it is necessary to match wits with wits. When he entered the station he was wearing a brown suit and a blue tie." He shuddered delicately, "A revolting combination, I feel that he may have dressed thus to attract attention. So now we must assume that he will look very different."

Marka shuffled uneasily.

"Now?" he asked again.

"Take the sergeant and eight men," Jhasa instructed. "Examine each passenger carefully and separately, taking all documents from them."

He smiled bleakly. "This will be good training for you. This man will be disguised and his papers forged. Find him and bring him to me here."

* * *

"They wait . . ." Emsworth told his companion.

"Trying to the nerves," the other

replied. "This is the way Jhasa works. The one he seeks will already be feeling the strain. It will show perhaps in his face, or a trembling of the hands.

"But they will find him," he said, "of that there can be no doubt. I have never known Jhasa to fail."

Emsworth folded his arms on the window. "There's always a first time," he comforted himself. And then, aloud, "They come, there are ten of them. What now?"

"Papers and passports first," said his companion, "and then each in turn will be taken to stand in front of the captain. Always it is thus."

* * *

The lieutenant pressed his clenched fist across his breast in salute.

Jhasa acknowledged. "Well . . . ?" he asked, "You have found me this man?"

Marka looked at the papers in his hand.

"There is but a handful on the train," he said. "Eight women, who are obviously women; two children, one in arms, the other of some four years. There are six men only. One is the husband of one of the women; two are soldiers, wearing our uniform, who tell me they are replacements for the local garrison. There is a greybeard, old and wrinkled, who goes to visit his son's grave. The other two travel together, saying they are business men."

Jhasa smiled gently, his eyes mocking.

"The women . . . ?" he wondered, "you are sure?"

Marka smiled in return.

"The sergeant took care of that," he explained, "he left no shadow of a doubt. By the amount of clothes that some were wearing, they will yet be dressing again. One was young," he added, "and pretty. The sergeant's face is bleeding . . ."

"Tell me of the men," Jhasa said, "for one of them must surely be Emsworth."

"The old one is indeed old," the lieutenant said simply. "His wrinkles are deep, but even so, with the back of my sleeve . . ."

He raised his arm, demonstrating.

"Emsworth is more than thirty but less than forty," Jhasa said. "That leaves us with five."

"The husband of the woman, I know. I have seen him at his stall in the market-place. He has lived all his life in Krummer and is well-known there. He goes now to spend a holiday with his daughter. His permit was signed by His Excellency himself."

"Four, then . . ."

"The two soldiers have satisfied me. One is known personally to my sergeant, the other has a brother here in the garrison."

"Two . . ." Jhasa said coldly. "You leave me poor pickings."

"These last two say they are from a firm of printers in Krummer. They carry samples of paper and their visas are in order. They were co-operative and answered all questions well and without hesitation."

"How they answered is of little importance," Jhasa reproved. "Tell me of them; describe them."

Marka half-closed his eyes.

"One is tall, perhaps six feet . . ."


NB

The captain shook his head.

"The other, the younger, is an ordinary man . . ." Marka smiled as at a secret thought. "Brownish colouring, pale blue eyes. There is a mole on his cheek; he has a small moustache."

Jhasa stroked his chin, his eyes on the dark shape of the locomotive.

"He has but one leg," Marka added, looking sideways. "The other is of metal. I made him remove his clothes. It is strapped to his waist with a harness."

"Artificial?"

"He took it off," Marka explained simply. "I held it in my arms."

"So that disposes of them all," Jhasa told the mountains, "It would seem that Emsworth has surpassed himself. And now I will talk with these men myself. The papers you have there, is there any of interest?"

The lieutenant rifled through them, holding them up.

"Visas, passports, identity documents. There are a few letters. I have read them all."

"There should be a list," Jhasa said. "Names and addresses. Was there such a paper?"

Marka fanned them like a hand of cards.

"You may see for yourself," he invited. "There is nothing like that."

"This list of which I speak," said the captain, "is as important as the man who carries it. While I speak with the men, I want you to go through this train with a tooth-comb. Tear away the upholstery, rip up the carpets from the floor. Break the panelling. I want those papers."

"Shall I bring the passengers to you?"

Jhasa shook his head. "I will go through the coaches myself," he said. "I will talk to them in the compartments in which they have travelled."

* * *

"Now Jhasa comes himself," Emsworth murmured to his companion. "This is something new?"

"New indeed," replied the other. "This I have never seen before."

"I grow hungry," said Emsworth watching the slim figure swing into the first coach. "Will we be permitted to leave the train to seek refreshment?"

"Not till after this is over."

Emsworth sighed. "You think it will take long?"

The soldier beneath looked up into his eyes, grinning briefly, openly enjoying their discomfort.

"Until they find what they are looking for," his companion said. "Jhasa has all the time in the world. A delayed train means nothing to him."

* * *

Jhasa sat in the end compartment of the last coach and spread the passports and visas about the seats.

"And that is the lot?" he asked.

"You have spoken with them all," Marka said, taking pleasure in the captain's discomfiture, but taking care that his smile was hidden.

"And they are all accounted for," Jhasa admitted, "which leads us to the conclusion that our man cannot be here after all."

"But that is impossible," he told the luggage-rack. "You have spoken with the guard?"

Marka nodded. "The train didn't stop between the two stations. More. It maintained a steady speed, there was no slowing."

* * *

"Nearly three hours," Emsworth said. "How much longer?"

"I have a flask of wine," his companion offered, "some bread and a little cheese. If I may be permitted. . . ?"

"You are kind," Emsworth replied gratefully. "For myself, I had no time to bring anything but the bare necessities." He patted his breast-pocket.

"You have been this way before?" the other asked politely, busy with the long, crusty loaf.

"Once," Emsworth admitted, "many years ago. Before the new régime."

"I have the greatest admiration for you," said his companion. "You have displayed a calmness that is greatly to be envied. For myself, the very sight of those uniforms . . ." He sighed, offering the bread. "But then, I have spent so long in their company. And you . . . I can tell from your tongue that you are not of my race."

"Is it then so obvious?" Emsworth asked.

"I have had time to study you," replied the other, and tilted the green flask of wine.

Emsworth smiled, watching the surging throat.

"You should be with Jhasa," said he. "I feel that he has need of such as you."

* * *

"Are we all idiots?" Jhasa asked bleakly. "Can it be that the truth is staring us in the face and so obvious that we overlook it?"

The lieutenant took off his cap and passed a handkerchief over his face.

"He is not on this train," he told the greasy, green lining. "Of that I am prepared to swear on my mother's grave."

The sergeant came to stand in front of them, waiting permission to speak. Jhasa nodded.

"They have phoned from Krummer," the sergeant said respectfully. "They wish the line cleared for the express."

"How long?"

"They said it will be here in ten minutes. They do not wish it delayed; His Excellency himself is travelling."

"In that case," Jhasa shrugged, "we have no choice. Tell the guard that he may proceed."

"And Emsworth?" Marka asked.

"He is not on that train," said Jhasa. "On that I'll stake my reputation."

* * *

"Does that mean we can go?" Emsworth asked, and his companion leaned from the window.

"That is the signal," he said. "Now praise be to all the Saints."

The train started to move, the engine wheels churning in sudden bursts of spark-like fury as they sought a grip on the greasy rails.

Emsworth leaned from the window to look back at the lonely station,

with its soldiers, now drawn up in ranks. He smiled gently to himself, then turned to look ahead to where the twin gleaming ribbons swept up into the mountain pass.

Ignoring his companion, he started to strip off the stained overalls, letting them drop to the swaying footplate.

The brown suit revealed was only slightly crumpled, the blue tie free from grease. He wiped his oily hands on a piece of waste.

The other watched the operation with steady eyes.

"You are the one for whom they sought?" he asked, his eyes back on the track. And when Emsworth stayed silent, "I felt that for a fireman you lacked a certain experience. And your hands . . . Dirty, but the nails," he shook his head, "clean."

"You are perceptive," Emsworth said, mildly offended. "I'm sorry about my nails. I must remember . . ."

The train gathered speed, rocking and swaying.

"The trouble with this country, my country," said the other, "is that one never knows from one minute to the next who one will be working with."

"Now take me"—leaning from the cab to peer ahead "—you may take me for a driver, but for all you know, I may be one of Jhasa's men."

The train roared into a ravine, the over-hanging wall tossing the echo from side to side.

"And are you?" Emsworth queried.

"I'm afraid not," his voice was filled with regret, "but I am of the police. You will understand that we leave nothing to chance. I could have disclosed your identity back at the station. But why add yet another feather to Jhasa's already over-filled cap? No," he smiled over his shoulder, "this little triumph is to be all my own."

He slid a gun from his pocket with an apologetic gesture.

"I'm truly sorry," he said. "You are a clever man and I have come to admire your courage."

The train swung from the ravine, and the golden-green valley opened out far below.

"A pity," Emsworth said, his eyes on the rapidly-steepening slope.

He turned and picked up the heavy shovel.

"Please to set that down," the driver said mildly, raising the gun.

"You may press the trigger," Emsworth told him, "but it will serve no purpose. I removed the shells quite a long time ago."

"Your nails," he added, "they are clean, too."

He swung his weapon in a vicious sweep, and the other stepped back to avoid the coal-blackened metal.

For a long moment he swayed on the edge of the pitching footplate, the gun clattering to the metal floor, his hands clutching wildly for the greasy hand-rail.

Then he fell backwards, his outflung arms and legs black-starred against the distant pale green of the valley below.

Emsworth laid his hand on the brake-lever, bringing the train to a slow, hissing stop.

BOOMERANG

A. E. MURCH

Illustrated by Vera Jarman

IN SEVENTEEN HUNDRED, two or three miles of lonely country lay between the city of Toulouse and the little hamlet of Croix-Daurade, near the southern border of Languedoc, where peasant farmers tended their vineyards and olive groves as their forefathers had done from time immemorial, never dreaming that all France would soon be talking of their village as the scene of a strange drama of crime, detection and punishment that was to horrify Church and State and call forth a special edict from the *Parlement* of Paris itself.

The most prosperous man in Croix-Daurade at that time was Saturnin Siadoux, who made olive-oil from his neighbours' produce and sold it to merchants in the large towns of southern France. He was a hale and hearty widower of sixty, living with his two daughters, who kept house for the family, and three sons, who helped in the business. The eldest, Louis, was just twenty-five, a hard-working, serious-minded man like his father. Tomaso, a year or so younger, was gentle and easy-going. Jean, the youngest, was of a very different type, a pale, black-haired lad of twenty, keen-eyed and quick-thinking; taciturn, even morose, by nature, but when his anger or intensity of purpose was roused he was unquestionably the most forceful of the three brothers.

Saturnin Siadoux had only one other relative, his younger sister, Madame Louise Miraillé, whose husband, a wealthy tanner of Toulouse, had died the year before, leaving everything he possessed to his wife, since they had no children. Louise was devoted to her young nieces and nephews, who would inherit all her property in due course, unless she married again. So it is not surprising that the Siadoux family were somewhat disturbed when gossips hinted that a certain eligible burgher of Toulouse was courting this rich and attractive widow of forty-five. Her brother ventured to ask her, one day: "Tell me, Louise. Who is this man Cantegrel. Do you know him well?"

"I've known him these eight or ten years, but not well. He is a butcher who used to sell hides to my husband, a neighbour who would sometimes drop in of an evening for a chat."

"And now he visits you?"

"Only to help me with business. Some of my husband's old customers still haven't paid their bills, and Monsieur Cantegrel is much better than I am at collecting the money."

"You must be discreet, Louise. Remember how people talk!"

"Let them! There's nothing in what they say," she retorted, but she coloured a little as she spoke, and the

twinkle in her eye made her brother wonder what truth there might be in the rumour, and whether Cantegrel would be likely to make her a good husband. He began to make cautious inquiries about the butcher and was not entirely reassured by what he heard. Cantegrel had come to Toulouse as a stranger several years ago and started in business there. He had prospered and was now accepted as an honest tradesman of good standing, but nothing was known of his family or past history. From his bluff, jovial manner, some thought he might be an old sailor from Bordeaux; others fancied his accent smacked of the Mediterranean coast, but no one cared to question him, for he had a violent temper and was quick to use his fists. The story ran that one day in the market-place a travelling pedlar had called to him: "Hey, Master Cantegrel! Buy something from me for old times' sake! Fancy meeting you again, so far from Narbonne!" With blazing eyes the butcher strode across and knocked him down, muttering something so fiercely that the pedlar snatched up his pack, fled without another word and was never seen in Toulouse again.

When M. Siadoux heard this piece of gossip he decided it might be worthwhile to visit Narbonne, a long journey for those days. Being a prudent man, he told his family nothing of what he had in mind, saying simply that he needed to visit the town on business and would be away for a few weeks. A month later they received word that he had finished all he had to do in Narbonne and was starting back at once. He would travel to Carcassonne, visit one or two old friends as Castelnaudary, call on a few customers in Villefranche and arrive home before sunset on Tuesday, April 26th. His daughters were to cook a specially good supper that evening to celebrate his return and invite Aunt Louise to join them, also three or four neighbours and the parish priest, Monsieur Chaubard, a kindly, sociable man who was always a welcome guest at any festivity in the village.

It was a busy time for the worthy curé. On the 25th, the Festival of St. Mark, he had duties to perform at the Cathedral in Toulouse and also had to attend a convocation of the local clergy there on the following morning. "But I shall be back sometime in the afternoon," he told Tomaso. "I'm looking forward to your supper party and to seeing your father safe home after his travels."

The meeting was over, most of the clerics had dispersed and M. Chaubard was on the point of setting out on his walk back to Croix-Daurade when the sacristan came to the door of the chapter-house and inquired for the Abbé de Mariotte, one of the priests attached to the cathedral. "The Abbé has just gone," replied M. Chaubard. "Is there anything I can do?"

"There's a man in the church who seems in great distress," said the sacristan. "I've seen him here before, and the Abbé is his usual confessor."

"If he is in trouble, perhaps I can help him," the curé answered. "I hold a faculty from the bishop to hear con-

fessions in this church as well as in my own. Take me to him."

The man was striding restlessly up and down, biting his knuckles. He started violently as M. Chaubard addressed him: "My son, the Abbé is not here. Can I help you?"

"Oh, yes! father!" the man replied eagerly. "I asked for the Abbé de Mariotte because he is the only priest I know by name. To confess to a stranger would be better still."

"Then come with me, my son, and cleanse your soul."

The sacristan watched them go and sat down at a short distance to wait. He was surprised to notice that almost as soon at the penitent knelt before the confessional and began to speak, the curtains, open till then, were hurriedly drawn across to conceal the priest's face. It was a long time before the man rose to his feet and turned to leave the cathedral, still longer before the priest himself came from behind the curtain, his appearance so changed that the sacristan started to his feet in amazement. The curé's face, usually so plump and rosy, was chapfallen and pale as clay and he tottered from the church without a word to the sacristan.

Meanwhile, all was bustle in Saturnin Siadoux's house. Preparations for the feast were well in hand and towards sunset his daughters took turns to watch the high road for the first glimpse of the returning traveller. Evening came, and still there was no sign of their father. One by one the guests assembled and sat down to wait for the master of the house, entertained by Mme Miraillé and her nieces, who did their best to conceal their growing anxiety.

"Where is M. Chaubard?" asked Mlle Siadoux. "He's usually one of the first to arrive at a party! He's not ill, I hope?"

"He looked all right when I saw him this morning, on his way to Toulouse," replied Louis. "He waved to me and called out that he would see us all tonight."

"I thought he was far from well when he came back through the village this afternoon," said Monsieur Gaspé, the miller. "White as a flour sack, he was. I went to the mill door and gave him good day, but he stalked past me with never a word."

"Run across to his house and see how he is, Tomaso," urged Mme Miraillé. "Unless he's really ill, persuade him to join us if you can. He's such good company. I'm afraid my brother has been delayed, and won't be home till tomorrow. Still, supper's ready, and as soon as the curé joins us we will begin."

Tomaso found the priest sitting alone in his study, his head bowed on his hands. "I am in great distress," he groaned. "Leave me. I cannot come to your house tonight."

"Oh, M. Chaubard, I beg you not to disappoint us all. We need you, Father has not come home yet, but you are his oldest friend and he would wish you to take his place tonight. Supper is on the table. Good food and good company will cheer us all."

"Hush! Let me think!" murmured the curé. A moment later he rose to his feet and continued more firmly: "Very well! For your father's sake I

will come. Bear with me if I cannot be my usual self."

As they entered the dining-room, steaming dishes were carried in, the hungry guests fell to and soon there was a cheerful buzz of conversation. M. Chaubard did his best to join in, but now and then he fell silent or changed the subject so abruptly that his fellow-guests raised their eyebrows. Jean grew thoughtful, and watched the curé so intently that, when the party was over, Louis scolded him sternly for this breach of good manners. "Why did you keep staring at M. Chaubard so rudely? Couldn't you pretend not to notice, and try to help him out of his depression, as a host should?"

"I had my reasons," Jean replied, "but don't ask me for them now. I'm going to bed." He took up a candle, and the little flame flickered as though he was trembling. "Perhaps I will tell you tomorrow," he added. "Good night."

Next morning, everyone kept an eye on the road, and towards noon they saw an impressive group of people approaching the house. At their head came the chief magistrate of Toulouse in his robes of office, closely followed by his clerk and a bodyguard of archers. Between their ranks walked four men carrying a bier, which they set down at the threshold. The clerk drew back a sheet to reveal the dead face of Saturnin Siadoux and the magistrate addressed the horror-stricken family.

"Alas! good people, I bring you sad tidings. M. Siadoux has been murdered. Some woodmen found his body early this morning in a little stream that runs into the River Gers. We thought at first that he had been drowned, but the surgeon soon discovered that he was stabbed."

"But my father had no enemies," cried Louis. "Who can have done such a terrible thing?"

"That, I fear, we may never know," the magistrate answered gravely. "Perhaps he was set upon by a band of robbers, for there are such gangs in those woods, and the body bears almost a dozen wounds, all in the back. Yet nothing was stolen as far as we know. Your father's pockets still contained his money and business papers; his horse was found grazing nearby and the saddlebags were undisturbed. All this property is now in safe keeping, ready to be claimed by his heirs in due course. Out of sympathy and respect I have myself escorted his body to his own parish for burial, and there my duty ends. That is all I can tell you."

When the first shock of their grief had passed, Louis called his brothers together. "Our father's blood cries to us for vengeance! The law holds out no hope of finding his murderer, so we must take on the task ourselves. Join hands with me over his body and make a solemn oath that we will bring his assassin to justice!"

"But how can we begin to seek him out?" cried Tomaso.

"Perhaps I can answer that," said Jean. "Last night you asked me why I watched the curé so closely. Now I can tell you. I had a growing conviction that he knew of the murder."

"M. Chaubard? Impossible!"

"Whenever anyone at table mentioned our father, the priest was deeply troubled. He either talked loudly of something else or fell silent for a while, and more than once I saw tears in his eyes. I tell you he knew, even then!"

"Then if we ask him . . ."

"Useless! He's made up his mind not to speak of it, or he would have told us last night. We can try, but I don't think he will give us any information unless we force him, and I have thought of a way. Listen!" For a few moments he whispered to his brothers, who blanched as they grasped his meaning, but, to men of their fierce southern blood, vengeance was a sacred duty, and they at last agreed to his plan. "Give me half an hour to make ready," Jean continued, "then go and fetch him. No one but ourselves must know of this, so bring him straight to the workshop across the yard."

* * *

In the workshop stood the presses for crushing olives and the large vat where the crude oil was purified, floating in a thick layer upon water kept just below boiling-point for several days and nights. To keep the olive-oil sweet-flavoured and pale in colour it was important not to let it cool or get overheated during this refining process, so there was always a man on duty to tend the fire. When Jean entered the workshop he called to the employé: "Go home, Pierre. Neither I nor my brothers can sleep tonight, so we will busy ourselves here. You had better get a good night's rest, for there'll be plenty to do tomorrow." He saw the man off the premises, locked the doors behind him, then fed the fire till the cauldron seethed, the oil darkened and wisps of blue smoke began to rise from it. Then he sat down to wait for his brothers and M. Chaubard.

They were not long in coming. Jean let them in and locked the door behind them. If the priest had assumed he had been summoned to bring spiritual consolation to the bereaved family, he was quickly undeceived. Louis and Tomaso stood one on each side of him, stern and silent, while Jean faced him and spoke: "M. Chaubard, when you were at supper here last night, did you know our father had been killed?"

"God help me, I did, but my duty forbade me to speak."

"Do you know why he was murdered?"

"I do."

"Who did it?"

"That I cannot tell you. I do not know the man, or even his name. He came to the cathedral as a penitent, and by a mere chance it was I who heard his confession. The secrets of the confessional cannot be revealed. Do not seek to know more. The poor wretch is in agony of remorse. As Christian men, leave his punishment to God."

"Our duty is as plain as yours! Justice demands a life for a life. Tell us everything you know that may lead us to the criminal."

"Never! It would be sacrilege!"

"Listen, Father," said Jean quietly. "We are determined to know. Either

you will speak or you will die here and now in this cauldron of boiling oil."

"My sons," faltered the curé, "your grief has turned your brain. You cannot mean what you say!"

"You think not? Up with him, my brothers!"

"Oh, Jean! Give him more time!" cried Tomaso.

"I'll give him time—at the cauldron's edge! Stand aside, Tomaso. Louis and I will lift him. Curé, you're a heavy man. I don't know how long we can hold you up there, but that's all the time you can have."

Instantly the two brothers seized the priest and swung him up to the full length of their arms, poised over the smoking, brown eddies.

"Speak, Father Chaubard!" cried Tomaso, twisting his clenched hands in distress. "Do not force us to do this! Our quarrel is not with you! Why should you shield our father's assassin? The man who killed your own best friend! Speak!"

Still the curé remained silent, though his face was convulsed with terror and his brow and tonsured head streamed with sweat. The arms that held him began to quiver with the strain. A corner of his cassock dropped into the boiling oil, and as the stench of burning rose to his nostrils the priest uttered a shrill scream. "Let me down!" he shrieked. "Do you swear to tell us?" Jean insisted. He nodded.

As they lowered him he collapsed on to the stone floor, then struggled to his knees and prayed a while. When at last he spoke, his voice was low and calm and his face was set in lines of deep sadness, like a man who knows he has not long to live. "Louis, Tomaso," he said, "even you, Jean, I forgive you all, as I hope to be forgiven for the sin I am about to commit. Pray for me when my time comes. The man who killed your father is a tradesman in Toulouse who hoped to marry your Aunt Louise."

"Cantegrel!" breathed Jean. "So it was Cantegrel!"

"That may be his name. I did not ask him. This is what he told me. When he heard that your father had gone to Narbonne he followed him by stealth, for he feared M. Siadoux might discover a secret he had kept hidden for many years, that he already had a wife living in that town. She had left him for another man by whose name she was now known, but your father succeeded in tracing her and obtaining proof of the marriage. Then he started his homeward journey, dogged all the way by this wretched man with murder in his heart. As far as Villefranche your father travelled in a convoy with other merchants and so was safe from attack, but no one else was coming to Croix-Daurade so he rode on alone. His murderer came up behind him in the woods and stabbed him while he was watering his horse at a stream. That is all I know. Now let me go. I have much to do."

At dawn, the three brothers set out for Toulouse and roused the magistrate from his bed to hear them accuse Cantegrel of murdering their father.

They had hardly begun their story

when he held up his hands to stop them. "Wait!" he cried. "This matter concerns the Church, and I will hear no more unless the bishop or his officer is present!"

An hour later, the bishop himself arrived, with M. Chaubard. "This man has confessed his sin to me," he said, "and surrendered himself to the judgment of the Church. To make sure these brothers say no more than they were told, you may hear their statement in our presence."

From these events stemmed three trials that roused the people of Languedoc to fever heat. Cantegrel was arrested and charged with the murder, but the only evidence against him was that obtained from M. Chaubard. Towards the end of his trial he broke down and confessed his guilt, whereupon he was sentenced to die on the wheel and was executed with the minimum of delay. Then M. Chaubard was brought to trial, charged with revealing information obtained in the confessional, an offence so rare that few people in France, and certainly not the brothers Siadoux, had any inkling of the terrible punishment laid down by law for any priest guilty of this crime. M. Chaubard was sentenced to be broken on the wheel, then to be tied, living, to a stake in the market-place and burned to death. The utmost his devoted parishioners (helped perhaps by certain high authorities in Toulouse cathedral), could achieve was that the executioner strangled him surreptitiously before binding him to the stake.

Then came the trial of the three brothers, charged with conspiring to force a priest in holy orders to reveal information given by a penitent during confession. They were pronounced guilty, and sentenced to death by hanging, but the authorities hesitated to fix a date for their execution. The death of the priest had already caused a tremendous uproar throughout Languedoc and seriously threatened the power of the Catholic Church in southern France, where the Huguenots were gaining strength and the Camisard Revolt was already being planned. The cause of the Siadoux brothers roused the common people to fury. These were sons any father would be proud of! It was their duty to hunt out their father's murderer by any means they could! They were young and had not the slightest idea that their action was contrary to law! If they were brought to the scaffold, they would be rescued by force and riots would occur.

Faced with this dilemma, the authorities prudently decided to wait till popular feeling grew less intense, and, as it turned out, the delay enabled the brothers to regain their liberty. The gaoler's daughter fell in love with Tomaso and managed to contrive their escape over the border into Spain, where she and Tomaaso were married.

To settle the matter, the *Parlement* of Paris issued an order, three weeks after their escape, that the brothers were to be executed in effigy and banned from re-entering France, but whether they were in any way inconvenienced by this edict, history does not say.

BLOW THAT HORN

ROBERT BLAKE

Illustrated by Michael Ricketts

I KNOW WE MUSICIANS are supposed to stick together and all that, but what he did for me that night was really something out of the ordinary. I mean, there I was, all set to break into Mocky's shop—that's Mockenstein what runs the hock-shop—and there's this guy leaning against the wall like he growed there, with the lamplight sorta playing round his head and a trumpet under his arm.

"Why," says he, almost as if he'd been waiting for me, "if it isn't Gabby! An' where are you off to with such an important look on your face?"

And while he talks there's this gentle smile on his lips, and though I can see clear enough that his hair is all gold and curly, he keeps his face bent a little, him being taller than me, so that all above his mouth is in shadow. So if ever I gets to seeing him again it's odds against me recognizing him.

Unless, of course, he wears that white suit. Looked like he'd just stepped out of a theatre, all spangles and glittering. You know how some of the big boys get themselves all dolled up when they go out on the stage. Gimmicks—that's what you have to have these days.

I figure I know most of the top names, but this guy I've never seen before, for all he throws my name at me.

"So late, Gabby," says he. "An' you with a gig waiting."

Which takes my breath away, this one-night stand which I just got not being known to anyone except me and Mavis, and Hover, and Big Joe what runs the band.

"Now where would you be going?" he asks, and there's something in his voice that gets me talking before I rightly know what it's all about.

I find myself telling him the whole story. How first I'm doing the odd job with my trumpet with Luke Mason's band; I was in the chips, so I takes a tip from Hover and I put a packet on "Blue Boy" in the two-thirty. Then the job folds, the horse runs backwards and I'm left owing eight quid. And Hover gets nasty all at once and says he wants the cash pretty sharpish or else.

I know what he means. Hover is small and greasy and as mean as he looks. He's got rotten teeth and a face that looks like it's been squashed between his ears—them being larger than most. He works for the bookie and he's bad medicine; mostly he uses the razor. So it's kinda important for me to get the dough when he asks for it. Like Mavis says, I shouldn't ever have had anything to do with him. But you know how it is—you learn as you go. She says he's got his knife

into me over some affair a while ago when he nearly got nicked. Mavis says that he thinks I tried to shop him. But this I don't know about until it's all over. Mavis said she didn't think it was important.

Well, I'm broke, and all I've got is my trumpet. It's a real good trumpet, having been given to me by the boys at the Empire longer ago than I care to think about. A real posh job with my name engraved round the bell.

With Hover turned nasty there's only one thing for me to do. I take the horn to Mocky's hock-shop and he gives me a tenner. So I pay Hover his eight, and after I've had a good meal and my clothes pressed, and paid the landlady fifteen bob on account, I'm pretty well back where I started. Only now I've got no trumpet.

And when I'm round at Barkey's place paying Hover the eight, having eaten a good meal and got myself looking tidier, he smiles and says, "So you had it all the time, wise guy. An' why did you keep me waitin'?"

I feel like taking my fist to his face, but he's got one hand in his pocket, and his eyes are cold like fish. I tell him that I had to hock my trumpet to get the money.

"Now that's a pity," says he. "For I've just heard that Big Joe has got himself a job in a posh café an' he's asking for you to go an' play for him. Tonight, it is, and he says if it goes down well, then it's all set for a year at least. With good money."

He grins and grins, and I can see he's really enjoying this. And I feel again like pushing his ugly face in, only he still keeps his hand in his pocket. And although I'm no beauty I don't want to look worse than I do now, having once seen what happened to a guy who only stepped on his foot, and that by accident.

"Tonight?" I ask.

"Tonight it is," says he. "At Lombards, at ten. An' you without a trumpet," he sneers. "Now that's a pity. The chance of your life this is."

I have to agree with him, and while I'm racking my brains to think of some way of raising the ten again, he says: "But there's one thing you can do."

"And what's that?" I wonder.

"You could borrow your trumpet back," he says soft-like. "You could slip into Mocky's place and borrow it just for the night. He'd never know, not if you took it back again after the show. An' his place is easy as easy to get into if you use the back winder."

"That's what I'd do," he tells me. "But maybe you ain't got the guts."

That got me on my toes—and my insides felt like they was filled with tangled wire. It was the way he said it. But I keeps it in check. I simply say it's an idea, and I go before there's an excuse for him to flash his razor.

Outside it's grand to smell fresh air; even if it is the smoky stuff in the dirty alley with the rusty ash-cans. But there's a breath of something real good coming, for there's Mavis tip-tapping on her high heels and breaking into a run when she sees me.

She's all dolled up, with the fur coat swinging and showing off the black frock underneath. Black going so well with her yellow hair, which seems to have come in for special at-

tention, being buttery-smooth and shining and swept to one side. She sometimes does a stint as cigarette girl for Barkey when he has a special night and it looks as if she's coming to see if there's anything doing.

"Gabby, my Gabby," says she. "I heard you singing," I come back. All of which is our usual greeting. And which goes to show that we have a sort of arrangement.

We've known each other for nearly three years. And one day we're going to get married. When the money runs to it. That's the sort of girl Mavis is. Hard as china to look at, but underneath—well, it's the kitchen sink and her own front step to scrub and she'd be in Heaven. I know. I love her. The only time I ever took a chance on Hover's razor was the day when I caught him making a pass at her and I gave him the neatest clip you ever saw. He hadn't got his hand in his pocket at the time, so he didn't stand a chance. I went in almighty fear of him coming up on me in the dark, but it seemed like he'd forgot. Which wasn't like him. All the same, I don't aim to risk it again.

Mavis puts her hands on my shoulders and stares at my face.

"Now what's biting you?" she wants to know. "You look like you've bitten on the red end of a poker."

There's no point in keeping my news to myself. I tell her what's happened, but not about Hover's suggestion. His name's like a red flag to a bull where she's concerned.

"A chance with Big Joe," she mourns. "And you with your trumpet in hock. Oh, Gabby——" And then she starts to weep, and I guess I know why.

She knows the same as me that if I got this job then we could get married. This was the sort of chance we'd been waiting for ever since we'd found out how we felt about each other.

So she weeps, and clings to me, and after a while she says: "Is there no way of getting the money?"

I tell her I've racked my brains. I don't mention Hover's idea.

Then she looks down at the ground, like she was ashamed to let me see her eyes. "Maybe I got an idea," she whispers. "Maybe I know a way of getting the money."

And when she still won't look in my face I know what she has in mind. Shakes me up real proper, me knowing Mavis inside out and how she feels about such things. And it shows just how much she wants to get married.

That's when I made my mind up. Well, if she was prepared to rub her nose in the dirt, then it was up to me to see she never had cause. It got me really ashamed of the way I was letting the opportunity slip through my fingers. If Hover had been there I would have sent him kicking to the ground, razor or no.

And suddenly I knew that Hover was evil. It was a barrier of his making that had come down between Mavis and me. Everything that had happened had been as he had intended. It was as if invisible strings were linked to our arms and legs and gathered into his filthy claws.

But I had already made up my

mind to do as he had suggested. It was the only way. I was in a dead-end alley.

So I put my arms round Mavis and tell her to cheer up. "I got an idea," I say. "I think I know how to get my trumpet back for tonight."

She takes my lapels in her hands. "Nothing wrong, Gabby? You mustn't take any chances."

"Nothing wrong," I lie. Then we talk a bit more, and she goes inside to see if there's a job going.

First I try it the straight way. But when I ask Mocky for the loan of my instrument just for the one night he tells me to get lost. Coming out of his shop there's Hover leaning against the wall and picking his teeth with a match-stick. It looks like he was waiting for me, for he grins with his yellow teeth, spits and throws his toothpick away.

"Bin thinkin' of what I said?" he asks me knowingly.

Now there's nothing else to do. I got Mavis to think of more than anything else.

"Tell Big Joe that I'll be there on the dot tonight," I say. "And I'll have my trumpet with me."

Then he grins harder than ever. "So you're gettin' wise. Can't say I blame you. Mocky closes at seven—I got it all worked out. He turns in about half-eight. If you do the job about nine you should be safe as 'ouses. Ain't that good of me?" he asks. "Always ready to help a friend."

I don't like the way he says "friend". Maybe I don't aim to do like you say," I tell him. "Maybe I knows where I can borrow a trumpet some place else."

"Yeah," he grins. "An' pigs might fly." He sticks his face close to mine so's I can smell his breath. "You know damn well that it's about the only thing you can do. That's if you want to get back in the chips. Don't try it before nine. Give the old geezer time to get tucked up."

Later, I go along to Barkey's place to have a drink with my last couple of bob, and to say howdy to Mavis who is floating round with her tray, and wearing a short skirt and a frilly apron.

She's too busy to talk with me, so I sit and watch the clock. Some big guy with a face like lard makes a pass at Mavis, but before I can get up she's caught him neatly on the chin with the corner of her tray. She can take care of herself, but I don't like it. This ain't a fit place for a girl like her.

I think a lot about Hover. He seems dead set on me doing the job at nine. I wonder why. I've got to let Mocky get well asleep, so I let nine slip by and at half-past I slide quietly out and start off for the shop. If I get there by quarter to ten I'll have plenty of time to get to Lombards in time for the start of the gig, it only being a step away.

And outside there's a lamp-post at the corner of the alley, and there's someone leaning against the wall, and it's Hover. I don't feel good about it—I get a sort of feeling that things are going too much his way. But there's nothing else for it. I don't let

on that I see him, but I step out pretty sharpish towards Mocky's place. I figure that if there's trouble waiting, then I can take care of it as it comes. This is a risk worth taking.

But on the way I meet this guy in the white suit and I find myself telling him the whole story. I don't usually spout off like this, but there's something about him . . .

He listens to every word, and all the time he's smiling and nodding like he's heard it all before.

"So it's really for Mavis that you're going to do this thing," he says when I've done. I tell him she's worth it.

He seems to be weighing things up. "As I see it, you only decided to take this course when she came up with her idea?"

I agree that he's hit it right on the nail. For Mavis I would risk most anything. This guy catches on quick. He holds out his trumpet. "I'm a musician myself," says he. "Hardly in your class, but I think we ought to stick together. Now I shan't be wanting to use this for an hour or two, so if you want the loan of it . . ."

At first I think I'm not hearing right. I nearly fall on his neck. I take the trumpet and try out a few notes. Sweet and clear they come, like honey. "Good," he approves. "Very nice. Don't overdo it," he warns. "I want it back in good shape."

"How do I go about letting you have it back?" I ask.

"I'll be round—I'll be keeping an eye on you." Which is reasonable enough.

"But supposing I don't see you?" I ask next. "Who do I ask for? What's your name?"

"Why," says he, like he was surprised. "I thought you knew. For sure, it's the same as yours . . . Now you'd better be on your way."

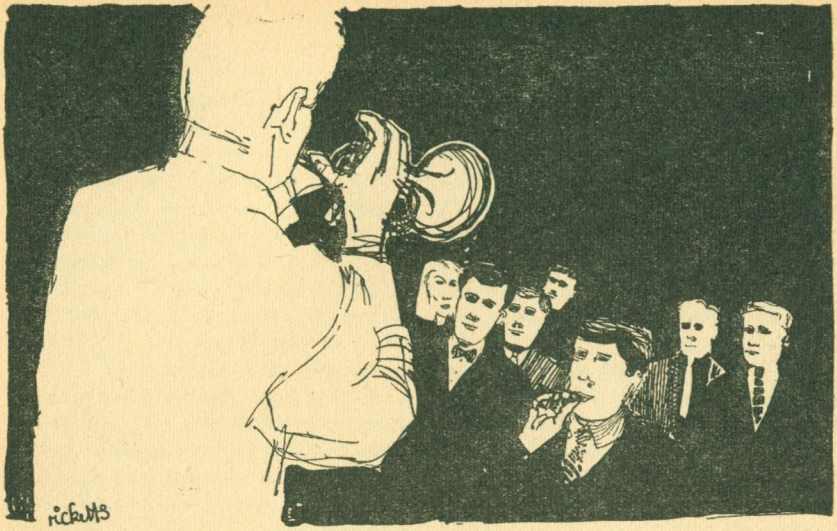
You never heard the like of the music that came from that trumpet. Right from the moment I put it to my lips I knew I was on to something really high-class. Smooth as silk and rich as molasses. And with the high notes clear and full like they'd been dragged down from the skies.

At first it felt strange after my own blower, but that was only to be expected. It was made of a softer metal, and though it was golden-bright and shining like new, I could tell that it had seen plenty of handling. But after a couple of tunes I might have been born with it in my hands. Big Joe came over after the first number.

"You got something there, Gabby," he says admiringly. "We'll get together after the show. I got a proposition that should interest you."

After that I blew like my heart was fit to burst, and once it seemed that the ground trembled under my feet. I forgot all about Hover and the crowded hall. There was just Mavis and me, and I blew till the tears came in my eyes and the folk stopped their dancing to gather round and listen. I played the trumpet like it had never been played before.

Hover's as far away as the North Pole, until about elevenish when there's an interval on, with the pianist tickling the scales in a gentle sort of way and I'm sitting down having a



breather and a pint. There comes a stir at the back of the hall.

It's Hover and he's looking as mean as I've ever seen, and there's a couple of guys with him. Tall, soft hats, raincoats, and their faces shouting police as loud as loud.

And when I see them, although I got nothing to fear, the blood goes kinda coolish and my knee-caps dithery. They thread through the people and Hover points at me and says, "That's the guy. I heard 'im sayin' he wus goin' to do the job. He said 'e 'ad a down on old Mocky on account of ' is trumpet bein' in hock, an' this job on tonight, an' Mocky refusing to let 'im 'ave the loan of the trumpet . . . He said 'e wus goin' to get it back anyway . . ."

My stomach flips up and hits my throat. But I say steadily enough, "What's the trouble?"

One of the cops flashes his card. "Police," he says, like he doesn't waste words. "Anywhere we can talk quiet-like?"

I take them to the little room where we got the coats and cases stacked. Hover shakes his head at me and grins. "You shouldn't've done it, Gabby."

They tell him to shut up. The taller one says to me that there's been trouble at Mocky's shop. I'd guessed that, but what I didn't know was that the old boy had been found with his head bashed in. He was in a bad way; he wasn't expected to pull through.

"We figure he must have disturbed the burglar," the copper said. "Mr. Kronsky here says you might be able to help our inquiries." Kronsky being Hover—I never did find out how he

got his name. Probably someone figured he looked like a vulture.

"I never been near the place since this afternoon," I tell them. And Hell, am I glad that I met the guy in the white suit. I can see what Hover has in mind as plain as plain. I also decide that with him being so keen on me not doing the job before nine he must have been there first. And when I see him outside the alley, he must've already done the job and just waiting to make sure I was on my way. But in that case surely I would have seen poor old Mocky . . .

Then I start asking questions myself, and for some reason the police are co-operative. They tell me how first they get an anonymous phone call, and when they gets to the shop, Hover just happens to be handy and helpful.

Whoever had pulled the job had been neat about it, Mocky's body being cached away under the counter. And the safe had been opened, and the contents removed, then closed as tidy as you please.

It all fitted in nicely. And I had very nearly stepped right into the trap. If I'd gone like I intended, then my prints would have been everywhere—for I'd never have bothered about using gloves, and the trumpet would be missing, and I'd have it. I knew I was safe, but the sweat made the shirt stick to my back for all that. A closer shave I've never had.

"So Hover just happened to be there when you got to the shop?" I asked. The copper nodded. "Just passing."

"Quite a coincidence."

He said it was. Hover broke in harshly. "You're wasting time. There's the guy you want, an' there's the trumpet in 'is 'and to prove it. What more d'you want?"

"He's got a point," the copper allowed, eyeing the trumpet.

"Maybe this ain't mine," I say. "Maybe I borrowed it?"

Hover laughs out loud. "An' what mug would lend a trumpet to a bum like you? That's your trumpet all right." He turns to the copper. "You'll find 'is name on it . . ."

I'd got him. Right out of his own mouth. First I gives the trumpet to the copper, and he examines it and says, "No name on this."

"Ask Hover how he knows my name's on my trumpet," I suggest. "Just ask him that."

Hover get's kinda greenish. "I seen it, many times," he says.

"I never showed it to a soul. Not since I came to live down here, anyway. The only way you could've seen the name is if you saw it on the shelf in Mocky's shop."

He blusters and there's a lot of talk, but he doesn't stand a chance.

After they take him away, I go back and finish the evening with the band, and boy, am I feeling good. I fill that hall with music of which you never heard the like. And right at the top of some high notes I feel the floor give a sort of gentle heave, just like when you stand on a bridge with a train thundering and roaring underneath.

At two o'clock we finish, and I go out into the cool with my heart sing-

ing and the trumpet under my arm. And there, waiting in the shadows, is the guy in the white suit.

He clicks his tongue. "You sure blew that trumpet," says he. "Man, I felt it out here.

"It was cool and sweet," he adds. "But you haven't rightly got the touch. Which all things considered is just as well."

"I got the job," I tell him, handing back the instrument. And while I'm trying to think of how to thank him he just sort of drifts off into the darkness. While I'm wondering where he's gone, Mavis comes along.

A real picture she looks, with her hair shining in the lamp-light and her eyes as blue and soft.

"It's all right," I tell her before she can open her mouth. "I got the job and we can get married when you say."

She says that she is free the day after tomorrow, that being a Thursday and not much doing at Barkeys on that night. When it's all fixed up and I've told how pretty she looks, she wants to know how I got hold of the trumpet.

I leave most of the story for later. It's too grand an evening to spoil by bringing Hover in. I just tell her that I borrowed one from a stranger and that I'd just given it back to him as she came along.

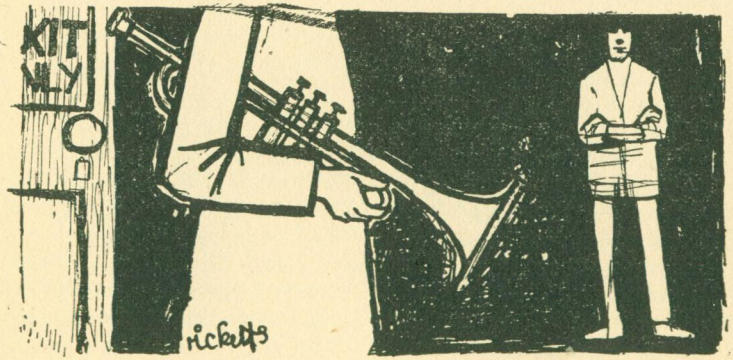
"I didn't see anyone," she says, wrinkling her nose. "What did he look like?" Who was he?"

And when I try to remember just what he did look like, I can't. It's gone. All except for his smile and the white suit, and that's not much to go on. But one thing I do remember.

"He said his name was the same as mine," I tell Mavis.

"Gabby?" she wonders.

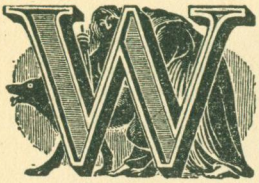
"Gabby's short for Gabriel," I say. "Only keep it to yourself. It's a cissy sort of name."



SEA GREEN

G. E. FOX

Illustrated by M. Coxhead



HEN THE wind and the sea roll and tumble and tear at each other with titanic hatred, men stay indoors and let them fight it out. Why, then, was everybody standing on the beach, staring out to sea? Dodwell asked himself. He watched them curiously through the greenish, uneven glass of the taproom window—a row of dark figures, evenly spaced along the beach from the lighthouse to the Point. That, too, was odd. Why were they posted at such even intervals along the edge of the sea, like an old-fashioned line of infantrymen awaiting the charge of enemy cavalry?

The wind gave a great heave of furious endeavour and the old inn rattled, the bottle-green sky grew darker and the black sea showed a million white fangs. There was no sense in being out there, leaving comfort and good ale for the uncharitable elements. He was indignant at such foolishness and aggrieved that he had been left alone in the inn because he was not one of them, but a stranger from London. They had gone without a word of explanation and he knew it was because he was a "stranger". They were secretive and contemptuous of those they called "strangers", but even that and the economical use of words they called conversation was better than being left alone. It would, perhaps, be better out there in the storm with them than being in an empty old pub. At least he would know what all this standing about on the beach in howling wind and flying spume portended.

He was a sour-dispositioned man and knew it, taking a masochistic pleasure in unpopularity. Why should he try to please other people by listening to their self-glorification, their dull life stories, their duller ailments or their political and unpolitical opinions. He liked to talk, to shock, to raise argument by bitter tirades against anything or anybody. He called his bitter tirades originality, and considered it appropriate to his middle-aged solidity of mind and figure, to his balding head and to his idea of his own importance. He took his annual holiday alone each year, always selecting a quiet, remote place where he could impress by his "originality".

This year he had been unfortunate. He had failed to impress by his misanthropic ways and the weather had been wretched, culminating in this howling storm on Midsummer's Day of all days.

He went to his room, clad himself

suitably to face the storm and with a disgruntled scowl on his face staggered against the wind to the turbulent beach. He approached the nearest of the watchers, who turned out to be Ted Blackmore, the innkeeper.

"What's the fuss?" he shouted to make himself heard above the wind and the sea. "Expecting a wreck?"

"There's no call for you to come down here, Mr. Dodwell," shouted back the innkeeper, turning his head to show disapproving eyes under salt-rimmed lashes.

"Why not?"

"It's no business of strangers to these parts. Better go back to the house," yelled the innkeeper.

"What are you looking for then?"

The innkeeper turned and looked at him with uncompromising finality. "I said go back, man! It's best not to know some things," he shouted.

"Well, then, I'll go!" he bawled back angrily. "I know when I'm not wanted, but at least you can tell me how long you intend to stay out here in this. It's not very pleasant being alone up there."

As if realizing that he was not being very courteous to a guest in his inn, and one who was paying good money, too, the innkeeper suddenly dropped his attitude of truculence and shouted: "I mean no incivility, Mr. Dodwell. It's for your own good. There's a superstition in these parts about a storm on Midsummer's Day, especially a foul, black storm like this. We believe something evil comes out of the sea so all the village watches to make sure it goes back again."

Dodwell laughed at that, his laughter sounding thin and foolish as the wind whipped it out of his mouth and smothered it in the driving salt spray. "Piffle!" he screamed. "You're welcome to your superstition. I thought it was something exciting the way you are all staring about as if pearls were being washed up on to the beach."

"A word of warning, Mr. Dodwell!" cried back the innkeeper. "If you find anything on the beach, either tonight or tomorrow, throw it back. Or any time for that matter!"

"Even pearls?" shouted Dodwell derisively.

"Aye, even pearls and gold and precious things!"

Laughing contemptuously to himself, Dodwell struggled back up the beach to the inn. These country yokels; what fantastic nonsense they believed in! Wishing wells, fairies, the evil eye, witches and things out of the sea! Catch him throwing anything of value back into the sea!

He took a drink at the deserted bar and went to bed early, for there was nobody to talk to. He lay awake for a time listening to the roar of the sea and the shrill whine of the storm across the roofs of the village. He got up once and looked out of the window and grinned satirically to himself as he saw the pertinacious watchers still at their posts on the beach.

"Superstition!" he sneered.

Next morning the sun shone and the gulls wheeled and banked across a sea still ruffled and dishevelled by the storm, but between the turbulent

white caps, as blue as the delphiniums under his window.

Nobody saw him leave the inn for a saunter along the beach before his breakfast. Probably they're all in bed, tired out after their nonsensical vigil in the storm, he surmised sourly.

He lit his pipe and walked slowly along the shingle, marvelling at the clear brightness of the beach, clean-swept and polished by the high sea of the previous evening.

With his pipe between his teeth and his hands behind his back, he stood and contemplated the blue and white restlessness of the sea, hypnotized a little by its rhythm and steadfastness. He felt very tranquil and drew rhythmically at his pipe as if to be in conformity with the rise and fall of the waves.

Then he saw it, spinning along on the crest of a wave, green and gold in the sunlight, until it slid into a trough where it became a shiny jade green in colour. It looked like a curiously shaped bottle. He watched it come closer and closer until the last dying wave, hissing up the shingle, deposited it at his feet.

It was a bottle, or flagon, a smallish one about the size of a man's fist, but exquisitely shaped and made of a dark green substance like jade. Dodwell picked it up and was immediately attracted by the colouring and texture of the material of which it was made. It must be jade, he thought, noting the way the sunlight penetrated into it to reveal lights and shadows and patterns in charming profusion. It had all the variation and colour of the sea concealed within it. Sea green, he designated it.

There was a little stopper in it, shaped like an open sea anemone and made of the same dark green substance. Automatically, he tugged at the stopper although it must be evident there could be nothing in the bottle. As the stopper came away in his hand there was a sudden hiss from the bottle as if his action had released some pressure of gas within, but his surprise was immediately checked by a greater and more disconcerting occurrence. Twenty yards from shore a great cloud of spray leapt from its parent wave and, hurtling through the air, enveloped him in a damp, salty embrace. For one incredible moment he could have sworn that damp, slimy tentacles enveloped him, twining round his body, gripping his face and throat, striving futilely to hold him in their watery, unsubstantial grasp. In that moment he knew terror, but instinctively he leapt away, mechanically ramming back the stopper into the bottle as he did so. Immediately his fear evaporated and he felt nothing but annoyance. He pushed the bottle into his pocket and returned to the inn to change.

He was in a bad temper when he came down to breakfast and gave the other occupants of the dining-room but perfunctory nods. They were all village men and they all looked tired and dispirited.

When Ted Blackmore brought in his bacon and eggs Dodwell whispered to him, nodding to the men sitting about the room, "Village on holiday?"

Ted Blackmore looked at him closely for a moment, then said quietly: "No, Mr. Dodwell, they're not on holiday. They're going to patrol the beach. It's as I said last night. If anything comes out of the sea today on to the beach, they're going to hrow it back."

"Such as?" Dodwell said with faint sarcasm.

"Look, Mr. Dodwell," said Ted Blackmore carefully, "I know it's maybe a joke to you, but to us it's serious, deadly serious. We believe in good and evil—not like town folk who haven't time to believe in anything. Anyway, that's neither here nor there. We do believe that something evil may have come out of the sea in that black storm on Midsummer's Day. It's a sort of terrible contrarywise thing to have a raging black wind and a raging black sea on Midsummer's Day, don't you see? There's evil in it."

"Well, then," said Dodwell impatiently, "what do you expect to come out of the sea? You're talking in riddles, man!"

"It could be anything. We can't rightly say," Blackmore muttered, offended by Dodwell's ironical tones and abruptness.

"For pity's sake! You mean to tell me you don't know what to look for?"

"No, we don't, but we'll know when we find it all right, and back it goes!" Blackmore growled. "And, Mr. Dodwell—take the advice of someone who knows. If *you* find anything unusual on the beach, do the same."

With that he walked away to talk to the men at the other end of the room.

Dodwell was amused. All Ted Blackmore's vague warnings and tiresome superstition added up to one thing only—just plain, downright ignorance. He wondered what they could find on the beach beside the usual piles of seaweed, dead starfish and odds and ends of refuse. He was also curious. How did this weird superstition arise? He admitted to himself that a freak storm on Midsummer's Day could appear illogical to simple minds, a sort of evil disposition on the part of nature.

When he saw Mrs. Blackmore laying the dining-room tables for dinner he decided to ask her about it. She was more amenable than her husband and liked a friendly gossip when she had a moment from her numerous domestic activities in the kitchen behind the bar. She was stout and comfortable and middle-aged, all attributes of a woman of easy confidings.

"Mrs. Blackmore," said Dodwell in friendly tones, "can you tell me what all the fuss was about last night?"

"Didn't Ted tell you?" she asked cautiously.

Of course, her husband would have told her about the encounter on the beach. Was she going to be as vague and non-committal as he?

"Well, did they find anything on the beach, then?" he asked, changing his direction of attack.

"No. Nothing."

"What did they expect to find?"

"Could have been anything. The

last time—and it's said that was in the reign of King George IV—a lad found a bugle and kept it hidden instead of throwing it back into the sea. Well, he took it up on to the edge of the moors and blew it and that was the end of him!"

Dodwell wanted to laugh, but he saw Mrs. Blackmore was expecting amazement, incredulity and profound curiosity. Her face was taut with solemn expectation. She was impressively waiting for a suitable reaction. He couldn't disappoint her if only to see the rest of this little pantomime.

"No, Mrs. Blackmore!" he exclaimed in feigned astonishment. "What happened, in Heaven's name?"

She looked over her shoulder and then whispered, "The evil-one took him. Horrible to look at he was. Mutilated beyond recognition. They threw the bugle back into the sea."

"Are there any other legends—like that one?" he asked.

"Many! Before that there was a golden box, and before that a flute. The evil thing came out of the sea in something attractive as it were. Oh, but now we're wise to his tricks, Mr. Dodwell. Everything goes back on Midsummer Day, storm or no storm, but if there's a storm—especially!"

"What is the evil thing like?" he asked, but at that moment Ted Blackmore called her away and she did not reply. He would draw her out on the subject again later. It was fascinating nonsense and would make a good story to tell among his friends and acquaintances back in town.

That night in his room he remembered the bottle. What a whimsical coincidence, he thought. If any of the villagers had found it they would undoubtedly have thrown it back into the sea. He took it out of the pocket of his jacket which he had hung on the back of a chair to dry after the wetting it had received in the morning. In the artificial light the green jade-like substance had the texture of something rare. He examined it carefully and decided that it was both ancient and valuable. The very feel of it, its pleasing symmetry and rich colouring were all indicative of rarity and value. Strangely it made him think of deep green caverns, fathoms below the rhythm of the tides.

He tentatively pulled out the stopper. Again there was that strange unaccountable hiss of escaping vapour and again his astonishment was annulled by a greater astonishment which verged on sheer horror, for a sudden gust of wind from the sea, apparently rushing through the open window, sent the heavy velvet curtains surging into the room until they wrapped themselves grotesquely around him as if they would entangle and smother him. Again he felt as if he were held in an unsubstantial grip, as if the folds of velvet held intent, as if, indeed, the curtains were charged with malice towards him. He felt a terrifying nausea as the soft, tenacious material wrapped itself around him. There was obscenity in the clinging softness and strange and evil purposefulness. He struggled frantically to escape, but even when he stood panting and trembling beyond the reach of the curtains they

still seemed to have that frightening purpose in their wild struggling contortions towards him. Impatiently, he stooped to the floor where he had dropped the bottle and thrust home the stopper.

The wild movements of the curtains subsided and they fell slowly back into their sedate folds against the windows.

His terror gone, he sank on to the nearest chair. What on earth had caused that sudden infuriating gust of sea wind? The day was calm and tranquil. The small, startling, unaccountable incident puzzled him, yet he could account it to nothing more extraordinary than a freak of the wind.

Next day he took the bottle to Exeter and searching out an antique shop asked the proprietor to value his find. The man, with the usual noncommittal air of a dealer who might be asked to buy, made no comment and took the bottle in his hands. He studied it closely for a few moments, feeling its texture, assessing the workmanship, and at least said guardedly, "It's a sort of jade, I think, and could be valuable. I can't say if it's Chinese. If you like to hang on a moment I'll get a piece of Chinese jade out of my safe and compare the two."

"Fair enough," agreed Dodwell, and the owner of the shop, removing his glasses, went to the rear of his premises.

Dodwell picked up the bottle and toyed with it absent-mindedly. Then he pulled out the stopper. The bottle hissed and immediately behind him

was a hideous clangour of metal. Turning abruptly in sudden fear, Dodwell saw an antique suit of Samurai armour falling towards him, the hideous face-mask diabolical in the subdued light of the musty shop, the curved sword in the act of slashing downwards at his face. He fell back terrified at the apparition and with incredulous face saw the thing coming at him with the slow, spasmodic jerks of an automaton.

Then some shadowy intuition told him to replace the stopper.

When his shaking fingers had achieved their purpose, he saw the old armour collapse in a ludicrous pile of moth-eaten fabric and old metal on to the floor of the antique shop.

"My God, what's happened!" shouted the dealer, hastening into the shop. Seeing the pile of tumbled Samurai armour and the petrified Dodwell, he added: "You didn't touch it, sir?"

"No!" screamed Dodwell. "I didn't! Why can't you fix your stuff so that it's safe. That confounded sword could have killed me! What a bloody silly thing to have posturing like that."

"But it was safe enough," said the dealer, annoyed by the rebuke. "The sword was at the side of the armour."

"Oh, never mind!" muttered Dodwell. "I'm too shaken to worry about the jade now. It was a nasty experience, I can tell you, to see that junk coming towards me. I'll come back later."

With that he left the shop and went to the nearest pub for a stiff whisky, leaving the mystified antique dealer fumbling about in the pile of Japanese armour.

The whisky put everything back into its true perspective, so he believed. Life is prosaic and all things pertaining to it logical, he persuaded himself, so the dim, troublesome feeling that a power of evil was dogging him somehow was nothing more than an aberration in his mental processes. Reasoning further, he concluded this was a result of the queer pantomime staged on the beach by a mob of superstitious villagers.

But when he arrived back in the village he had lost his jaunty self-assurance and felt depressed. Could there be anything in the story of the evil thing out of the sea? The bottle was valuable, he was sure, and he would be insane to throw it back into the sea.

He sought out Mrs. Blackmore in her kitchen where he found her kneading dough for bread, her arms entangled in the stiff mixture and white flour up to the elbows.

"Mrs. Blackmore," he said, without preliminaries or apology for his intrusion, "tell me, what is the evil thing the people hereabouts believe comes out of the sea?"

She looked at him keenly for a moment, then removed her hands from the great earthen mixing bowl and wiped them perfunctorily on her apron.

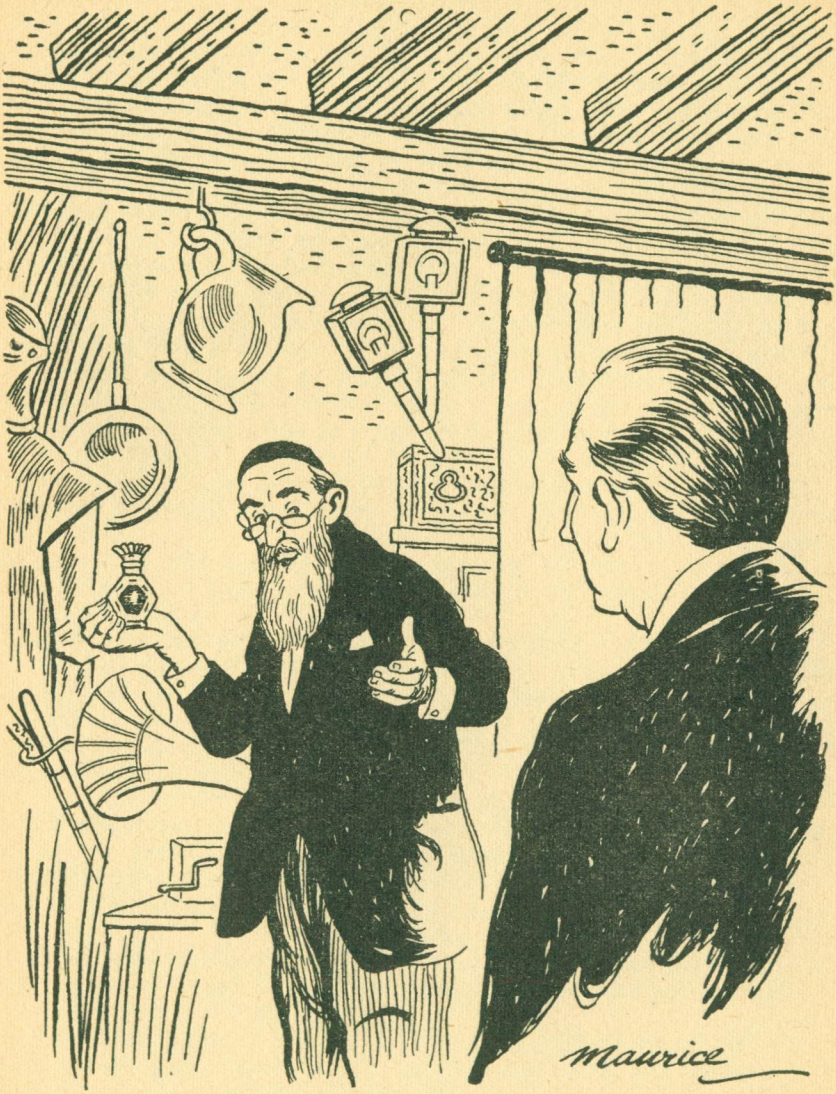
"Why do you ask?" she inquired.

"I'd like to know," he replied.

"Is that all?"

"Yes, yes. Curiosity, that's all."

"Well," she began slowly and thoughtfully. "It's said to be a sort of


Maurice

wicked force. You know—something without a body. Just a—a—well a sort of—bodyless devil, if you can see what I mean. It can't hurt anybody unless it gets into something, then it uses whatever it gets into to do mischief."

"Suppose it got into that dough you're kneading?" he asked.

"Well, I dunno, Mr. Dodwell. Dough couldn't hurt nobody, but it 'ud try. Maybe the dough would jump out of the bowl at you. Not that it could do harm, but it wouldn't be nice to see, would it?"

"Well, suppose it got into a living thing, what then?"

"Heaven forbid, Mr. Dodwell," she said with deep feeling. "That's when it murders horribly. Don't talk about it, Mr. Dodwell. That's what we all fear." And then in sudden suspicion, "Mr. Dodwell, if you have found anything on the beach, for God's sake get rid of it, no matter how precious it is. You haven't, have you?"

He evaded the question. There was no point in causing her alarm by telling her of his finding the bottle.

"It comes in something like that?" he asked incredulously. "Why doesn't it just come—if there is anything in this superstition?"

He was feeling alarmed now. Coincidence was one thing, but too many coincidences add up to purposefulness somewhere. The spray, the curtains, the suit of armour coming at him, the nausea he experienced, his intuitions that evil was abroad on each occasion—these were strange, illogical confirmations of her story. He had never thought to see the day when he would accept superstition as an unexplained logic. Could any logic link the spilt salt with bad luck? Could any logic link a jade-green bottle found on a beach with an accident that could have caused death? Of course not, but he intended to throw the bottle back into the sea just the same.

"Being evil it must come in sin," she replied in answer to his question.

"But you said once it came in a gold box! That surely isn't sin, Mrs. Blackmore?"

"It came in covetousness, that's what! The man who found it coveted and kept it secret from others."

"Oh!" he said. "I see. Most interesting. Well, thank you, Mrs. Blackmore. Thank you. I—I think I'll go for a stroll. It's rather a nice evening."

"Remember to throw anything precious you may find back into the sea, Mr. Dodwell," she cautioned him as he left the kitchen.

He did not reply. He must throw the sea-green bottle back into the sea right away. Who knew what could happen in the night? Supposing the stopper came out of the thing by accident? Supposing it was forced out from within?

He took the bottle from his room and set off for the beach. The evening was blue with dusk and he experienced that mysterious solemnity that descends on the world in the vague shadowy interval between day and night, but it brought him no tranquility. There was a pale gleam of moonlight over the edge of the sea and only a stray cat promenaded the quiet beach, but he was uneasy in

mind as if he were being closely watched by baleful eyes.

At the sea's edge he fumbled in his pocket for the bottle and inadvertently pulled the stopper loose. He heard the hateful hiss of the escaping vapour and his fingers, suddenly paralysed with fear, could not maintain their grip on the anemone stopper. It fell on to the shingle. He heard the faint tinkle of its contact with the pebbles.

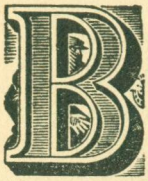
Frantically he fell to his knees and scrabbled in the shingle . . . He was demented with horror. The stopper! Merciful heaven! It must be found!

A deep coughing snarl along the beach, as of some great beast, caused him momentarily to stop his frantic searching in the half-light; glancing up fearfully he saw a huge sabre-toothed tiger such as primeval man might have seen long ago on this very beach, its eyes like firelight on green jade, where a moment ago had been a tabby cat . . .

Hallucination! Just hallucination! his mind screeched as he broke his fingernails in his wild, futile tearing at the pebbles.

SURVIVAL

IAN JEFFERSON



ECAUSE MY FATHER was very old and wise, and because his years had taught him the importance of being careful, he waited overlong before sending for me, so that when I came to his side he was dying.

He lay on his bed of dried fungi husks in one corner of the cave with his face turned to the wall. His hair was the coarse greyness of age; his teeth, the few that remained, yellowed and rotten. Once, when I had been very young, I had asked him why it was our teeth loosened and dropped from flabby gums. He said that it was because of the food we ate. He told me in his wisdom that all things were balanced according to their usage and purpose, that once our people had eaten food of a different kind and not the glowing fungi that grew on the cavern walls. Once, he said, teeth were needed to eat harder food, but now, because the fungi was soft and melted in the mouth juices, teeth were not used as they should be, and because of this they loosened and dropped out.

He was sleeping, the restless sleep of age. My grunt of welcome brought him complainingly awake, turning and stretching and blinking.

He said: "Grul, my son, how old are you now?"

"I have a quarter of a life," I told him.

"In your prime," he said sighing a little, then raising himself awkwardly to peer into my face. "It is time," he said, and there was a new life in his voice and the faded yellowed eyes.

"You have taken a mate?" he asked before I had time to ask a question.

I shook my head. "Not yet; but there is Bruna, the daughter of Glok. She has agreed that—."

"That must wait," he told me. "It must wait until you come back."

"Back?" I wondered. "From where . . .?"

"It is the time," he said solemnly. "After thirty generations and more besides, for in the early days no count was kept, after all those generations the time has come for which you have been prepared.

"What of your training?" he asked. "How does it go? What it its purpose?"

Then I thought that his mind must indeed be rambling, for all knew well that I and sixteen others—all young and strong—spent half of each waking period in the small cavern where the fungi grew thickest and where there was the most light. And the reason we had to do this was known to all. . . .

But to humour him I spoke of it.

"It is to teach concentration and wisdom," I said. "First the fasting, and then the staring at the light. In this way it is easiest to control the thoughts."

Then he smiled a little. "No," he

told me. "That is not the reason. Let me tell you why the elders have made you do these things. The sitting with your eyes on the brightest lights is to accustom them to a fiercer light than any you have so far met. And the fasting is to train the body to do without food for long periods at a time. And both these are for a purpose, a very special purpose.

"Listen," he said, motioning me to come close by his side. "I have much to tell you, and perhaps I have left it too late. My breath tears at my throat, the blood runs slowly in my veins. I must tell you what I know in as few a words as possible. And that will be difficult, for it is the history of the tribe, our people, from the time when they first came to live in the caverns. I must speak," he said, "of the Outside."

I echoed his last words with fear; it was well-known to us that the Outside was a place of death, only to be spoken of with bated breath.

"Listen to the truth as we know it," he continued. "This is the story of our people and how we came to be here, passed down from father to son through the generations."

He lay back panting a little, his eyes half-closed.

"At the start there was a great brightness and a horror. And when it came our people fled here to the caverns, there to eat the fungi from the walls and drink the water from the blue stream that seeps through the roof above our heads. Many died, for there was not enough food and we had none of the wisdom which has come to us since living down here. But they had the instinct of survival and so gradually they adapted themselves to the new conditions.

"In those days the water was clear, holding none of the brightness that it has now; the fungi were small and frail, not glowing with light and encased in the husks as we now know them.

"All this," he told me, his breast struggling for breath, "is the knowledge that was passed on to me by my own father before he died. Instinct has taught us to keep this memory alive until the day when we would be ready to leave the caverns and take up our rightful place Outside."

"What is Outside?" I asked.

He motioned to me to listen. "Each generation we have sent one of our people through the caverns beyond that point which is forbidden and where we dispose of our dead. From there the path slopes upward to the Outside. For one sleeping and one waking period our messenger has waited Outside and then has returned; and we, the elders, have kept him in a safe place until he died.

"For thirty generations this has been done, and twenty-nine bodies have been thrown into the abyss. People of our tribe who have given their lives, their bodies in torment, so that we might know the time was not ripe. Each of them passing in agony, with their bodies a mass of sores and their very bones rotting so that they broke with the touching.

"But with the passing of the generations those who spent the allotted span in the Outside took longer to

die. At first, four sleeping periods, then five, six and seven and more. As though the sickness that lurked Outside was becoming weaker, or that we were growing stronger. Which it is we have no way of knowing, but the one my father sent out took half a generation to die; and the one I myself ordered to climb the forbidden path almost a generation ago is still alive and well. And that is the sign that now it is safe for us to leave the caverns. Even so, I have left it for as long as I may before giving you the word to go.

"To this purpose, throughout the history of our people as far back as it goes, the strongest of our youngsters have undergone this special training, learning how they may overcome the glaring light, teaching themselves to go without nourishment. Tell me, how long may you go without eating?"

"For fourteen periods," I told him proudly. "Ten without discomfort."

"And the others?"

"All can live for at least ten. All can watch the light without pain."

"What of your instinct?" he asked then.

His talk of instinct confused me. I was at a loss to know even what he meant. He stared at me without speaking for a while.

There was a stirring in my head as though thoughts were striving to break through.

"Well?" he asked. "Did you hear anything?"

When I shook my head he sighed, stirring restlessly on his bed.

"It will come," he assured me. "That problem was always present. The instinct comes only to those who are aged and useless. But strength is needed for the work in hand. We believe that when you reach the Outside the instinct will come."

"But what is it?" I persisted, angered at my own ignorance.

"It is something that cannot be explained," he told me. "It is the understanding without words that has always belonged to our people but has fallen into disuse. It is with you now; when the time comes you will know it is there. Because you are my son it will be stronger in you than in any of the others. That is why you are to be their leader.

"Think of it as a sense," he explained. "Like seeing and tasting. Once there was another sense . . ." He seemed to be rambling, talking to himself. "We had a sense of being able to smell." He touched his nose. "Here. A sense associated with the food we ate before there was only the fungi. Now we have only a faint trace of taste, and no ability to smell. . . ."

He roused himself suddenly, as if aware of the urgency.

"The others will be told of what they must do. At this moment each of them will be standing before his father as you are now, being told much of what I am telling you. You will take as much food with you as will last three days. You will not be able to carry more.

"You will climb the forbidden path and arrive at the Outside. Then you will travel in a straight line for two sleeping and two waking periods. At

the end of that time the first of your followers will be sent back here to tell us of your findings. Then you will move in a circle, always keeping the entrance to the cavern in sight, at the end of each waking period sending another messenger back. And when there is only yourself and one other left you will return and make a complete report. And if everything is as it should be our people can move back again into the Outside."

The knowledge of the work ahead stunned me into silence. All my teachings had told me that to climb the steep path was forbidden. I had thought of the Outside as being a place invented to keep the youngsters from straying. It was a place of horror and death, of fearsome creatures who would attack and kill.

"What is the Outside?" I asked my father.

"Those who have spent the sleeping and waking periods there have told different stories," he told me. "Some spoke of rocks, much the same as those in the caverns, but with no fungi growing on them. Some spoke of growths that spring from the ground to various heights. Some tell of the ground underfoot being as hard as the cavern floor, others say that there was a moisture in the air and that when they set foot to ground an impression was left. One spoke of a strange substance that covered everything and which turned to moisture when it was touched. But all speak of the brightness of the light, saying how it seemed to burn into their eyes, causing great pain."

"There is something that causes madness?" I hazarded. "That they should tell such varying stories?"

"Possibly," he said carefully. "But my instinct tells me that perhaps there was truth in all their words. It is the same instinct that has been handed down to me through the blood of my father. It tells me of the start of it all; of the brightness that came to fill the world, a brightness that destroyed. And after came the sound and a moving of the air, strong enough to lift our people and toss them aside, broken. It was then that those who were left came down here, bringing a fear that they didn't understand, but driven only by their instincts which told them to drive deep into the ground.

"They were ignorant people, those ancestors of ours. They were not as we are now. In those past ages they fought and killed, living from day to day, eating when the need arose and raising families with no thought to the future."

He moved uneasily on his bed, his eyes dimmed.

"The wise ones have passed down the knowledge that it is the shining water from the stream and the fungi which has brought about the change in our lives. They say that it might even have changed our very appearance, but that we have no way of telling. Now our lives are ordered; there is no killing; we gain each day in knowledge. And always we have the instinct of our forefathers, perhaps the only useful thing they have handed down to us"

"I haven't got it," I told him. "I have no understanding."

"It will come," he said, "when the time is ready. Now go."

He turned his face to the wall. The interview was over. I felt that this would be the last time I would see him alive. But he was also the leader of the people, and he had given his orders. I left him without any more words.

But I was frightened beyond belief. As a child I had believed in the existence of the Outside, but only because it was held up to me as the place from which there could be no return. It lay beyond the last cavern, they said, and one must never stray beyond there. As I had grown older so I had come to think of the place as having no existence save in the minds of the mothers who wished to keep the children from straying.

But now I had to tell myself that it was real; that our people had once lived there. And that now I was to make the journey up the forbidden path to see for myself.

Deep within me this fear raged, fighting the knowledge that had risen unbidden saying that there was nothing to fear. I wondered if this was the first faint stirrings of instinct.

For a long while I stood and thought. Then the last words of my father came, and with it the knowledge that I was the strongest of the tribe, and that I must show no cowardice.

The others were ready and waiting in the big cavern where the stream rustled across the rocky floor, filling the place with thin streamers of the glowing light. There was Groc and Hurrer, and others of my own age gathered together fearful and silent. Each with his own pile of food at his feet. Groc, with whom I played when I was young, came with me to the food cavern while I plucked the fungi from the walls. Like the others the fear was heavy on his face, and he said not a word as we returned to the big cavern.

Some of the older ones of the tribe were there to see us go. But there was no excitement, no last messages. It was clear from their behaviour that they were doubtful of the outcome of our journey. With a sinking heart I silently motioned the party to follow.

I led the way from the big cavern into the place where the rock walls crowded in and where nobody lived. From there we passed into the cavern of the sick and then out again with the passage narrowing and the abyss opening out dark and bottomless to one side. Here we had to press tight against the wall to pass without danger. I kept my eyes averted from the depths, feeling that before many waking periods had passed my father's body would be thrown into its darkness.

And so we came into the last cavern of all, the one that is never used, for from one side of it is the way that leads upwards, the forbidden way.

It took all my courage to turn my face to that steep, rocky path. Only the knowledge that I was my father's son kept my feet moving. Upwards we climbed, slipping and stumbling on the loose rocks and boulders with the walls closing in from all sides.

There was only a faint light now, for the fungi were sparse and the few that did cling to the damp rock face were glowing very feebly. Behind I could hear the scrabbling of feet and the panting of my companions.

Once we had to wade breast-high through a fiercely-bubbling stream; once we had to crawl on our bellies in a place where the roof all but touched the ground. Groc breathed in my ear, "How much farther?" as though I knew what lay ahead. I grunted back for him to save his breath, proud in my leadership and not wishing to admit that I knew little more than the others about the Outside.

The way turned and twisted but ever climbing upwards. There were no signs of fungi now, but a glow of light for all that. It was Groc who noticed the flood of light ahead and drew my attention to it.

The effort of climbing had set my muscles aching, and perhaps there was a goodness in the pain that took my thoughts from what might lie ahead. It was an adventure, I told myself. Once the horror could be overcome there was always the surge of adventure; something to boast about when I returned. . . .

Groc breathed, "Light . . . see. Go carefully now."

The light grew, filling the passage with a clearness that made the eyes smart. It was different from the only other light I had known, and yet, in the first moment of seeing it, familiar.

One last corner turned and then we were there. We had reached the Outside before we had even chance to realize it. I came out first on to a smooth stretch of rock, looked upwards instinctively to seek the source of this new light, and then fell to the ground, hugging the rock tightly, my face pressed close to its warm surface.

For there was no top to the Outside. Only the brightness that burned deep into the eyes and a sickness that set everything whirling. I forgot who I was, forgot those who followed, forgot everything in the need to keep my eyes tight-closed from the horror of this roofless world. For one moment I nearly turned and fled back into the cave from which we had emerged.

It was in those first few breaths of this new air that the vague stirrings came to my mind; as if something alien was trying to come to life. There were shadowy memories of things I could never have seen; and a twitching of my nostrils as if they too were trying to stir into awareness. Something told me to lift my head and look round, that there was nothing here to cause fear, that this was the place where my people had once lived.

I felt sure that this must be the start of the thing called instinct about which my father had spoken. This was the deep hidden knowledge starting to show itself.

When I came to my feet the others were huddled fearfully with their faces also pressed against the ground. I stirred them roughly, bringing them to their feet. Then I turned to see what the Outside was like.

Distance was the first thing that

needed understanding. For a while my eyes refused to tell the story of how far this new world extended. After the mistiness had cleared I could see that there was no end, that the distance went on forever. For a while the dizziness returned but now I had the awakening instinct to help fight it back.

We were on a level piece of rock with the ground sloping away beneath to the vastness of the world. Tall growths sprouted from the ground, pointing upwards and moving a little with the air. For the greater part they were clustered together as if seeking protection in numbers. My instinct told me that they offered nothing to fear, that they had a similarity to the fungi of the caverns.

Behind and to each side were the piled rocks which reached away as far as the eye could see. In front were more rocks, piled one above the other, covered with growths of different sizes.

So this was the Outside. A place where nothing moved.

It was easy to look ahead now; the sickness only came if I turned my eyes upwards to the brightness. My companions were silent. All except Groc. He said: "So this is the Outside. I didn't expect it to look like this . . ."

The time had come for me to obey my orders. Leading the way I started off down the slopes. The ground was hard, with a certain resemblance to the floor of the cavern. As we got lower a short, wiry growth started to appear, pleasant to the feet, deadening the sound of our passage. Groc, walking abreast with me now, said: "We may not be able to find our way back. Where are we going?"

I nodded ahead. "We travel in a straight line for two sleeping and two waking periods. We keep trace of our path by these groups of growth. We shall aim first for that large rock directly ahead.

The stirring in my nostrils became stronger the farther we penetrated into this new world. I recalled what my father had told me about the lost sense of smell, deciding that this was the first signs of its return. A confusion of thoughts came with the smells. From one group of the tall things came a certain sense; from a small cluster of growths in the crevice of some rocks came another. Before we reached level ground I had already learned to associate a different smell with each cluster we passed.

With the knowledge that this part of my father's teaching was right I stepped ahead with confidence, the others following in single file.

The first sleeping period we spent beneath a cluster of the tall growths which by this time had become as familiar to me as if I had known of them all my life. I sensed that they offered shelter and protection. Before we slept there came a change in the brightness. For some time it had been gradually dimming and now it faded completely. There was a little fear and wondering amongst us, but after a while we accepted it as a normal occurrence. Instinct again? I wondered as we settled down in our shelter.

Leaving two of my followers to

keep watch we slept soundly enough in this new world. When we woke, Groc said thoughtfully: "If this dimming of the radiance is to happen regularly, as I feel it will, don't you think we would be better travelling when it is on? The brightness is still trying to our eyes . . ."

While privately agreeing with him I still had my position as leader to maintain. And also there had been no mention of this in my father's instructions. I told him shortly that we would travel as before, sleeping during the period of dimness. He sulked for a while but soon came back to walk by my side.

After the second sleeping period I sent the first messenger back to the caverns with the word that so far all was well, and that we had seen no other living creatures.

The rocks from which we had emerged were now far behind but still within sight by reason of their size. I found by this time that I could look upwards towards the light without having to grasp the ground to save falling. And we discovered too that the light had its source in a globe of brilliance which moved steadily across the emptiness. There were other moving things there too, pale and drifting, occasionally moving in front of the globe so that for a while, even though the light was still there, it was dimmed.

And the final dimming of the radiance with the approach of the sleeping period coincided with the globe lowering itself to the ground far ahead and finally vanishing altogether. The first time this happened caused a panic among my followers, but their fear soon passed. And I saw in its passing the instinct that was surely stirring in their minds as well as my own.

With the sending of the first messenger I turned aside from the direct path as I had been ordered, striking off into a new direction. Every two sleeping periods I sent back another messenger, each with the word that we were so far the only living things in the Outside.

In time there was only Groc and myself left.

And during the waking period, when we turned our faces back to the rocks ready to start the journey back to the caverns, we saw the first signs of life other than our own.

We had slept in a hollow beneath some rocks; by this time we were feeling the effects of going without food. We had found water but although it quenched our thirst it lacked the sparkle and tang of the glowing stream in the cavern.

With the coming of the radiance we stirred, Groc stretching and yawning and raising his face to wrinkle his nose, a habit we had all found ourselves doing. By this time we had learned how to identify the things we saw by the thoughts our noses carried to our minds.

He said: "There is something new. . . ."

I came to stand by his side, and the new thing came to me as well. And with it a stirring of uncertainty, almost fear.

"This is very different," he said fearfully.

And then a thought came unbidden to my mind, a faint distant thought that brought a fleeting picture of things I didn't understand. A picture of rocks ordered into a shape; many of them, with creatures moving about.

"Can you see it?" I asked him softly.

"No," he grunted back, peering from side to side. He had mistaken my meaning. The mind picture hadn't shown itself to him. The instinct was working only in my mind.

I led the way from the shelter of rocks, treading softly and cautiously. And then we saw them.

There were two of them, some distance away, walking together slowly and awkwardly. I had never seen anything like them before, and yet mingled with the strangeness of their appearance came the sense of familiarity.

They were small and puny, with a way of walking that was different from our own. Their faces were turned away; they carried sticks which they planted to the ground with each clumsy step.

And from them came successive waves of thought-pictures, strengthening as I opened my mind to receive them. Words came too, strange words that individually held no meaning, but collectively caused yet more pictures to form. Suddenly I knew what they must be. . . .

Groc said, "What are they, Grul? I feel that I have seen them before but that is impossible."

"Go back now," I ordered, excited and tense. "Tell the others that there is nothing to fear, that our people may leave the caverns and come back to live in the Outside. Tell them that."

"But what are they?" he persisted. "They will expect me to say what these creatures are."

It was clear that his instinct was taking longer to come to life than mine had. "Go!" I ordered impatiently. "I will keep watch on them."

I came boldly out into the open so that they could see me. There was no fear, no hesitation. I called . . . loudly so they must hear.

They stopped, turning to stare towards me.

They were speaking to each other and the words came winged on their frightened thoughts. But I had known that they would be afraid.

Meaningless words, but the thoughts vibrant with horror.

"What is it . . .?" A wave of fear came with the words.

And then the reply. "God. A wolf. A giant wolf."

To Groc, still waiting, I said: "Tell our people I have found food."

THE VICTORIAN UNDERWORLD

HENRY MAYHEW

A further excerpt from LONDON LABOUR *and the* LONDON POOR

A CONSIDERABLE number of depredations are committed at the doors of shoemaker's shops. They are committed by women of the lower orders, of all ages, some of them very elderly. They come up to the door as though they were shopping, attired generally in an old bonnet and faded shawl. The shoes are hanging inside the door, suspended from an iron rod by a piece of string, and are sometimes hanging on a bar outside the shop.

These parties are much of the same order of thieves already described, possibly many of them mothers and some the grandmothers of the ragged boys referred to. The greater number of them Irish cockneys. They come up to the shop-door generally in the afternoon, as if to examine the quality of the shoes or boots, but seldom make any purchase. They observe how the articles are suspended and the best mode of abstracting them. They return in the dusk of the evening and steal them.

The shops from which these robberies are committed are to be found in Lambeth Walk, New Cut, Lower Marsh, Lambeth, Tottenham Court Road, Westminster, Drury Lane, the neighbourhood of St. Giles's, Petticoat Lane, Spitalfields, Whitcross Street, St. Luke's and other localities.

Small articles are occasionally taken from shop windows in the winter evenings, by means of breaking a pane of glass in a very ingenious way. These thefts are committed at the shops of confectioners, tobacconists and watchmakers, etc., in the quiet by-streets.

Sometimes they are done by the younger ragged-boys, but in most cases by lads of 14 and upwards, belonging to the fraternity of London thieves.

In the dark winter evenings we may sometimes see groups of these ragged boys, assembled around the windows of a small grocery-shop, looking greedily at the almond-rock, lollipops, sugar-candy, barley-sugar, brandy-balls, pies, and tarts, displayed in all their tempting sweetness and in all their gaudy tints. They insert the point of a knife or other sharp instrument into the corner or side of the pane, then give it a wrench, when the pane cracks in a semi-circular star-like form around the part punctured. Should a piece of glass large enough to admit the hand not be sufficiently loosened, they apply the sharp instrument at another place in the pane, when the new cracks communicate with the rents already made; on applying a sticking-plaster to the pane, the piece readily adheres to it, and is abstracted.

The thief inserts his hand through an opening in the window, seizes a handful of sweets or other goods and runs away, perhaps followed by the shopman in full chase. These thieves are termed star-glazers.

Children are occasionally sent out by their mothers with bundles of washing to convey to different persons, or they may be employed to bring clothes from the mangle. They are sometimes met by a man, at other times by a woman, who entices them to go to a shop for a halfpenny or a pennyworth of sweets, meanwhile taking care to leave their parcels or bundle, which they promise to keep for them till they return. On their coming out of the shop they find the party has decamped and seldom any clue can be got of them, as they belong to distant localities of the metropolis.

In other cases they go up to the children, when they are proceeding on their way, with a bundle or basket, and say: "You are going to take these things home. Do you know where you are going to take them?" The child being taken off her guard may say she is to carry them to "Mrs. So-and-so, of such a street." Then they will say, "You are a good girl, and are quite right. Mrs. So-and-so sent me for them, as she is in a hurry and is going out." The child probably gives her the basket or bundle, when the thief absconds.

These larcenies are generally committed by vagrants decently dressed and too lazy to work, who go sneaking about the streets and live in low neighbourhoods, such as St. Giles's, Drury Lane, Short's Gardens, Queen Street, and the Borough. They are in most cases committed during the evening, though sometimes during the day.

Another method of stealing is child stripping. This is generally done by females, debauched, drunken hags who watch their opportunity and accost children in the streets, tidily dressed with good boots and clothes. They entice them away to a low or quiet neighbourhood for the purpose, as they say, of buying them sweets, or with some other pretext. When they get into a convenient place, they give them a halfpenny or some sweets, and take off the articles of dress, and tell them to remain till they return, when they go away with the booty.

This is done most frequently in mews in the West End, and at Clerkenwell, Westminster, the Borough, and other similar localities. These heartless, debased women sometimes commit these felonies in the disreputable neighbourhoods where they live, but more frequently in distant places, where they are not known and cannot be easily traced. This mode of felony is not so prevalent in the metropolis as formerly.

Stealing from drunken persons is done by a very low class of male thieves, who go prowling about at all times of the day and night for this purpose.

They loiter about the streets and public-houses to steal from drunken persons, and are called "Bug-hunters" and "Mutchers". You see many of them lounging about gin-palaces in the vicinity of the Borough, near St.

George's Church. We have met them there in the course of our rambles over the metropolis, and at Whitechapel and St. Giles's. They also frequent the Westminster Road, the vicinity of the Victoria Theatre, Shoreditch, and Somers Town. These low wretches are of all ages, and many of them have the appearance of bricklayers', stonemasons' and engineers' labourers. They pretend they are labourers out of work and are forward in intruding themselves on the notice of persons entering those houses; they expect to be treated to liquor, though entire strangers to them.

They are not unfrequently so rude as to take the pewter-pot of another person from the bar, and pass it round to their comrades till they have emptied the contents. If remonstrated with, they return insulting language, and try to involve the person in a broil.

You occasionally find them loafing about the tap-rooms. They watch for drunken people, whom they endeavour to persuade to treat them. They entice him to go down some court or slum, where they strip him of his watch, money or other valuables he may have on his person. Or they sometimes rob him in the public-houses; but this seldom occurs, as they are aware it would lead to detection. They prefer to follow him out of the public-house. Many of these robberies are committed in the public urinals at a late hour at night.

These men have often abandoned women who cohabit with them, and

assist them in these low depredations. They frequently dwell in low courts and alleys in the neighbourhood of gin-palaces, have no settled mode of life, and follow no industrious calling —living as loafers and low ruffians.

Some of them have wives, who go out washing and charing to obtain a livelihood for their children and themselves, as well as to support their brutal husbands, lazzaroni of the metropolis.

This class of persons are in the habit of stealing lead from houses, and copper boilers from kitchens and wash-houses.

There is another class of thieves, who steal from drunken persons, usually in the dusk of the evening, in the following manner: two women, respectably dressed, meet a drunken man in the street, stop him and ask him to treat them. They adjourn to the bar of a public-house for the purpose of getting some gin or ale. While drinking at the bar, one of the women tries to rob him of his watch or money. A man who is called a "stickman", an accomplice and possibly a paramour of hers, comes to the bar a short time after them. He has a glass of some kind of liquor, and stands beside them. Some motions and signs pass between the two females and this man. If they have by this time secured the booty, it is passed to the latter, who, thereupon slips away, with the stolen articles in his possession.

In some cases, when the property is taken from the drunken man, one of the women on some pretext steps to the door and passes it to the "stickman" standing outside, who then makes off with it. In other cases these robberies are perpetrated in the outside of the house, in some by-street.

Sometimes the man quickly discovers his loss, and makes an outcry against the women; when the "stickman" comes up and asks, "What is the matter?" the man may reply, "These two women have robbed me." The stickman answers, "I'll go and fetch a policeman." The property is passed to him by the women, and he decamps. If a criminal information is brought against the females, the stolen goods are not found in their possession and the case is dropped.

These women seldom or never allow drunken men to have criminal connection with them, but get their living by this base system of plunder. They change their field of operation over the metropolis, followed by the sneaking "stickman".

Some of these females have been known in early life to sell oranges in the street.

The "stickman" during the day lounges about the parlours in quiet public-houses where thieves resort, and the women during the day are sometimes engaged in needlework—some of the latter have a fair education, which they may have learned in prison, and others are very illiterate.

Though respectable in dress and appearance, they generally belong to the felon class of Irish cockney. They are to be found in Lissen Grove, Leicester Square, Portland Town and other localities.

Females in respectable positions in society occasionally take too much

intoxicating liquor and are waylaid by old women, gin-drinkers, who frequent public-houses in low neighbourhoods. They introduce themselves to the inebriated woman as a friend, to see her to some place of safety until she has recovered from the effects of her dissipation—she may have been lying on the pavement, and unable to walk. They lift her up by the hand and steal the gold ring from her finger.

At other times they take her into some by-court or street in low neighbourhoods, where doors may frequently be seen standing open; they rob her in some of these dark passages of her money, watch, and jewellery, and sometimes carry off her clothes.

If seen by persons in the neighbourhood, it is winked at, and no information given, as they generally belong to the same unprincipled class.

There is another low class of women who prowl about the streets at midnight, watching for any respectable-looking person who may be passing the worse of liquor. If they notice a drunken man, one comes and enters into conversation with him, and while thus engaged, another woman steps up, touches him under the chin, or otherwise distracts his attention. The person who first accosted him, with her companion, then endeavours to pick his pockets and plunder him of his property. A case of this kind occurred near the Marble Arch in August 1860.

They have many ingenious ways of distracting the attention of their victim, some of them very obscene and shameless.

Such persons are often seen at midnight in the neighbourhood of Bloomsbury and Oxford Street, the Strand, Lower Thames Street and other localities.

Stealing linen, etc., exposed to dry, is generally done by vagrants in the suburbs of the metropolis from 7 to 11 o'clock in the evening; when left out all night, it is often done at midnight.

Linen and other clothes are frequently left hanging on lines or spread out on the grass in yards at the back of the house. Entrance is effected through the street-doors which may have been left open, or by climbing over the wall. In many cases these felonies are committed by middle-aged women. If done by a man, he is generally assisted by a female who carries off the property; were he seen carrying a bundle of clothes, he would be stopped by a vigilant officer and be called to give an account of it, which would possibly lead to his detection.

These felonies generally consist of sheets, counterpanes, shirts, table-covers, pinafores, towels, stockings and such-like articles.

When any of them are marked, the female makes it her business to pick out the marks, in case it might lead to their detection. Such robberies are often traced by the police through the assistance of pawnbrokers.

They are very common where there are gardens at the back of the house, such as Kensall Green, Camden

Town, Kensington, Battersea, Clapham, Peckham and Victoria Park.

The clothes are generally disposed of at pawnbrokers or the leaving-shops, commonly called "Dolly Shops". They leave them there for a small sum of money and get a ticket. If they return for them in the course of a week, they are charged 3*d.* a shilling interest. If they do not return for them in seven days, they are disposed of to persons of low character. These wretches at the leaving-shops manage to get them into the hands of parties who would not be likely to give information—the articles, from their superior quality, being generally understood to be stolen.

These felonies are also committed by the female Sneaks who call at gentlemen's houses, selling small wares, or on some other similar errand. When they find the door open and a convenient opportunity, they often abstract the linen and other clothes from the lines, and dispose of them in the manner referred to.

There are many depredations committed over the metropolis from carts, carriers' wagons, cabs, railway vans, and other vehicles. Many of those people have the appearance of porters at a warehouse and are a peculiar order.

At one time they may have been porters at warehouses, or connected with railways, or carmen to large commercial firms. Some have corduroy or moleskin jacket and trousers and cloth cap; others have a plain frock-coat and cap.

Many of the robberies from carts are done by the connivance of the carters. They are sent by business establishments to dispose of goods over the metropolis; some of them are connected with the worst class of thieves. They connive with those men in stealing their employer's property, and in rifling other carts, carry the booty away in their own, and always manage to secure a part of the prize.

These carters take thieves occasionally to railway stations to assist them with their work, and when an opportunity occurs, carry off goods from the railway platform, such as bales of bacon, cheese, bags of nails, boxes of tin and copper, and travellers' luggage, which they dispose of to marine-store dealers and at chandlers' shops. The wearing apparel in the trunks they sell to second-hand shops, kept by Jews and others in low neighbourhoods, such as Petticoat Lane, Lambeth, Westminster, and the Borough of Southwark.

Many carts are rifled by persons who represent themselves as hawkers or costermongers—men who have no steady industrious mode of livelihood, and are usually in the company of prostitutes and thieves of the worst description. The carter may have occasion to call at a city house, and to leave his horse and cart in the street, when they steal a whip, coat, or horsecloth, the reins from off the horse, or any portable article they can lay their hands on.

Robberies from cabs and carriages are sometimes effected in the following way: they follow the cab or vehicle with a horse and cart, driving along in its wake—two or three thieves generally in the cart. One of

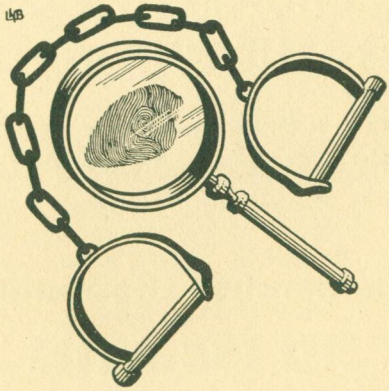
them jumps on the spring of the conveyance while the driver is sitting in front of his vehicle, pulls down the trunk or box, and slips it into the cart, then drives away with the booty.

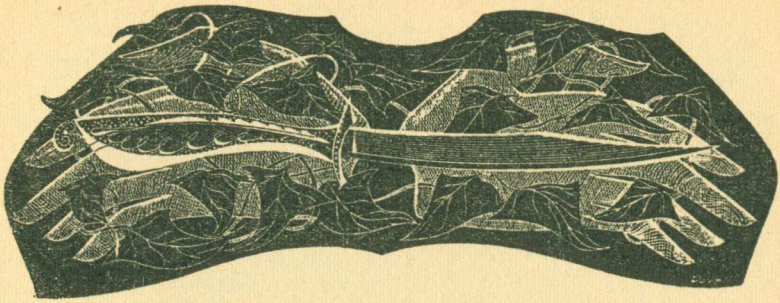
At other times they run up, and leap on the spring of the conveyance while the driver is proceeding along with his back toward them; lower the trunk or other article from the rood, and walk off with it. These trunks sometimes contain money, silver plate and other valuable property.

These depredations are always done at night, by experienced thieves, and generally in the winter season. They are common in the fashionable squares of the West End, at the East End, toward the Commercial Road and St. George's-in-the-East, at Ratcliffe Highway, the City, the Borough of Southwark, and Lambeth, along the docks, and at the railway stations around the metropolis.

There is a class of robberies from gentlemen's carriages about the West End of the metropolis. In going to the opera, West End theatres or other fashionable places of amusement, the gentleman frequently leaves his valuable overcoat or cloak in the carriage. These thieves follow the conveyance to some quiet street leading to the stables where the vehicle is to remain till the gentleman returns from his evening's amusement. They let down the window of the carriage and carry off any article which is left. The theft is nimbly committed while the vehicle is on its way to the stables, or when it is returning to the opera, and is done chiefly by young men, experienced thieves. They live in the low neighbourhoods already referred to.

There is a good deal of this mode of thieving carried on in the West End of London during the winter season.





CROOKS IN BOOKS

A review of some recent crime, mystery and detective books

STEVE AUSTEN

"THE PROGRESS OF A CRIME", by Julian Symons (*Crime Club Choice*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

Julian Symons is good but is he good enough to go outside the conventions of the hallowed crime circle? The edges have become blurred over the last two decades; mystery, murder, detection, the who-dunit and the thriller have all tended to merge into a composite and less firmly defined genre of crime fiction, probably for better but, on occasions, for worse. Mr. Symons has been teetering on that dangerous no-man's-land between this and the novel proper. His latest essay, and it is characterized by imagination and quality, is the analysis of a casual murder (perhaps too casual) and what follows from it. A group of Teddy boys and a stabbing; a provincial journalist; the nature of truth and evidence; the behaviour of the police (refreshingly treated as not altogether admirable, a rare thing in this land where the policemen for crime novelists and visiting film stars, at any rate, are always wonderful), and of the public at large, all this is well visualized and accurately and realistically reported. In addition, of course, the writing is good, well above the average and admittedly low level of crime fiction. But good enough in total? Not quite. And if the semi-documentary approach adds a solid third dimension, it also carries with it a risk of dullness which Mr. Symons does not altogether escape. Nonetheless, if this *Progress of a Crime* has not quite hit the jackpot, it was a near miss, and it was a pretty ambitious jackpot that was being attempted. This is undoubtedly a

book worth reading, and Julian Symons deserves congratulation.

"A CLUE FOR CLUTHA", by Hugh Munro (*Macdonald,* 10*s.* 6*d.*).

Re-enter Clyde dockside detective Clutha in a fast-moving, readable, tough thriller and yet, for a' that, worth no more than a beta minus. Clutha thinks, talks, acts; girls, crooks, policemen and Scots seaside resort worthies chase their own tails somewhere at the bottom. Good round the whirligig with Spanish gold, scenes but occasional softness at the centre—"Even at the bar of Heaven they'll have a special Glasgow bell for chiels like you . . ." Sic transit Clutha.

"THE RED COBRA", by Francis Grierson (*Robert Hale,* 10*s.* 6*d.*).

Counter-intelligence, F.O. secret departments, emigrés, financiers, artists, Scotland Yard, a crime novelist hero and, of course, an enigmatic Oriental. Also the Central Operative Bureau of Revolutionary Activities (COBRA for short), an all-Red Murder Inc. designed to smash the Commonwealth.

Despite recent contemporary references, political analyses, etc., it all really seems to belong to the Oppenheimer, Le Queux world. Somewhere Mr. Trim of the F.O. says to Monk the novelist that he's heard of the care he takes to get his background correct, that he's known to look for his characters "anywhere from a society wedding to a dockside public house". And Monk replies, "My publishers insist on that sort of tripe." If

this goes for Mr. Grierson, then he must have been moving in some pretty weird pubs and clubs on and off Whitehall. I doubt it: perhaps M.I.5, not to mention the F.O., does too.

"A Touch of Drama", by Guy Cullingford (*Hammond Hammond*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

Poor, maladjusted boy who makes good, becomes successful playwright, marries, divorces, marries again, now loses wife No. 2. Murder occupies a third of the book, while the rest is devoted to dramatist's return to grisly home-town, abortive, bitter-sweet love affair and old pals letting and not letting each other down. At times well done, the sum is disappointingly negligible. Probably too many ingredients which somehow makes it all rather mixed up and inconclusive.

"Slack Tide", by George Harman Coxe (*Hammon Hammond*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

Competent murder-thriller set in pleasing American East Coast estuary with millionaire's island and boatyard figuring prominently; also police and les girls, nice and not-so-nice. Good, readable, clean-limbed fun.

"The Lady and the Giant", by Clarence Buddington Kelland (*Robert Hale*, 10*s.* 6*d.*).

1869 and Barnum and Bailey's U.S.A. A thriller of a kind, with murders, splendid fights and a nice case of false pretences and swindling on a big scale in little ole Syracuse. Colourful, readable and enjoyable.

"ONE MAN'S DEATH", by Seldon Truss (*Robert Hale*, 10*s.* 6*d.*).

Not quite my meat, I confess, but there's a nice vein of quiet humour in Mr. Truss' writing and an engaging ingenuity in this plot. Full marks, too, for the non-U crime reporter who inherits a pub and a murder.

"THE GIANT STUMBLES", by John Lymington (*Hodder & Stoughton*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

A good, exciting piece of science-fiction which is, like all the best in this *genre*, a moral tale. The technical detail is convincing and simple enough for a layman to grasp, characters are good and the style easy and flowing. Heartily recommended for addicts.

"THE WEB OF SHADOWS", by Elizabeth Backhouse (*Robert Hale*, 10*s.* 6*d.*).

Set in a timber town in Western Australia, this book starts with an exciting and dramatic situation. In fact, the central idea is so good that it is disappointing to find it creaking so rheumatically towards the end. Some passages are embarrassingly overwritten, but there is a promising talent here.

"THE ALINGTON INHERITANCE", by Patricia Wentworth (*Hodder & Stoughton*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

A romance about a wronged, beautiful and incredibly spineless heiress. Miss Silver makes too late and too brief an appearance to class the book as a detective story. As they say on

the school reports: Miss Wentworth can do better.

"THE SILENT HOSTAGE", by Sarah Gainham (*Eyre & Spottiswoode*, 13*s*. 6*d*.).

Relaxed, rather slow-moving but compelling story set in northern Yugoslavia about an innocent English widow who gets involved with three wily Europeans who share her small, isolated hotel. Not frightfully easy to understand what it is all about, but one reads on, hoping to find out.

"KINGSTON BLACK", by Roger East (*Crime Club*, 10*s*. 6*d*.).

Detective story in the Margery Allingham tradition—nice people, unregretted victim, a spicing of technical knowledge (about typology), all very cosy and readable. This is the kind of detective story most people—to judge by the sales of the leading ladies of the profession—enjoy. And of its kind, it is very good.

"THE CASE OF THE INNOCENT VICTIMS", by John Creasey (*Hodder & Stoughton*, 10*s*. 6*d*.).

Good, practised, fast-moving story from the Creasey factory. Inspector West investigates a series of baby-killings. I didn't particularly care for the subject. Silly squeamishness, no doubt.

"THE NINTH CANDLE", by Florence Ford (*Crime Club*, 10*s*. 6*d*.).

Yet another American female stirring up a witch's cauldron of suspense. Only, alas, the mixture, if as

before, fails to bubble; maybe the ingredients aren't in the right proportions or the author lost interest—as I did. Anyway, the result is a weak broth—despite young widow visiting aged recluse mama-in-law, living in matriarchal power on sea-girt rock-bound Atlantic island, decaying house burning down and an incredible drawing-room comedy galaxy of beautiful bitches. Enough.

"NIGHTMARE FOR DR. MORELLE", by Ernest Dudley (*Robert Hale,* 10*s.* 6*d.*).

After reading this, my first Dr. Morelle, the nightmare is mine not the smooth, omniscient Doc's. Banal, melodramatic, incoherent—I suppose it's an introduction to the horrors of the international drug traffic. The Doc takes in Baghdad, Paris and Hamburg—tourism with misspelt names—to aid Interpol. Miss Frayle follows: I quit.

"MORTGAGE FOR MURDER", by Paul Costello (*Cassell,* 13*s.* 6*d.*).

A run-of-the-mill P.I. tale of girls, murder and blackmail. Good enough for a commuter's half-hour but not much more. We know where the Raymond Chandlers of yester-year are, alas, but where in the name of Marlowe are their successors?

"A WELL-KNOWN FACE", by Josephine Bell (*Hodder & Stoughton,* 12*s.* 6*d.*).

A surfeit of medicos in a murder drama in provincial England with the expected good atmosphere and competent writing of Miss Bell. But somehow the tension and, I fancy, the plot are below par. And despite strikings-off the register, love amid the syringes, bookies and bets, murders and all, I didn't really care.

"REQUIEM FOR CHARLES", by Harry Carmichael (*Crime Club,* 10*s.* 6*d.*).

I like Harry Carmichael's no-nonsense approach to crime writing, even if I don't always get very enthusiastic about his books. One can almost hear him say, "To hell with Fine Writing, the Novel, Crime in Literature, etc., etc., let's get on with the story—and the next book." And here it is, craftsmanlike as ever, the murder of an absconding womanizer in Knightsbridge. Sex, beer, police and barristers plus Quinn, the seedy, pub-addicted journalist with a heart of slightly dulled copper. If it's good straightforward library competence you're after, you can rely on Harry Carmichael.

"THE CASE OF THE VIOLENT VIRGIN", by Michael Avallone (*W. H. Allen,* 11*s.* 6*d.*).

Ed Noon, P.I. (what else?), gets involved with a pretty unlikely set of dolls and guys, including a lip-stick innovator and a college Dean who goes in for the worst kind of gobbledygook (pseudo-erudite) since Gower last tackled Civil Servantese, and an even more incredible Art Treasure. Still, it all adds up to a fairly exciting journey on the *Mainliner,* one of those high-speed de luxe trains, in this case running from New York to Chi-

cago. It also gives rise to a pretty odd picture of American life, on and off wheels.

"THE MAN WHO LOST HIS WAY", by W. E. Johns (*Macdonald*, 10*s.* 6*d.*).

Hungarian Communists and anti-Communists leaping around the Scottish Highlands like young fawns. In a remote mansion of hair-raising improbability, our hero, who has lost his way and run out of petrol, finds Central European drama, a wife and a fairly midget rough-house. The story moves along at a tolerable pace but the style is stilted to the point that one wonders whether it is a translation from the Scottish, and our hero is as indifferent a conversationalist as he is a motorist. His fiancée is unfortunately little better, a tolerable sample of their lean, sensitive duologues being the following:

"What is it, darling?" he said quickly.

"Papa is dead," she answered in a flat, even voice.

"Dead," Repetition of the word was excusable.

"Yes."

"Great God! You can't mean that!"

"I mean exactly that."

"Are you sure?" He was incredulous and frankly sceptical.

"I am quite sure. Frantz is with him now."

"Where is he?"

"In his room. Lying on his bed."

"But he seemed so well."

"I know."

Perhaps, after all, it was the author who lost his way.

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Sworn to and subscribed before me this 12 day of Feb., 1960.

[SEAL] JOHN B. PENFOLD,
Consul U.S. Embassy.
(My commission expires , 19)

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