LONDON MYSTERY

No. 51

A quarterly anthology of the best
CRIME, MYSTERY & DETECTIVE
• FACT & FICTION •

A Norman Kark Publication

TWO AND SIXPENCE QUARTERLY

MEN

Slick, shaved and all spruced up-ready to face a fresh new day

Lazy-Shave. No brush. No fuss. Press-button foam lather for the smoothest shave of your life. 6/4

After-Shave Lotion. A skin-smoothing conditioner for an invigorated wide-awake freshness. 6/8

Deodorant Cologne. Discreet deodorant cologne for men, refreshes and protects. 7/8

Cream Hair Dressing. Tames the wildest hair, keeps it healthy and groomed with no trace of grease. 4/10

Shampoo for Men. Foams faster, cleans more thoroughly, leaves scalp free from dandruff. 4/4

MAX FACTOR FOR MEN

THE LONDON MYSTERY SELECTION

Perhaps the greatest of mysteries is that of the human mind. It is capable of great power, yet it can become so possessed by emotions—love, fear, hatred—that all power of reasoning is lost.

The workings of the mind, their effects upon actions, have always fascinated writers of fiction; LONDON MYSTERY authors are no exception. The corners of the mind which they choose to explore are those in which the baser and weaker emotions have their being. The mind of the murderer, moved by hatred, avarice, a compulsion to kill indiscriminately; the mind driven to madness by circumstances, by fears of the unknown; the disembodied mind seeking revenge from the other side of death; the mind possessed by creatures of another world: all are subjects of study for the writers of our stories.

Hair-raising is an art in which we like to consider ourselves as experts. The thought of short hairs bristling, of coiffures quivering, is always with us as we compile the magazine. It is, therefore, a great satisfaction to realize that we have so far succeeded in our purpose as to inspire the poem published on page 70 from one of our readers. We hope that he, and all our readers, will derive as much horrid pleasure from this issue as they have done from the previous fifty.

EDITOR.

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

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STEPS OF THE STEALTHY

BARRY PEROWNE

Illustrated by Buster

IX-TWENTY *a.m.* The day of the two killers dawned grey and wet. Rain beat down on the oilskin cape of a solitary policeman patrolling slowly along a tree-lined promenade. To his left stood a row of seats with their backs to a railing which edged a narrow road. On the far side of the road loomed the white façades of a terrace of graceful old houses.

To the policeman's right was a low hedge beyond which stretched a prospect to the westward over trees, rooftops and winding river—a fine view on a clear day, but obscured in this grey dawn by the veils of rain.

Being new on this beat, the policeman paused to look at a coin-in-the-slot telescope mounted on a concrete stand near the hedge. Moving on a little, he came to a small notice-board. He made out on it the names "William Byrd" and "Captain George Vancouver, R.N.," and he stepped nearer, peering through the rain, to read the notice:

"The view from this terrace reminding him of a similar view near his home on the James River in Virginia, U.S.A., inspired William Byrd to . . ."

A sudden clamour of men's voices distracted the policeman's attention. The angry voices came from somewhere below him. He walked along by the hedge, peering down over it. From the hedge a grassy slope fell away steeply to a parallel road below. Bushes and clumps of new-leafed birch trees growing on the slope intervened between the policeman and the point where the men were quarrelling. He stood listening intently.

As far as he could judge, the men were blaming each other bitterly about something they had lost. It sounded like some sort of creature, something they seemed to regard as exceptional, irreplaceable—a sort of king of its kind.

The policeman noticed a muddy footpath that meandered downward between the thickets. He started down this path cautiously, for it was slippery and overhung with wet branches. He had got about half-way down the slope when he glimpsed a tarpaulin-covered tilt-cart, with a horse in the shafts and two others tied to the tail-board, lurch out from among the trees on to the lower road.

The three men on the front seat were still snarling rancorously at each other when the policeman reached the lower road and, striding along it, overtook and halted them. In sudden silence, they sat staring at him. Their cart was festooned with bales of besom-brooms and wicker baskets, strings of whittled wooden clothes-

pegs. The men were of a vanishing breed of pedlars.

They denied that there was any contention between them. They denied that they had lost anything. All they would admit was that they had pulled off the road to boil their breakfast-kettle and that they were passing through, bound south.

Looking at their lean, sullen, half-gipsy faces, the policeman knew he wouldn't get any more out of them. He took a look into the back of the cart. Under the tarpaulin cover sat a shawled woman and two small children.

Unfamiliar with the beat, the policeman drew back. "Move on," he ordered. "Make yourselves scarce before the city-bound traffic starts coming through."

He stood watching the cart trundle off, the two tied horses plodding behind it. After a while, he glanced back up the slope through the rain. He could see the telescope up there jutting over the hedge, with the notice-board not far from it. As he continued his patrol, he made a mental note to read the rest of that notice next time he came on duty.

7.15 a.m. At the back doors of the terrace of graceful old houses which faced the notice-board lay the bracken-slopes, ponds and spinneys of a park, two thousand four hundred and sixty-nine acres in area, which once had been a hunting preserve but now was open daily to the public from official dawn to official dusk—which latter was announced on the gates on this day of the two killers as 6.15 p.m.

About one and three-quarter miles eastward across this park, on its opposite boundary, there loomed above the trees in the rain the square, lofty outlines of a group of great modern apartment-blocks, part of a new housing development. In a three-room apartment at the corner of the top floor of one of these blocks, a young taxi-driver called Brian Stedman was having breakfast with his wife Melda. They had been married four months.

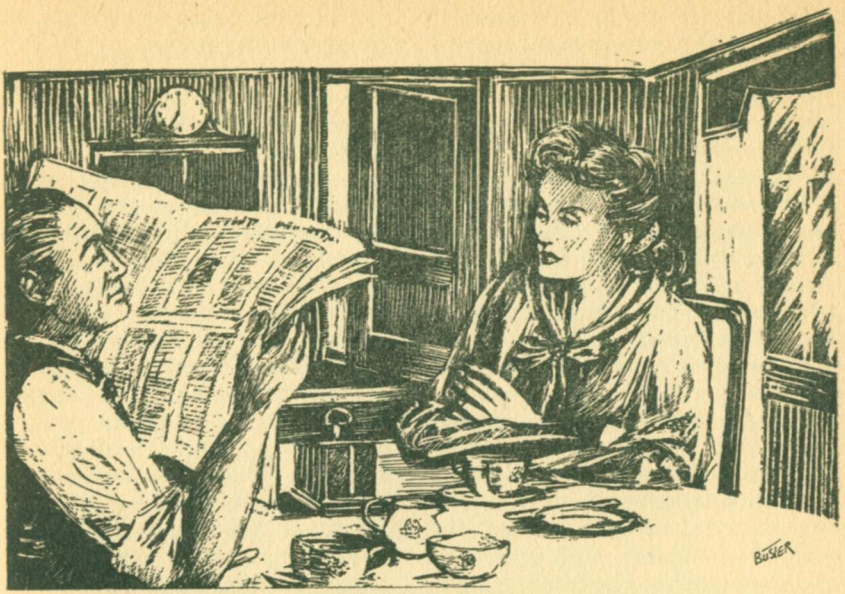
The day had begun badly for Brian. Melda had had one of her dreams, and when Melda dreamed she had to describe the dream to him in detail —even at 7.15 on a wet morning, when he had a headache.

In their brand-new, spick-and-span kitchen, with the day grey at the windows but the electric light burning brightly, Melda brought the toast to the table as she chattered on about her dream.

"There were these queer sort of shapes floating past," she said. "What do you think they signify, Brian?"

No shapes signified very much to Brian at this time of day—not even Melda's, dreamy though it was, silhouetted through the wispy sort of dressing-gown she wore. He didn't answer. Sitting at the table, he was trying to read out of the corner of his eye, without Melda noticing, an evening paper he had brought home yesterday and hadn't had a chance to look at.

Melda, sitting down opposite him, buttered toast, and said, "And what



on earth do you imagine happened next?"

"What?" said Brian.

The newspaper lay folded beside his plate. His temples were throbbing dully as he sipped his tea and tried to read the headlines sidelong. He was a hard worker. He left home early and returned late, and after a long day's driving in a bedlam of traffic he often woke up next morning with a headache.

"Oh, never mind," Melda said.

"Go on," he said. "I'm listening."

"Forget it," said Melda. "If you'd rather read your paper, then for heaven's sake read it."

He glanced at her. Her brown eyes gave him a hurt look. Rising from her chair, she turned her back to him, went and gazed out of one of the windows.

They were lucky to have got an apartment in one of these new blocks. There were long waiting lists. From some windows of their apartment, the young Stedmans could look out for miles over the city, stretching interminably to north and east and south. From other windows, they could look out over the bracken-slopes and ancient trees of the park.

Melda loved the city, and whenever she looked out of a window of their apartment she instinctively chose one that faced that way. But Brian, as a taxi-driver, knew the seamy side and disillusion of cities, and when he looked out of a window he usually chose one of those that

faced out over the park, because it reminded him of the country, the real country, somewhere away off there in the remote distance. Sometimes he wished they lived in the country and that he drove a tractor on a farm or something.

He looked now at Melda standing there with her back to him, her chestnut hair tied back with an attractive ribbon, and he said irritably, "Come on, Mel, don't be like that. Go on about your dream."

"Want some more toast?" she said, not turning.

He knuckled his aching forehead. "Now look," he said, "are you going to tell me this dream or aren't you?"

"It's a horrible day," said Melda.

Exasperated, Brian stood up. He was wiry, well-knit, with grey eyes and close-cropped blond hair. He put on his black leather jacket, his taxi-badge with its number dangling from the lapel. He looked at Melda, hesitated, then offered her an olive branch.

"It's Thursday," he said "—night school night. I'll come and pick you up in the cab at five-thirty, as usual."

They had had a short honeymoon and, to make up for it, were planning on a month in Italy later on, so meantime they were going to an Italian class at night school together once a week.

"O.K., Mel?" he said.

Her shrug was indifferent. So was the cheek she tilted to him when he went to kiss her. That did it. Always quick and violent in reaction to provocation from Melda, he didn't kiss her at all. The blood surged to his head and he walked straight out of the apartment, slamming the side door hard behind him.

He used the side door because the lift inside the building wasn't in use this early in the day. The side door opened on to a balcony, the topmost balcony of the tall block. The balcony was linked to all the balconies below it by stairs which zig-zagged down the side of the building.

He paused on the balcony to cool his anger with a look out over the lonely rainswept park. He liked the park, but it wasn't the real country, of course. Big as it was and old as it was, it was just a bit of make-believe country ringed round by endless miles of houses, streets, shops, supermarkets. More than ever, as he looked out longingly over the undulations of bracken, he wished they lived in the real country, close to nature—where everything, he somehow felt, was different.

He glanced down over the ledge of the balcony. Far below, the cars and scooters of other residents were beginning to slide, dwarfed, along the macadamed ways, edged by neat strips of lawn, which threaded the group of great new buildings.

All the cars and scooters turned to the right into the roadway—heading away from the park, towards the city. With a shrug, Brian turned up the collar of his jacket against the rain and started down the zig-zag stairs to join the stream.

7.45 a.m. While Brian Stedman was driving his taxi into town, the behaviour of the jackdaws in the park

betrayed to a man mounted on a white horse the presence of a killer.

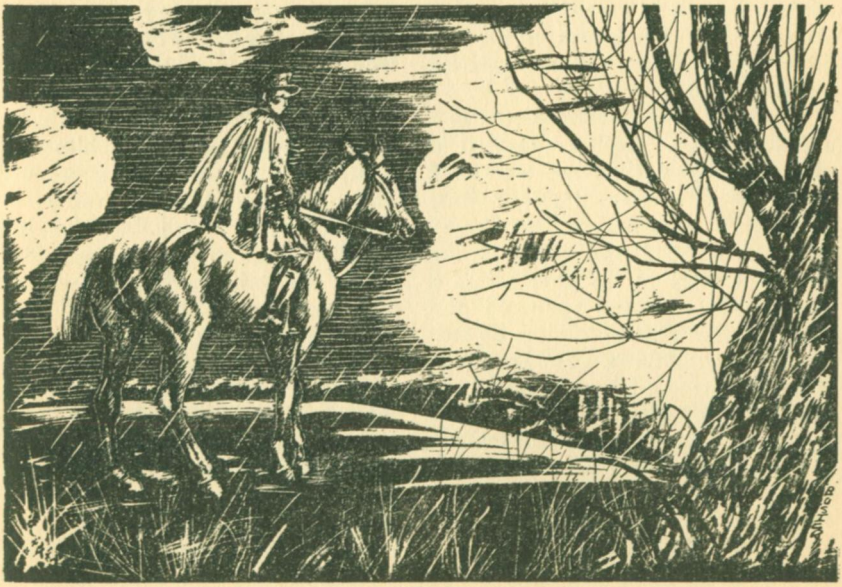
The mounted man, one of the park-keepers, was making his first round of the day. Rain beat on his flat-topped blue uniform cap, his oilskin cape and black leggings, as his horse plodded at a walk along a footpath which wound upward through young, new-springing bracken to the top of a low, rounded hill.

On top of the hill, he reined-in and took a look round. Away to his right the new apartment-blocks loomed like ramparts above the trees. Ahead, in the distance, cars were gliding along one of the roads that traversed the park, all the cars going one way—townward. He couldn't hear the cars, only the rain beating down on his cape and the harsh cries of jackdaws. He looked down into the hollow immediately before him from which the unusually loud, discordant chorus was coming.

In the hollow, where ancient oak trees spread their boughs, stood a wooden-railed corral, a deer pen. Around and above this a great gathering of jackdaws wheeled in apparent agitation. They were angry. Repeatedly birds plunged downward to swoop low with wide-beaked threats over something they evidently could see moving below them through the grass and bracken which grew in the deer pen.

"They're mobbing something there," the keeper muttered.

He started his horse at a walk down



the slope. As he reached the level floor of the hollow, the jackdaws were circling in hundreds round a huge old oak just outside the open gate of the deer pen. On the opposite slope a herd of deer, with the stags to the forefront holding their antlered heads high, stood motionless watching the jackdaws.

The keeper checked his horse as he saw two half-grown rabbits dart from a gaping hole at the base of the tree. He watched the rabbits scurry into the bracken up the slope. Time and again since the first ravages of myxomatosis, rabbits had reappeared in the park, flourished briefly, then again died out. Recently there had been signs of a revival.

The keeper, sitting his horse in the rain with the raucous jackdaws circling overhead and the deer watching him intently, kept an eye on that big hole between two humped, gnarled roots of the oak.

The rage of the jackdaws rose to a crescendo as a creature appeared in the black gape of the hole—a creature with a coat of coarse, yellow-white hair and a back high-arched like an angry cat's. Half emerging from the hole, the alien in the park raised a wide-nostrilled snout spattered and glistening with blood to glare up red-eyed at the jackdaws. The keeper saw a narrow band of leather round the marauder's throat with a few inches of frayed cord dangling from the leather.

"Why, you great, ugly, overgrown brute," the keeper thought. "Where in the world did you come from?"

His horse just then tossed its head with a jingle of the bit chain. The marauder looked round swiftly, then turned with a sinuous movement in the gape of the hole and vanished underground.

The keeper rode his horse slowly round the tree, noting other exits from the warren of death beneath it. Then he put his horse to a canter up the slope, sending the deer bounding away with springy grace through the bracken, and went to seek the park's gamekeeper with the news that there was a killer at large in his bailiwick.

11.20 a.m. The other killer was at large in the heart of the city. Brian Stedman saw something of this killer's work when he picked up a fare, a woman, at one of the stations. On arriving at her destination, the woman found that she hadn't enough money in her purse to pay the charge on the taximeter. Telling Brian to wait, she went into her house to hunt up some more money.

Brian sat at his wheel with the meter ticking alongside him and lighted a cigarette. The street was one with old, elaborate houses on one side only. Along the other side stretched the railings of a cemetery.

His headache had eased and the rain had stopped, but the flat acres of yew trees and innumerable monument stones spread wide under the sombre sky oppressed him and made him wonder what Melda was thinking about him—if anything. She had a job in a beauty shop out near where they lived. The shop was full of other girls and they were all pretty and lively and friendly together, whereas driving a taxi could be a lonely job,

apt to strand a man outside cemeteries.

"Damned cities," he muttered.

Luckily, it was Thursday. Melda had a half-day, Thursdays, so he knocked off early himself—the only weekday he did so—and drove home to pick her up there in the taxi at half-past five.

Their night school Italian class was inconveniently early, so he always had a wash and brush-up somewhere before he went home, as Melda invariably was down in the lobby waiting for him, on edge that they'd be late. But Thursday was their best evening of the week. The taxi was all hers on Thursday evenings. They made quite a game of it.

As she hurried from the lobby, he'd jump out of his seat and open the taxidoor for her with a flourish and say respectfully, "Where will it be tonight, madam?"—as though she had every plushy spot in town at her feet. She'd tell him regally to drive to whatever place happened to come into her head, usually somewhere murderously expensive, and she'd get in the back seat and he'd drive her in state to the very ordinary night school. After their class, though, they ate out on Thursdays. They went to a *pizzeria* they knew and, over the scampi and the Tuscan wine, fished shamelessly for the praise of the Neapolitan who owned the place on their progress in his lingo.

Brian grinned as he thought about it. He was glad that, though he hadn't really meant to hurt Mel's feelings, at least he'd done it on a Thursday. With a bit of luck, it would make it easier for him to square himself with her tonight.

He heard a car approaching along the quiet street. He glanced idly into the driving-mirror. The car came on at a slow, steady pace and he saw that it was a hearse with its roof piled with wreaths. He sat up straighter in his seat, hiding his cigarette in his cupped hand as the flower-filled hearse passed slowly by, followed by two black limousines.

As he relaxed, watching the procession continue on towards the cemetery's ornate gateway a hundred yards ahead, he was surprised when a fourth car purred by, moving at the same slow pace, seeming to be following the procession but keeping at an interval from it. Then he saw that the fourth car was a police car with two uniformed men in the front seat.

The procession ahead turned in at the ornate gateway, but the police car slid to a standstill fifty yards short of it. A tall man in a dark overcoat and trilby hat got out, said something to the two policemen, then entered the cemetery by a smaller gateway in the railings and passed unobtrusively from view among the yews.

Brian took a thoughtful drag at his cigarette. "What's all that about?" he wondered. "Somebody get murdered?"

The door of the house opened and his fare came out.

"Can you change this?" she asked him.

Brian gave her change, pushed up his "For Hire" flag on the meter, pressed the starter. As he drove out

of the street, he saw that the police car still was standing there.

12.50 p.m. Outside a building at 201 Pornick Street, in a fairly busy quarter, stood the motor-hearse and the two limousines which Brian Stedman had seen earlier. They were empty now. The three chauffeurs were standing by them, chatting together. In the street-level office of the building, a telephone rang. A grey-haired man wearing a black suit and black tie picked up the telephone, gave the name of the establishment.

A voice in the telephone said, "I believe you're just back from a job?"

"Who is speaking, please?" the grey-haired man said.

"The party who initiated the job," said the cultured voice in the telephone. "Just checking up. Everything go off all right?"

The grey-haired man frowned. "Are you a relative of the deceased lady, sir?"

"Hardly that." A chuckle came over the wire. "I've told you who I am."

It was the lunch hour and the grey-haired man was alone in the office. The telephone to his ear, he craned to look over the frosted lower panes of the window at the three chauffeurs standing outside.

He said into the telephone, "The remains of the deceased lady were released to her relatives for interment, after a coroner's inquest." As he spoke, he rapped hard on the window with the knuckles of his free hand. He beckoned urgently to the three chauffeurs. He continued, into the telephone, "If you have any questions, sir, I'm afraid I can only refer you to the police."

"In that case," said the smooth voice in the telephone, "I'll waive any questions. I'm sure you did a good job. To show my confidence in you, I'm going to send you another one. I'll send it to you direct this time. Have you a pencil handy?"

"A pencil?" said the grey-haired man. A sheen of sweat started on his forehead. He glanced at the chauffeurs filing in, put a hand over the telephone he held, nodded quickly towards a telephone on another desk. "Call the police," he whispered. "Either I've got some crank on the line, or this is the killer of the woman we've just buried. Tell the police to trace the call." Into the telephone, he held, he said, "I have a pencil, sir."

"Make a note," said the voice in the telephone, "to expect a delivery today at approximately four p.m. Got it?"

"A delivery at four p.m.," the grey-haired man said slowly, as though writing it down. His eyes on one of the chauffeurs, who was dialling the other telephone hastily, he said into the telephone he held, "You understand, sir, that our normal procedure is to collect from the home, hospital —or mortuary, sir—as the case may be." He was talking now solely to try to keep his caller on the line, delay him. "Of course, if the circumstances are unusual. . . . Are the circumstances unusual, sir?" There was no answer. "Hallo?" he said. "There's also the matter of the death certificate. We cannot proceed without

proper documentation. Could you give us some further particulars, sir? Hallo? Hallo?"

Only the purring of the dialling tone sounded in his ear. He cradled the telephone, dabbed at his forehead with a spotlessly white handkerchief which he drew from his shirt-cuff.

The chauffeur at the other telephone said, "The police are trying to trace the call, sir—and they're on their way here."

The four men stood looking at each other.

2.10 p.m. The establishment at 201 Pornick Street was under surveillance inside and out by twenty pairs of eyes. The hearse and the two limousines no longer stood at the kerb. Passers-by were unaware of the presence of plainclothes police in force. Cars passed, 'buses rumbled by. The people in Pornick Street weren't interested in the business undertaken at 201. Their business was with life.

3.00 p.m. In the park overlooked by the great new apartment-blocks on the top floor of one of which Brian and Melda Stedman had their home, the afternoon was grey and still. Under a tree at the edge of a spinney, mostly tall beeches planted in 1834, the park's gamekeeper stood motionless with a double-barrelled shotgun in the crook of his arm.

He knew every rabbit warren in the park and had visited them all today in quest of the stealthy killer whose presence had been reported to him by the park-keeper who rode the white horse.

Though it was the nests of the pheasants and partridges he was concerned about, not the rabbits, the gamekeeper figured it would pay him to concentrate on the warrens. There were many in the park, old and extensive warrens but now very sparsely populated. Even so, the gamekeeper had dug from some of them furry and bloody evidence of the killer's progress.

There was a big warren here at the edge of the 1834 spinney. Careful examination of the damp, soft earth round the warren's boltholes had convinced the gamekeeper that the killer hadn't yet found this warren in his lethal wanderings. But he would, sooner or later; it was one of the more populated.

The gamekeeper had been standing now so long motionless here that three rabbits, in the grey and humid silence of the afternoon, had ventured out from the warren. They were nibbling the grass of the gentle slope down from the edge of the spinney to a narrow, tarred road, a winding road little used that joined two of the more frequented roads across the park. On the other side of the road was a stretch of flat pasture where deer fed peacefully.

The gamekeeper, keeping a sharp eye on the three rabbits just outside the spinney, saw them freeze suddenly, heads up, ears pricked. He slid a glance along the edge of the trees, watching for the killer's approach. But it was a remote droning in the sky that had alerted the rabbits. The drone swelled louder, and a helicopter from the city's airport passed

overhead and receded swiftly above the roofs of the tall apartment-blocks.

The desultory note of jackdaws became audible again in the distance, a cock pheasant sounded its hoarse call in the depths of the 1834 spinney, and the rabbits crouched again to their busy nibbling, their occasional lollop to juicier grasses—unaware of the vigilant gamekeeper.

3.15 p.m. A taxi turned into a pleasant residential street and, halfway along it, was hailed from the pavement by a man carrying a briefcase. The driver—not Brian Stedman, but a stout, red-faced man wearing a beret—ignored the hail. He had been sent, by a garage where he took orders. to pick up a fare at No. 44 in this street.

"Telephone order," he had been told, "a regular. Lady 'phones here every Thursday for a taxi at three-fifteen to take her to her osteopath."

As the driver pulled up outside No. 44 and sounded his hooter, the man who had hailed him farther back came striding up.

"Taxi?"

"Sorry, sir. I've got a fare."

"I hoped you were just dropping one," the man with the briefcase said. He seemed disappointed. He was a man of professional appearance with a close-clipped grey moustache, horn-rimmed glasses. He wore a tweed overcoat and a Homburg hat.

He looked round as a woman came out of the house — a middle-aged woman, pretty but plumpish, who smiled at the driver as she told him where to take her. The man with the briefcase, standing close by, raised his hat.

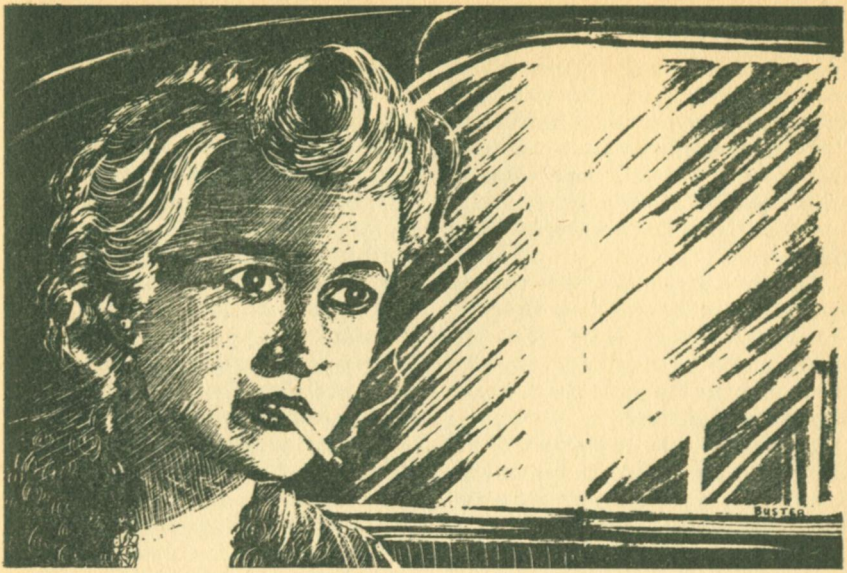
"Please excuse me, madam," he said, "but I happen to be going that way myself. Dare I ask if you would drop me off in some busier street on your way, where I'll have more chance of getting another taxi? It's rather urgent—and taxis seem rare in these parts."

Her glance moved over him in amiable appraisal, then she smiled and said, "Certainly." He opened the door for her, then followed her in.

As he drove, the taxi-driver glanced once or twice at his passengers' reflections in the mirror. Grey as the light of this day was, he could see the woman chattering—probably, the driver thought, giving the extra passenger an earful about whatever the trouble was that took her to osteopaths.

They came to busier streets, the driver had to concentrate on the traffic; and a battery of lights at a busy crossing was looming up just ahead when the glass panel at his back was slid aside and the extra passenger said, "Thanks—this'll do me very well."

The driver swung into the kerb. The man with the briefcase stepped out and, holding open the door, said to the woman who had obliged him, "I'm sincerely glad you've decided to try my man, instead. He's quite the best of his kind. Just mention my name. And thank you so much for the lift. No, no, you must let me pay this. I insist!" Closing the door, he turned to the driver. "The lady wants to go first to two-o-one Pornick Street.



Here, this should cover it—with something over for yourself."

The driver saw with satisfaction that there would be a good deal over for himself. He glanced into his mirror, saw the woman leaning back in her seat smoking a cigarette. Just ahead, the traffic-lights had turned green.

"Right, sir," the driver said, and let in his clutch.

As the taxi moved off, the man with the briefcase raised his hat respectfully to the woman in the back seat.

4.05 p.m. Twenty pairs of eyes noted a taxi-driver glancing up at the numbers of the buildings in Pornick Street as he neared 201. The taxi's direction-indicator flashed up, the taxi pulled into the kerb. The stout, red-faced driver, wearing a beret, got out and opened the door for his passenger.

Some of the watching eyes could make out that the passenger was a woman, leaning back in her corner with a cigarette, three-quarters smoked down, burning between her lips.

She didn't get out. The driver put his head in, to speak to her, and it seemed to the watchers a curiously long time before he drew back, closed the taxi-door. He looked about him in a strange way. The ruddiness seemed to have drained from his face. Cars, 'buses, pedestrians went to and fro. Only the unseen watchers looked at the taxi-driver.

Suddenly one of the watchers, a tall man in a dark overcoat and trilby hat

who stood in the steet-level office of 201 observing the taxi-driver keenly over the frosted lower panes of the window, rapped on the glass and beckoned peremptorily to the driver. The driver hesitated for a moment, then opened the door and came in with a staring, blank look.

"Police," the tall man said. "Anything wrong?"

The driver swallowed. "Go out and have a look at the woman in my cab."

Several men stood in the room. The tall man glanced at one of them, who went out immediately to the taxi. The driver sank into a chair.

"It can't be," he muttered. "Sittin' there with a cigarette in her mouth. I can't believe it. Professional-lookin' man. You'd have banked on him. Anybody would."

He started a confused account of what had happened, but broke off as the man who had gone out to the taxi returned.

"Dead, sir," he told the tall man. "She looks as though she died without ever knowing what happened to her. The killer must have known as exactly as a surgeon just where and how to slide the knife in. And it looks as though he lighted a cigarette, put a drop of some sticky stuff on the tip, and stuck the cigarette to her lip when she was dead."

The ring of grim men looked at the taxi-driver. The tall man said to him, "You see where you've brought the lady, don't you?"

The taxi-driver threw a hunted glance over the appointments, soothing and tasteful and discreet, of this establishment at 201 Pornick Street. He passed a shaking hand over his mouth.

"Yes," he said. "I see."

4.10 p.m. Much as it would have titillated his curious sense of pleasure to telephone 201 Pornick Street again and notify them there to expect a further delivery this day—probably, if his design worked out to pattern, around 6.15 p.m.—the killer knew that to do so would be to take a needless risk.

He was, in fact, slightly concerned about the time element in his precise and elegant plan.

He was a man who liked to observe slyly the lives of women left alone all day in residential areas by their money-earning menfolk. He believed that the police thought of him as a wanton killer, which he was. But he believed that they also thought him random, which he wasn't. His crimes were based always on some repeated feature in the timetables of women who had caught his attention. The variety of such features was infinite.

His taxi inspiration pleased him especially. He was sorry it could be put into practice twice only, because in his explorations in residential areas —going always to the same streets at the same hours, to note repetitions in women's timetables—he had spotted quite a number of houses at which taxis arrived, evidently telephoned for, on the same day each week and at the same hour on that day, and took a woman away somewhere. Where did they go, those women?

He looked with light-blue eyes, dancing-bright with an intense vivac-

ity, at his reflection in the dressing-table mirror of a bedroom in a back-street hotel where he had just booked in, paying a night's rent in advance.

His tweed coat and Homburg hat lay on the bed, his opened briefcase was on the dressing-table, he had taken off and pocketed his hornrimmed glasses. The window-curtains were drawn against the grey afternoon light, a naked bulb glared above the dressing-table.

He gripped with finger and thumb a corner of his clipped grey moustache and peeled it off, reflecting that he knew now where at least one of those women went, in the taxi that called for her every Thursday at 3.15 p.m. She went to an osteopath. She had told him so—before he had redirected her, with a cigarette stuck to her sagging lip, to 201 Pornick Street.

He ran water into the wash-basin. His hair was black with a hint of grey at the temples. He dipped his head in the basin, scrubbed his hair vigorously with his fingers. The water was refreshing. He dried his hair with a small towel which he took from his briefcase. His hair now was slightly red, its natural colour, and he sleeked it back with a comb from his high, sloping forehead. He pulled the plug from the basin, rinsed away the tide-line left by the dye, rubbed the taps and the edges of the basin carefully with the towel.

Returning the damp towel to his briefcase, he took out a small plastic bottle. As he poured a little liquid from the bottle into his left hand, he reflected that his taxi inspiration, which he never had acted upon before today, couldn't be used after today. Once news of what had happened to the lady who went to an osteopath hit the streets, his taxi method was finished. He had chosen today to act on it because Thursday was the only day for which he had noted *two* regular calls made by taxis. The times were just, but only just, close enough together for his purpose: 3.15 p.m. in one case, 5.30 p.m. in the other.

He rubbed his hands together, began to massage his pale face. He hadn't much doubt that at this very moment a call was going out to all police prowl cars with his description —as it had been—and news of what had arrived at 201 Pornick Street. But he was pretty confident that the news wouldn't be in the evening papers until well after 5.30 p.m. Even so, he wished that the second taxi, the one that called at a huge new apartment-block in a residential area to pick up a very attractive girl every Thursday, called there a bit earlier than 5.30. It would have been that much safer for him.

He looked at his reflection in the mirror. The liquid had given his skin an outdoor tan, accentuating the lightness and sparkle of his eyes. He took up his tweed overcoat. It was a new one, a reversible. He reversed it, put it on as a macintosh. He took from his briefcase a tweed hat rolled to a thin cone. He unrolled it with lithe fingers, restored its proper shape, put it on at a casual angle. It had a jay's pin-feather jaunty in the band. He set a pipe between his white teeth and smiled at himself in the mirror, pleased with his appearance—that of

an easygoing, pleasure-loving man in his mid-thirties, his actual age.

He took a sheet of brown paper from his briefcase. He crushed his Homburg hat flat, put it into the case, glanced round the room to make sure he had left nothing. Then he made a neat brown-paper parcel of the briefcase and, with the parcel under his arm, stepped to the door.

Taking out a handkerchief, he put it over the knob, opened the door slightly. He put an eye to the crack. He knew, from previous reconnaissance, how easy it was to slip out of this hotel unseen, especially in the afternoon doldrums. He slipped out.

4.45 p.m. Along the roads across the park cars were becoming more frequent, all moving westward, away from the city—forerunners of the evening exodus. Near the middle of the park, out of earshot of the homeward bound cars, a pair of partridges were moving peacefully through grass, feeding as they went.

For no apparent reason, the movements of the two partridges began to quicken. They started to run. Their keen, small heads, just showing above the grass, moved faster and faster. With a sudden whir of wings, they flushed. And the killer in the park, stealing sinuously, yellow - white, through the grass, checked with back high-arched and lifted his blue-spattered snout to watch with red eyes as the partridges glided on taut wings low over a pond where coots and moorhens paddled.

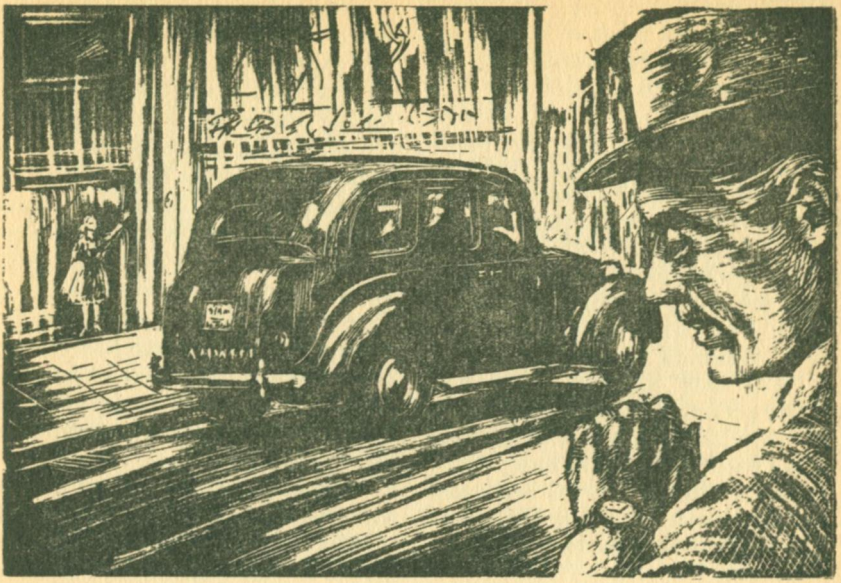
The gamekeeper had been for a cup of tea in the gardeners' mess-hut, but had returned to keep an eye on the big warren at the edge of the 1834 spinney. He noticed two partridges soar upwards to surmount a ridge, show as dots for a moment against the square towers of the apartment-blocks looming against the grey sky, then drop down from view into a patch of bracken.

The gamekeeper didn't pay much attention to the partridges. He was interested in the big warren. He had a hunch that his quarry was about due to find this warren, and the gamekeeper was waiting for the killer here.

5.40 p.m. No taxi. The man in the new macintosh and the tweed hat with a jay's feather jaunty in the band walked slowly again along the roadway in front of the group of tall, new apartment-blocks. More and more cars, bubble-cars and scooters were turning in on to the macadamed ways which wound among the blocks, but no taxi came.

Yet, obviously, the girl must have telephoned for a taxi as usual, for through the wide-open doorway of the block where she lived he could see her pacing the big, lighted lobby impatiently. She had been down in the lobby since 5.30. The taxi was late and the girl was fuming. He could tell it from the curtness of the nods she gave to people going in.

He strolled on past, pipe in mouth, a neat brown-paper parcel under one arm. These apartment-blocks were coming to life. In the dusk which the grey sky was bringing prematurely, lights were appearing everywhere in the windows. People came out on to



the balconies to look at plants they had growing there. Childrens' voices sounded from some playground among the blocks. Sudden loud bursts of music blared out, then were tuned down.

The killer was getting worried. Even if the taxi came now—

"Taxi! Taxi!"

The cry was jerked from him almost as a reflex—and was ignored, as he expected. The taxi passed him, swung in round a strip of kerbed lawn, pulled up. The man in the macintosh and tweed hat approached the taxi with quick strides.

"Taxi?"

The driver shook his head. The killer recognized him as the one who usually did this job, probably fished to get it because the girl was so attractive. The driver had close-cropped blond hair and wore a black leather jacket.

He said impatiently, "Sorry. Not for hire."

He got out of his seat, opened the taxi-door with a flourish as the girl hurried out of the building.

"At last!" she said tartly.

"Sorry to be so late, madam," the driver said. "It couldn't be helped. Where will it be tonight?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake," the girl said.

Evidently the driver knew very well where she went every Thursday at this hour, and his unnecessary question seemed to irritate the girl still further. Seeing the mood she ob-

viously was in, the man in the tweed hat didn't think much of his chances of a lift, but he stepped forward quickly and tried his luck.

"I hope you'll excuse me," he said, "but if you happen to be going in a direction where I'm more likely to pick up a taxi—it's pretty urgent, actually—I wonder if you could possibly give me a lift?"

The girl, half-way into the taxi, drew back and looked round at him in surprise. Then she smiled suddenly, a smile delectable and mischievous.

"Why not?" she said sweetly.

She got into the taxi, and he ducked in after her. He was exultant. He could hardly believe his luck.

The girl leaned forward in her seat and spoke past him to the driver, who still was standing there holding the door open.

"Well?" the girl said. "What are you waiting for?"

The driver didn't answer. He closed the door, got into his seat at the wheel.

5.50 p.m. Brian Stedman sat at the wheel for a moment, trying to control his shaking rage. Always quick and violent in his reaction to provocation from Melda, yet incapable of laying a finger on her in anger, he hardly knew how he had checked himself from exploding his rage on the man. His impulse had been to knock the man stone-cold. Only the fact that there were so many of the neighbours around, just getting home, and that to start a fight right at the door could create talk that might snowball and lose them their apartment here, had restrained Brian.

He knew just why Melda had done this to him. It was her half-day. She had been at home all afternoon with time to brood over the way he had walked out on her at breakfast. On top of that, he had kept her waiting in the lobby and she had worked herself up into a fresh lather. Now, there she was in the back of the taxi, knowing he was so angry he could hardly breathe, and getting a big kick out of the knowledge. At the same time, she knew that if the stranger she had invited into the back there should get fresh with her, she'd be perfectly all right because it was her husband who was driving the taxi.

Well, she wasn't so smart as she thought she was, Brian told himself grimly. She was going to be taught a lesson. It was tough on the man, but any man who came, consciously or unconsciously, between a husband and wife had his neck out and it was just too bad. But Melda was going to be taught a lesson.

Brian pressed the starter, slammed the taxi in gear. He didn't turn to the right, towards the bright lights, the night school, the *pizzeria.* He turned to the left, towards the nearby gate of the park.

Though official dusk was 6.15 p.m., the time announced on the gates as closing time, actual dusk was deepening already on this grey day as Brian drove through the gates in a stream of other cars.

The rolling bracken-slopes of the park, the spinneys looming dark on the knolls, opening out around him with almost a shock effect of wide

space and loneliness after his day of driving in the jitter and din of crowded streets.

As he drove along the road across the park, exactly what he had expected happened. The glass panel behind his head was slid back.

"Where are we going?" Melda said.

"Round through the park on to the other road, madam," Brian said, with sarcastic formality. "Not so much rush-hour traffic coming out on the other road."

"Oh," said Melda, in a small voice.

Brian thought, with satisfaction, that she didn't know what to make of it. He had her guessing. She liked the city, the bright lights. She didn't like the park when it spread its two thousand four hundred and sixty-nine acres all around her like this, shadowy and wide and unknown to her. She sounded puzzled, suddenly uncertain of herself and of Brian, as she sat back on the seat beside the extra passenger she had picked up.

Driving across the park, Brian grimly refrained from a glance into his mirror—except once, fleetingly, when the flicker of a match reflected there caught his eye and he saw the man in the back with Melda light his pipe, or a cigarette, at the flame shielded in his hands, as the taxi hummed on deeper into the park.

6.02 p.m. The stags were uneasy. Most of the herd were lying down on the pasture, but three big stags, roaming between the herd and the narrow, little-used lateral road, were restless. Sometimes they started to crop the turf, but then, remembering, raised their heavy-antlered heads with a start and gazed long and intently at the 1834 spinney up the gentle grass slope across the road.

They knew there was a man standing just inside the spinney, and in this grey dusk they were troubled by his stillness in the near-dark under the trees.

The gamekeeper was waiting there, near the big warren, for the killer.

He could hear the faint, intermittent hum of homeward-bound cars crossing the park, but he was surprised when he heard one approaching along the road which wound past at the foot of the gentle slope down from the spinney. In a moment, he was able to make out that the oncoming car was a taxi.

It was against regulations for cars to pull off any of the park's roads except at authorized parking-places, but the taxi bumped up suddenly over the verge and halted on the grass twenty-five yards down the slope from him.

The gamekeeper watched curiously. On the pasture across the road, the deer began to get to their feet.

The gamekeeper saw the taxi-driver jump out, yank open the taxi-door.

"Get out of there," he said. "Come on, you—out of it!"

He plunged his arms into the dark taxi, dragged a man out by the lapels of his macintosh, wrenched him round, thrust him away.

"This is a nice quiet spot," the taxi-driver said—"damn' near the middle of the park. O.K., mister, you're going to have a long walk and the railings to climb over before you get out of

here. That's just one of the things liable to happen to men my wife takes it into her head to pick up because she's sore at me. And here's another thing for her to bear in mind."

He slammed his left into the man's body, brought his right up under the man's jaw with an impact that threw him back against the taxi door, banging it shut. The driver bored in, punching. The other man, trying to duck clear, sidewise, tripped over a grass-tussock, fell sprawling, scrambled up and was knocked flat again. This time the driver dragged him up, holding him gripped, sagging, by the lapels of his macintosh.

"I reckon she's seen enough," the young man with the close-cropped blond hair and the black leather jacket said harshly. "Right, mister—you can start walking now."

He shoved the man from him. The man put a hand into the breast of his macintosh, as though to rub a bruised chest. But the hand came out with a glint in it that the startled gamekeeper saw clearly. The taxi-driver began to move backward, retreating, and the other man moved after him, step for step, crouching a little, with his right hand held low and forward.

The gamekeeper brought his gun-butt swiftly to his shoulder, sighted down the slope, pulled his choke trigger.

6.09 p.m. The sharp report and the red spit of flame from the trees looming along the edge of the spinney came just as Brian Stedman felt his back fetch up hard against the side of the taxi. Something thudded wickedly into the ground behind the crouching man with the long knife, and he turned like lightning.

"Drop that knife," a voice shouted. A man with a double-barrelled shotgun stepped out from among the trees, came striding down the slope. "I fired into the ground that time, but if you don't drop that knife you'll get the other barrel right where it hurts. Now, drop it!"

Brian saw the knife fall in the grass.

"Stand back against the cab—the pair of you," the gamekeeper said. "That's better." Facing them, he snugged his gun-butt under his right armpit, his forefinger on the front trigger. With his left hand he jerked from his breast-pocket a whistle on a bit of chain. He blew three long blasts.

Across the road, the deer like brown shadows were in flight from the shot.

The gamekeeper said, "There's a police prowl car makes a routine call at the main gates just before closing time. They won't keep us waiting here long. Let's give the boys another toot, to guide 'em."

He blew a series of quick, short blasts.

Brian glanced bitterly at the silhouettes, checkered with many lighted windows, of the apartment-blocks towering above the treetops in the distance. He wished to heaven he'd never driven into the park. Now they'd land in the police court, and there would be *real* talk. And Melda sat in the dark taxi at his back never saying a word, probably scared dumb at the mess they were in.

For a moment he thought he could hear her whimpering in the taxi, then he realized that it was from the man beside him that the whimpers were coming. Brian slid a glance at the man's bruised, blood-spattered face. The man's stare was fixed on the gun covering him. He moved his feet up and down in a queer way, as though the grass were hot under them. He breathed short and hard and made these little whimpering sounds, like a caged animal.

"Here they come," said the gamekeeper.

Along the winding road towards them, in the grey dusk, a dark car came sliding, swift and purposeful. A spotlight blazed out suddenly. Its white brilliance dazzled the men by the parked taxi, threw the gamekeeper's shadow slanting far up the slope, silvered the trees along the edge of the spinney. The car pulled up smoothly, its spotlight still illuminating the group by the taxi. Two policemen came striding across the grass.

"It's all yours," the gamekeeper told them. "This taxi came along, pulled off the road here. The young fellow, the driver, jumped out of his seat, dragged a man out of the back and beat hell out of him. The man pulled a knife, so I thought I'd better put a stop to it and I fired into the ground near him. He's a queer one, this one is—something very queer about him. His knife's lying in the grass there. It's all yours now."

One of the policemen bent over the knife, then hunkered down and shone a torch on it. He looked up at Brian and said, "Did he stick you bad?"

"He didn't stick me at all," Brian said. "The gamekeeper broke it up."

"Well, there's fresh blood on the knife," the policeman said.

He straightened up, leaving the knife where it was. Both policemen looked at the man standing beside Brian. The man closed his eyes tightly, wrapped his arms over his head and rocked himself, whimpering.

Brian said the policemen, "Look, what happened was I was going to take my wife somewhere in the cab. This joker had just hailed me, and he came walking on after me, and just as my wife was getting into the cab, he asked if he could share it with her. Well, she—"

The policemen said simultaneously, "He asked her for a lift?" And one of them added sharply, to Brian, "Where *is* your wife?"

"She's here," Brian said. "In the cab. Melda?"

He turned to the taxi, opened the door. And as he did so, the man sprang aside, began to run. In the cold, hard glare from the spotlight, he ran half-crouching, his arms wrapped over his head, hugging it, as though to shield it.

The two policemen were at him instantly. They got him by the arms. They dragged him, hanging back, digging his heels in, slipping, sliding, writhing and howling, to the prowl car. They got handcuffs on him, manhandled him into the back of the car, and one of them got in with him.

"Melda?" Brian said. He peered into the glimmer and shadow within the taxi. He felt cold to the heart. "Mel?" he said.

She came out of the taxi with a rush and into his arms.

The other policeman, coming back, stopped and stood looking at them.

11.30 p.m. Melda was sleeping now —at last. Her head was on Brian's shoulder, and his arm about her, as they lay in bed, was beginning to grow numb. He dared not move, for fear of waking her. He wished he could sleep himself, put out of his mind what they had been told during the long session with the police. Pornick Street? He'd driven along it many a time. But he'd never taken a fare to 201, never particularly noticed the place.

Lying wakeful in the dark, he noticed a thin line of light along the top of the bedroom door and realized they'd left the light on in the living-room. It couldn't be helped now, though; he couldn't disturb Melda by getting out of bed.

He thought of the knife, that long, thin knife with the blood on it that had seemed to the policeman to glisten like fresh blood. That had been because the knife had dropped in wet grass. The blood actually had got on to the knife some time between 3.15 and 4.5 this afternoon, when a woman had arrived in a taxi at 201 Pornick Street with a lighted cigarette stuck to her sagging lip.

The killer had lighted a cigarette, too, while he was in Brian's taxi, but it seemed he must have done so only because he was uneasy. Melda had said that he scarcely had spoken a word to her from the moment the taxi had turned into the park; he had seemed as worried about that, she said, as she had been herself.

She stirred slightly now, murmuring. Brian kissed her hair.

"Cities," he thought bitterly.

He wished they lived in the country, the real country, close to nature—where everything, he somehow felt, was different.

He heard two faint reports from out in the night.

11.45 p.m. Seeing that the cloud was beginning to move and break up and a fitful moonlight shine at intervals over the park, the gamekeeper had taken his gun, when the police car brought him home from the long session, and set out for the 1834 spinney.

He couldn't rest easy with a killer loose in the park, and he still had a hunch about that big warren.

For nearly an hour, standing under that same beech tree at the edge of the spinney, he had been watching the boltholes when the moonlight allowed. He thought he saw a movement in one of the blackly gaping holes. Next moment, the marauder with the coat of coarse, yellow-white hair and the back high-arched like an angry cat's half emerged from the hole and lifted a blood-spattered snout to look round with eyes glinting red in the moonlight.

A cloud obscured the moon just as the gamekeeper fired, so he fired his second barrel blind, to make sure; and as the moonlight spread again over the park, he walked forward. With his gun-barrels he prodded the inert creature, then picked it up by

the bit of frayed cord attached to the leather band about its throat and held it dangling at arm's length, its shadow thrown huge on a tree-trunk in the moonlight.

"Biggest bloodthirstiest ferret I ever saw," the gamekeeper muttered. "Except for that two-legged one who came here earlier—King Ferret himself."

The dangling ferret kicked once, spasmodically; and its huge shadow, like a hanged man, kicked with it.

11.55 p.m. About one and three-quarter miles westward across the park from the light which Brian and Melda Stedman had left on inadvertently in the living-room of their three-room apartment at the corner of the top floor of one of the new apartment-blocks towering above the treetops, a policeman at the beginning of his beat was patrolling slowly along a seat-lined promenade with a terrace of graceful old houses on his left, a low hedge on his right.

He came to a concrete-mounted, coin - in - the - slot telescope which pointed westward above the hedge to a wide prospect over trees, rooftops and winding river, all glimmering now with moonlight and patched with the shadows of slow-moving clouds.

Moving on a bit, the policeman came to a noticeboard near the hedge. He had started to read the notice on this board just after daybreak, but had been interrupted by a wrangle between some itinerant pedlars, half gipsies, over something they had lost, something they had seemed to prize as an exceptional specimen, irreplaceable—a sort of king of its kind.

Being new on the beat, the policeman hadn't realized that the pedlars might have sustained their loss while poaching in the nearby park. He didn't know much about the park. And now, as he took his flashlamp from his belt, he wasn't even thinking about the pedlars. He had promised himself that next time he came on duty he would read, right through, what was printed on this noticeboard. He shone his flashlamp on it:

"The view from this terrace reminding him of a similar view near his home on the James River in Virginia, U.S.A., inspired William Byrd to name the new city founded on the banks of that river, in 1737, Richmond. In the village churchyard of Petersham at the foot of the hill Captain George Vancouver, R.N., the famous explorer, lies buried."

"Well, I never knew that before," the policeman muttered.

Returning his flashlamp to his belt, he walked on slowly up the hill, passing the great gates of the royal and ancient park. It was closed now, silent, left to the creatures that slunk through its coverts with stealthy steps, and the grey ghosts of history that glided under its trees.

But the policeman, as he ambled on along his lonely beat through this London borough of Richmond, was wondering how it would feel to be pounding a beat in Vancouver, British Columbia, or in that other Richmond—the city of Richmond, Virginia, U.S.A.

DROP DEAD!

HUGH MILLER

THE GIRL WAS boring him. Yap — yap — yap.

"Okay, okay, Rita. I know! You got all the right measurements, and you can cook. So why don't you find yourself some guy who wants to get married? Me, I'm not the marrying kind. So forget it!"

Rita's blue eyes got wider and wider, and there was just a hint of a tear to come. The full, red-bedaubed lips gave out a little tremor. Hell! In a minute this blonde would be sobbing on his shoulder.

"But Harry," she said, "we've been going around so long—going real steady, too, just lately. I thought . . ."

That was the trouble with the dames. They fell for his husky frame, they drooled over his black, wavy hair, they got some kind of kick just out of gazing into his rugged pan. They were easy; but they all seemed to want to get married afterwards.

"You thought wrong," he told her.

They left the café where they had been sitting, and tramped off towards her home. They turned into a lane of dark shadows, lit only by a solitary flickering gas-lamp. Beneath the lamp, she stopped, and grasped the lapels of his Italian-style jacket. She gazed up at his face.

"But Harry—you got to—it's only right. I mean—after all we've been to each other . . ."

He sighed heavily.

"Aw—drop dead," he said.

And she did.

She slid wearily to the ground, and, when he tried to lift her, he found that she was out: right out. Fainted, he guessed—only it got round to being a long faint. He propped her against a wall, and gently patted her face, gently called to her. She stayed limp. Suddenly he realized that she wasn't going to come round, ever.

He placed her on the ground, and ran to the corner, where there was a phone booth. Dialled 999. Ambulance *and* Police.

The ambulance took her away, and the police took him down to the station: just for questioning, of course—purely a matter of routine.

In the end, they had to let him go. He had done nothing wrong. He hadn't hit her. He hadn't done a darned thing—except to say those two words. And he didn't mention that.

It caused a minor sensation in the papers. A girl had just died, just dropped dead; and the doctors didn't know how—why—she had died.

For a few days, Harry Glenn was a worried man, but then he shrugged it off. Coincidence: it must be. She would have died, anyway. How could two words kill, just like that? Yeah, there was some other cause, only the medicos hadn't been able to trace it. Anyway, the cops couldn't touch him . . . could they?

He went out quite a few times, then, with Myra. A dark and passionate type, Myra, slimly voluptuous, sinuously seductive—all of which was quite okay with Harry.

But, of course, in the end, she wanted him to marry her.

"Aw, drop dead," he said.

And she did.

The cops really went to work on Harry that time. But what could they do? The doctors were whacked. Two girls now: they had just died, just stopped breathing. The fact that they had happened to be in Harry's company puzzled those cops all right, but they couldn't do a thing.

Harry was a bit bothered, though. For weeks, he didn't touch a dame—didn't even talk to one unless he had to. Then it looked as if he was never going to talk to one again.

It happened in that same dark lane: the lane where Rita had died so quietly and mysteriously. He was ambling along, thinking about it all, when the voice whispered its warning.

"Just stay still, Glenn. Don't move, and don't try anything."

From the shadow, a dark figure glided towards him. Something glinted in the stranger's hand.

Harry did what he was told. There was no sense in arguing with a knife—or a razor, whichever it was.

"Okay," he said. "Take my wallet, if that's what you're after."

The man stood facing him in the gloom. He was just a dark, menacing figure, the street light right behind him, outlining his burliness, but hiding his features better than any mask.

"I'm not after your wallet, Glenn. I'm after you."

Harry stood stock still. For a moment, his mind was a blank. Then he began to feel fear—but he did not flinch from it. He had never kidded himself that he was a perfect guy; but at least he had guts. A guy had to have guts to have worn the red beret when he had still been quite a kid. He felt fear, but he recognized it for what it was, and so he could face it.

"What's the idea?" he asked. "What have I done to you?"

The dark face came closer to his.

"I'm Brett Clark—Rita's brother. Maybe you remember Rita?"

"Sure I remember Rita. She was a great kid. I was real sorry . . ."

"I'll bet you were, you devil! When you'd had enough of her, you killed her!"

Harry could only shake his head in despair.

"No . . . no! I didn't touch her. She . . . she just died on me. . . ."

"And then another dame just died on you—just like Rita?"

"Yes!"

"Kind of a coincidence, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, it was. But that's *how* it was. They . . . they just . . . died. The doctors don't know how. And I'm damned if I do, either!"

"Look, Glenn, people don't 'just die'. Okay, so the medical guys don't know how. Nobody knows how—except you. I don't know how, for sure, but I'm saying you did it; and I'm here to get you for it."

The knife rose over the head of the dark figure, and Harry watched it rise, watched it glitter in the gaslight.

It was all in slow motion, somehow, and there was a lot of time to think, though it wasn't more than a second. A second—but enough.

"Drop dead," said Harry.

And the man did.

Harry ran from the spot, and fixed up an alibi. He didn't want another of those chats with the cops. It was getting to be too much.

The cops talked to him just the same—only his alibi was pretty good, and, this time, they couldn't even prove that he had been there, in that dark lane, at that time. They couldn't even prove that he had ever met Brett Clark.

It was getting on his nerves now, though. He had found a new fear: a fear of himself, a fear of this new, fantastic, unbelievable power of his —the power of sudden death. It was too much for a man. Suppose he let those words slip out, in company, with lots of guys about to hear him, and then . . .

He felt he had to talk to somebody about it, but there was nobody he could trust. He could write to Jeff, of course; an air-mail letter would reach Canada fast enough. But what if the cops had his mail watched, opened the letter, realized what had been happening? Could they book him—for murder, perhaps, just for having said those words on each of three occasions? Was it a crime? Or would they have to let him go? He had no idea, and he felt that he could not dare to ask some lawyer, who might be hand in glove with the police.

In his room, a week or so after Brett had died to his order, Harry was lying on his bed, smoking, and blowing rings up to a dingy ceiling. He heard footsteps, then a knock on his door.

"Yeah?"

"Oh, Mr. Glenn," came the voice of his fat, greasy landlady, "there's a gentleman on the telephone, asking for you."

Harry went down the three flights of stairs to the phone in the hall, and picked up the instrument.

"Glenn here," he said.

"Here, too!" came from the other end of the wire. "Hiya, Harry!"

"Jeff, Jeff boy! I was just thinking about you. What the hell are you doing over here?"

"Just visiting, Harry boy, just visiting. I been reading in the English papers, see, about how my identical twin brother's been making the headlines lately. Thought I'd like to talk about it. So I flew over."

Flew over! As though he'd taken a tube from two stations away. But then, Jeff had whacks of the stuff. The air fare would be chicken feed to him.

"I'm staying at the Regal," Jeff went on. "Get your glad rags on, and come on over. We'll have ourselves a ball."

The West End, then, and the Regal, and a doorman looking like a field-marshal, and waiters looking more like guests than some of the guests.

Jeff was in the bar—of course—and Harry soon found him. They gazed at each other. It was Jeff who spoke first.

"Yep, you're still my reflection in the mirror, I guess!"

"Same goes the other way round, Jeff."

Yes, they were identical, all right. Even their mother hadn't always known which was which; their father hardly ever got them right. Alike in looks, deeds, thoughts, and only parting when Harry had joined up in 1943, while Jeff had gone to Canada on some government business mission, and had stayed there, to build up a big business of his own. Since then, this was their first meeting.

They had a ball all right. They did the town in style. They picked up a couple of dames, and dined them, and wined them, and things.

Next morning, they both had heads. But the heads cleared, and they lunched together at the Regal, then went up to Jeff's room.

"Now, Harry boy, what's all this business I've been reading about? About you know . . ."

Harry poured out his story, though he chose his words carefully, and Jeff never once broke in. When Harry had finished, Jeff spoke.

"Just like that?" he inquired.

"Just like that!"

"Well, I'll be . . ."

Perhaps nothing more would have happened, if it had not been for Elizabeth. They met her at a strip club, but she was not one of the strippers. She was a nice girl, who believed in marriage—or nothing.

Harry fell for her on sight—really fell. For the first time in his life, he was thinking, seriously, about marriage. But Elizabeth was often in Jeff's company, and that Harry didn't like. There was nothing to choose between him and his twin, except about half a million dollars. Would that matter to Elizabeth? Harry didn't know.

In the end, he made up his mind. He would propose to Elizabeth that very evening.

He told Jeff so, as they sat together in that posh hotel room. For about three seconds, Jeff was very quiet. Then he spoke.

"Forget it, Harry. She's not for you."

"What do you mean?"

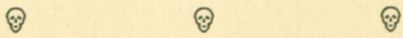
Jeff did not speak. Instead, he put a hand into his pocket, and took out a little box. As it flicked open, Harry saw the brilliance of the stones in the ring.

"You mean . . . you're going to ask her, too?"

Jeff nodded. The two men gazed at each other unwaveringly. Identical twins—they *would* each want the same girl, Harry told himself. But Jeff was going to be unlucky. Elizabeth's for me, Harry said silently, even if I have to . . .

Then both men spoke.

"Drop dead," they said simultaneously.



CLOTHES MAKE THE MAN

OLIVER TAYLOR

Illustrated by Norman Battershill

NEEDLES OF BLINDING rain peppered Everett Shelby's face and slowed his progress as he slouched forlornly along towards Blair Ballard's bachelor apartment. Park Avenue South glistened and gleamed under the street lights, and he pulled his head deeper into his collar. His bristling grey hair, bulky nose and lucid grey eyes gave Shelby the look of a shabby eagle flying against the wind.

It had been easy, he reflected, to keep his infirmity from Pamela, but Blair Ballard was another matter. Well, it would not matter greatly if he did suspect after tonight, though it was humiliating to be forced to borrow from him again. Only the fact that there was no one else, that he must pay this last insurance premium if Pamela's future was to be secure in the event that anything should happen to him, impelled him to do it, propelled him forward in the teeth of the early-spring rain.

In his mind's eye Everett could see Pamela, after a dozen years of marriage still pretty as a schoolgirl. He remembered a time when Blair Ballard and he had been college classmates: how their friendship had come close to being wrecked when he had married Pamela; how, after a few resentful weeks, Blair had buried the hatchet and become their best friend, helping them out more than once with short-term loans.

Sometimes the loans were accompanied by lectures on success: "You can't get ahead in business, Everett, on impulses and hunches. You must learn to be cold and calculating," Blair would say.

"Perhaps," Everett would agree reluctantly. And then he would resolve to develop a cold detachment in business—the sort of detachment which had been such an asset during his career as a boxer. He smiled at the memory of his years in the ring: he had won more often than he had lost. Everything had gone smoothly until that last match when Everett, knocked to his knees, his kidney damaged, had been saved by the bell. He had almost forgotten his opponent's smashing blow below his belt, but he would never forget the sound of the bell that had saved his life, starting him in a business world he could not understand. He sighed. It was a new world to him where opponents seldom met face to face, an insidiously competitive world which Blair Ballard conquered with ease and which Everett found incomprehensible. But he had no envy for Blair's wealth: Everett was no status-seeker. Indeed, even this afternoon he felt a certain smug comfort as he thought: Being

a successful industrialist is a hollow victory for a man without a wife. Pamela and my appliance store put me way ahead of him in spite of all his dollars. No doubt Blair was forced to resort to a good deal of trickery to pile up that fortune, anyway. He was glad for the straightforwardness which had permitted him to retain his integrity, though it had brought him precious little in the way of worldly wealth.

At the corner of Twentieth Street he stepped into a glistening puddle, but Everett barely noticed. The kidney pain was settling down after a bad week, his mind floating on an April cloud of sudden and rare exhilaration, every key fitting neatly into every locked door in his life; there seemed a completeness about his existence that he had never known before. Funny how when the pain went you could really *feel* happiness. A vast calm embraced his world, and the sense of physical relief held him intact.

As Everett started to cross Park, his foot slipped on the rain-washed pavement. At the same moment a long black sedan darted from its parking place half a block down the street. Its driver, coat lapels turned up around his face and hat brim pulled low on his forehead, crouched over the steering-wheel. Like an arrow the machine headed straight towards Everett. Off balance for a second, Everett managed to stagger back against the kerb. The car whizzed by, with an agonized shriek of brakes, then went into a brief skid. The sharp fender edge caught his raincoat and ripped it up the back, missing his body by inches. Arms and legs akimbo, Everett sprawled in the gutter. The driver shot one frightened glance over his shoulder and crouched lower in the seat. The car skidded around the corner on two wheels and disappeared, a blur of black in the traffic turning into Gramercy Park.

Passers-by gathered around morbidly. A policeman's whistle shrilled in the distance and then was drowned out by the insistent wail of a siren. A teenager helped Everett to his feet; a Western Union messenger handed him a patch of the coat and a couple of buttons. A burly police sergeant arrived in a squad car, got out, picked up Everett's hat and set it on his head.

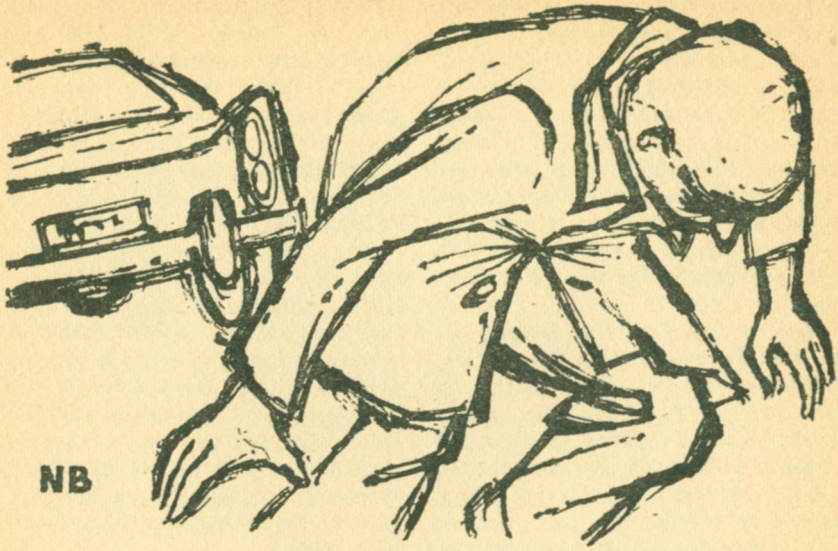
"Are you all right, sir?" the sergeant asked.

Everett took a trembling breath and checked himself. "Yes, Officer, everything seems okay. Just a spot of palpitation, it's passing. There's only my coat to worry about." That and the chance that I might have been killed before I got that last insurance premium paid, he added bleakly to himself.

"Well, sir, I'm afraid we lost the car in the congestion." The policeman seemed embarrassed. "But our cruisers are looking for it." He removed a notebook from his pocket. "Can you describe the driver or the car?"

"No . . . neither. Guess I was daydreaming."

The policeman took Everett's name and address, questioned several bystanders who had witnessed the accident, and then roared off in his automobile.



The dizzy sensation of emerging from a near brush with death held Everett rooted to the spot for a moment; then he strode with renewed determination towards Blair Ballard's downtown flat. Once again he felt secure, but the accident had sharpened his sense of life's impermanence, making him want to hurry, to do what had to be done while there was still time.

It seemed as if the driver had deliberately aimed the car at him. But that seemed hardly likely. Who could have wanted to kill him? He had no enemies. Wasn't it Voltaire, though, who had said: "Beware of your friends. You know where your enemies stand"?

"What happened?" exclaimed Ballard as he waved Everett towards the blazing fireplace in his sumptuous lounge. "Dry your bones while I fix you a drink." Blair's charm was the deceptive sort which is often described as "boyish", and Everett found himself studying him. Thick hair, brown and grey-flecked, handsome face and loose-limbed figure—a middle-aged Casanova, Everett concluded.

"I sure need one. A hit-and-run driver nearly got me."

"You need watching," Blair flung over his shoulder. "Good married men are scarce."

Everett laughed: "But good whisky is scarcer."

Blair came back with two glasses of sherry. "Try this, instead. Warm you up and dry you out." He surveyed Everett good-humouredly.

"You can't go home to Pamela like that. Let me lend you my camel's hair."

For a fraction of a second he glanced at Everett through eyes which had grown flinty. Everett caught the cold, hard look and felt a sudden chill. Startled, he warned himself that even a good friend like Blair Ballard could be treacherous. He started when he heard the telephone ringing in the rear of the apartment.

Blair walked into the hall to answer it, and Everett, listening to his low voice, made an effort to compose his thoughts. The intimacy in Blair's voice convinced him that he was speaking to a woman, and he smiled, wondering what sort of woman Blair felt most at home with. . . . He was glad when Blair had come back and he had spoken his piece, when the money for the insurance premium was safely in his pocket.

"You're a regular guy. And don't forget, we're expecting you for dinner in about an hour. Not a word about this loan, remember."

"I'm an oyster," grinned Blair. "But I'll be a glutton when I smell Pamela's cooking. What a wonderful woman she is. And you must be travelling, Everett: you'll want a word with the wife before I turn up."

It had stopped raining. Twilight began to smudge the sky.

On his way home Everett decided to window-shop for a new coat. He couldn't afford one yet, but he'd like one the same as Blair's. It was so elegant, and it fitted so snugly. He felt a different man in this luxurious, velvety coat. He caught a glimpse of himself through a mirror in a men's shop window, and gaped. This isn't me: this is a handsome young fellow . . . Hell's bells, what a difference clothes make.

The remaining four blocks to his home seemed short. He whistled for the first time in months and increased his pace.

The greyness of an evening fog began to streak the growing darkness. An acquaintance who passed failed to recognize him in the gloom.

"I'm not really old yet," Everett murmured half-aloud. "Maybe the kidney pain isn't as prophetic as it seems. I should have had new clothes long ago. Strange how good they make you feel." His step became lighter; he almost skipped along the pavement.

A weeping moon filtered through the clouds and cast a silvery hue over the fog-laden streets.

In a warm afterglow of nostalgia he thought more hopefully about Pamela. She had grown cold, somehow unfriendly towards him these last few months. Maybe it was his shabby clothes, that and the fact that failing health left one with somewhat less to give. After all, she was ten years younger than he. Perhaps if he dressed more like Blair . . . But then she hadn't liked Blair. Oh, what the hell—that was all water over the dam now. She hadn't liked Blair when he and Everett were graduated, but since then she had become reconciled to their friendship. Definitely. He recalled their happy vacations together at the beach; how the three of them, almost inseparable, had become

known to the other vacationers as the "unholy three". Unholy? Everett shuddered at the word. It made him recall the cold and calculating look which Blair had directed at him in the apartment. He shrugged it off, ducking under the awning of his apartment house.

Anyway, it'll be fun to surprise Pamela with this coat, he mused, as he quietly opened the front door.

The hall was quite dark; the lights were never turned on unless visitors were expected. "Must keep down the bills."

She's in the living-room now, thought Everett, somehow warmed by the thought.

His pulse quickened as he heard her footsteps approaching him in the hallway. Then suddenly, he felt as if all of his senses were exposed to sandpaper. A bell seemed to be ringing faintly somewhere behind the apartment building, its sound echoing persistently in his ears.

He stood still, waiting in the darkness.

He was right in thinking Pamela would be more affectionate when she saw the coat. She stole up close to him, twined her arms about his neck, and kissed him warmly and intensely. She burrowed her head in the collar of his coat. His heart sang.

"Everett isn't home yet, darling. But he'll be here any minute."

"Will he?" answered Everett Shelby in a voice he didn't himself recognize. "Is he often late in the evening?"

Shock, then terror, flashed briefly across her face. Then she laughed. "Thought I'd kid you, Everett," she faltered, lighting a cigarette. But her hand shook, and her expression was like nothing he had ever seen before.

Everett, detached, almost tolerant, glanced down at his wife. "You nearly kidded yourself, didn't you?" He smiled mirthlessly. "How about a sherry before dinner?"

"Y-y-yes, of course, b-but Blair—?"

"Oh, he'll be along soon." He turned towards the bar, and, for the first time, a look of cold determination masked his face.

Puzzled by her husband's appearance of nonchalance, Pamela stared blankly at his back while he poured the drinks. Her cigarette glowed and then darkened, leaving her blue-eyed brunette beauty in a kind of grey-faced obscurity. She tried desperately to smile.

As old friends often do, they seated themselves without ceremony and began eating. Dinner was unnaturally quiet. At first Everett's presence dominated the little dining-room like a Damocles' sword. So far Pamela had been granted no opportunity to enlighten Blair regarding her slip in the halfway, and he, Everett, was determined to prevent any exchange of information between them tonight. During the main course Pamela, listless and silent, stared sullenly at her plate. But Blair, unwarned, was as cool and smooth as a martini. At a glance from him Pamela's face lit up. For a long, cryptic moment she and Blair looked at each other, without speaking. Pamela started to signal, gesturing with her hands, saw Everett watching them, paled, and then

flushed bright crimson. Everett met her gaze with an enigmatic smile and said nothing. The muscles of his jaw tightened in sharp, resolute lines.

"I wish we could take another vacation together at the beach," said Blair, aware now of the growing tension.

"Oh, it's becoming tiresome," Everett laughed. His eyes, however, were intent and serious. "Let's try another place next time."

Blair smirked, and Pamela smiled nervously.

A bright fire flamed in the hearth and bathed the tiny sitting-room in its flickering amber light. Blair Ballard, smoking a clear Havana cigar, lay stretched out in a large easy chair. Everett sat huddled in a corner of the sofa. From the kitchen drifted the sounds of Pamela washing the dishes. Strained silence, like an expectant living thing, filled every corner of the apartment.

"You're not saying much," forced Blair. "Still worried about that torn coat?"

"No," said Everett. "It's the new one I'm worried about." He studied his friend solemnly. "You know, Blair, this may be the last dinner we'll enjoy together."

"How come?"

"Just a hunch I've got."

Blair put down his cigar and examined his nails. "You're mistaken, pal," he muttered, but he couldn't conceal the anxiety on his face. Fear began to crack across his cool self-assurance.

"Maybe, Blair." Everett's eyes were alert, penetrating. "But let me thank you once again for lending me your camel's hair coat. It's wonderful how wearing that coat opened my eyes."

Wincing, Blair took up his cigar and puffed nervously. "Dress right, old man," he said through a cloud of smoke, "and you'll feel a new man. Remember the old saw: 'Clothes make the man'."

"What do they make him, Blair? Healthy, wealthy and wise? Or perhaps dead?"

Blair looked definitely startled. But Everett's eyes were closed now, and his head was nodding.

Blair turned quickly towards the kitchen. "You can come in now, Pamela. Everett's gone." He waited a second or two. "Pamela, can you hear me?" Her heels tapped on the floorboards.

Everett Shelby opened his eyes slowly, stared dully at the pair of them. "Just in time," he said.

"In time?" Her voice was dead too, as if in anticipation of what was to happen.

"To watch Blair die." He looked almost amiably at Blair, who stumbled to his feet. "That sherry . . . blast you, Shelby. . . ."

"Yes, Blair—that sherry. I took the precaution of switching drinks while you were getting the coat." Everett smiled grimly. "Thought it odd you should offer me sherry when the whisky bottle was on the table. And it *is* a fact that certain drugs are less easily detectable in sherry, isn't it?" He smiled again. "Just a hunch. But it was the right one, wasn't it?"

Blair struggled towards Everett. But sudden weakness pushed him

back. His body slumped helplessly downward.

"You see, Blair, clothes, besides making the man, sometimes change him. Pamela thought it was you when I came in. She kissed me—something she hasn't done in months." He stared at her, trying to identify the death's mask of shock and fear with the image which he had carried for so long in his heart.

The telephone began to ring urgently in the kitchen, but Shelby ignored it. Bells no longer held any significance for him. He was tired now, very tired.

He started walking away from the inert figure on the floor, paused for a moment, and then looked back, frowning. "Oh, one last word of thanks. That loan. I'll have to change the beneficiary of my insurance policy tomorrow. Ridiculous to have it in Pamela's name now, isn't it?"

But Blair Ballard never heard those last words.

The telephone continued to ring as Shelby shrugged into the camel's hair coat and walked to the door. No point in answering, he thought. What he needed now was air. This had been a busy day for him, but apparently it had been good medicine for his kidneys. That sherry hadn't bothered him in the slightest. . . .

He walked to the nearest bar and ordered a whisky. Perhaps the police had caught the hit-and-run driver, who had been, he felt certain now, a paid assassin in the hire of Blair Ballard. Well, if that was what the phone call had been about, let Pamela receive the news—if she were able to.

In the mirror he saw only the camel's hair coat, in sharp contrast to the green dress of the woman seated on the stool beside him.

"Whew, what a night," she said brightly. "Is it ever going to stop raining?" She, too, was looking at the coat, and there could be no mistaking the invitation in her voice.

"I don't know," he said. He had suddenly caught sight of his face in the mirror, and he turned away abruptly, that she might not see the death in his eyes.

I am told he makes a very handsome corpse, and becomes his coffin prodigiously.

OLIVER GOLDSMITH

THE BLACK DOG

GEOFFREY LEE

I WAS ON MY WAY to visit some friends in Warwickshire and, having missed a connection at Seatry Junction, found myself with two hours to kill before the next train.

I don't know if you have ever been to Seatry or its Junction, but let me assure you that it is the most miserable, dingy town you could ever imagine. I had explored its grimy neon-rimed shopping centre in fifteen minutes, and because I am one of those people who cannot just sit still and do nothing I decided to follow a road leading out of the town for a short walk. At the end of thirty minutes I would about turn and be back in good time for my train.

It was a mild October evening with a bright, hard moon to light my way and I walked along briskly, vaguely wondering what my friends would think of my unpunctuality.

First, I came to houses and the entrance gates of factories, and then I was out in the countryside. The road had been making a large semi-circular curve since it had left the town and when, after thirty minutes, I found a small side road leading in a straight line back towards the lights of the town I thought that it might be a good idea to take this short cut back to my starting point.

The side road led past a public house and then dipped under heavy trees. Here, in a pocket of countryside engulfed by the urban sprawl of Seatry, I was in darkness. The air was filled with the rasping of grasshoppers. A plane roared overhead and was gone, leaving a throbbing silence. No cars used the road. An occasional house loomed out of the darkness and disappeared. Then there were no houses. The lights of the town were reflected in the sky: as I topped a rise in the road I could see a bank of factory lights blazing not half a mile away—yet I was quite alone in a country lane with tall elms towering above me.

And then I came to the cottage.

The curtains were undrawn and as I passed my eyes turned to the window. An oil-lamp lit a small room filled with shabby Victorian furniture. A woman was standing in the middle of the room drying her hair with a towel. The lamplight shone on her bare arms, reddening them with its rays. The woman was looking straight out of the window. She saw me and smiled what seemed to be a welcoming smile.

The blood pounded in my head as I walked on and my heart thumped against my ribs. A sensuous vision of the bare brown arms swum before my eyes.

I hesitated and stopped. Then from the cottage came the long drawn out howl of a dog. A wolf-like sound that quickly rose to its highest pitch and

then slowly died away into silence. Yet I scarcely heard it: the enticing smile—so I now thought of it—had filled my mind and stirred my blood. An attractive woman alone in a cottage. A smile to a stranger. What else could it mean? No, I was mad. Probably she hadn't even seen me—was just smiling to herself. Nevertheless, I had slowed my steps.

The road now seemed to be bearing slightly to the left, away from the town. I hesitated: the road, of course, might turn back again; on the other hand, it might be safer to retrace my steps to the main road and return the way I had come. Go back past the cottage. I could call there and inquire which was the best way to go. It was a legitimate excuse for calling. Then, if there had been any meaning in that smile. . . .

No! I hadn't lost my way. If I called at that cottage I must not deceive myself as to the reason. It was only because of the tempting smile and my own weakness.

I began to retrace my steps towards the cottage. I waited for the dog to howl, but it was silent. The curtains were now drawn, I could see the lamp shining through them. Was the woman alone? It would be quite in order to call to inquire the way. It was quite reasonable, surely?

I had already unlatched the gate and was walking up the path. I braced myself for the sound of the dog, but there was not so much as a growl. I knocked on the door. After a moment I heard a bolt being drawn back and then the door was pulled wide open.

The woman, now in a worn dressing-gown, stood in front of me. I hesitated, my mouth dry. I tried to frame some plausible inquiry. Before I could say anything, the woman spoke.

"Come inside," she said.

As in a dream, I stepped through into the room I had seen from the road. A fire burnt in the grate and two chairs were drawn up in front of it.

"Please sit down," said the woman, pointing to them. I looked at her face: a rather coarse, reddish face. The lamplight had deceived me. She was much older than I had thought; nearly fifty I guessed. Her black eyes fixed me with a piercing uncommunicative gaze. She went to a door leading out of the room.

"Will you excuse me? I shan't be a moment," and she was gone.

I, still in a state of bewilderment, went over to one of the chairs. As I sat down, I was suddenly aware that I was not alone. The sound of a shuffling movement from a dark corner of the room startled me out of my daze. A man almost bent double slowly dragged himself into the circle of light thrown from the lamp. A creature so hideously deformed as to make me start from my seat.

"Please sit down," the creature spoke. "My wife won't be long."

The hunchback came towards the other armchair. I saw that his deformities were due to terrible injuries. The left leg was twisted round at a right angle to his body so that it had to be dragged along as he walked crabwise across the room. His face was a mass of scars—the most terrible

being a livid gash that had taken one eye away and scored its way right across the face.

He sat down in a chair facing me.

"We know why you came," he said.

I was by now very frightened. I stood up again, but he leant forward and gripped my wrist and pulled me down into my chair. In spite of his appalling injuries he was very strong and I was helpless in his grip.

"Here comes my wife."

I turned to the door. The woman had changed into a short green dress in the style of the 'twenties. It had a wide waist band very low down on the hips and with it she wore three long chains of amber beads. Her hair, which I had seen her drying only ten minutes or so before, was, I now noticed, cut in a bob.

The man turned to me. "My wife and I were once great ballroom dancers, professionals; before the war. Irving and Denise Allerdine—you may have heard of us."

I shook my head. "No."

"Oh we were famous. We won many international prizes. Anyway, I was severely injured in an air raid in 1944. I have never, obviously, been able to dance since. My wife was fortunately uninjured, but she has never danced publicly from that date. She only dances for me, in private. See."

He pointed to the floor which I had now noticed had a worn but highly polished surface.

"It is not often we have a guest, but when we do I like them to dance with my wife: it reminds me of the old days."

It was not a dream that I was in but a hideous nightmare.

For some reason I could not escape —I seemed to have lost my willpower. I tried to make some protest.

"I can't dance."

"My wife will soon teach you."

As he spoke, his wife went over to an old horn gramophone standing beside his armchair and put on a record. A very scratched version of *September in the Rain* filled the air.

Without further ado the woman waved me to my feet and pushed me into a foxtrot. She gripped me very tightly and I danced as best I could. In spite of what I had said I am a moderately good dancer and when the woman found that I could dance she relaxed her hold.

She said nothing to me; indeed she scarcely seemed to see me. Her eyes were blank—she was merely a dancing machine. As soon as a record stopped, the man would put on another one: they were all tunes of the twenties and thirties. Sometimes he would merely push the arm back and play the same record again. When he came to *Dance Little Lady*, he played it over and over again.

On into the night I danced. I had given up protesting. I was quite powerless to do anything. I could only dance like an automaton with an automaton. Waltz, quickstep, innumerable foxtrots and the charleston, the same tunes over and over again until I could no longer tell neither tunes nor dances apart from each other.

It seemed that I had been dancing all night when at last the man stopped the gramophone and said, "I think

that's enough for tonight." We had come to a halt near the door and the woman simply opened it and pushed me out. "Good night," she said, closed the door behind me and shot the bolt.

I stood there shaking with exhaustion and relief. The nightmare was over; I had woken up. Still unable to comprehend what had happened, I walked up the path. As I got to the gate I heard the long eerie howl of the dog again. Something seemed to snap inside of me. I ran as fast as my legs would carry me. When I saw the lights of the main road and the public house I slowed to a walk.

I looked at my watch and was surprised to find that I had only been in the cottage for two hours. I had honestly expected to find that it was the early hours of the morning. But no, I should still have time to catch the last train to my friends' station. First of all I would call at the public house and have a stiff drink and make some inquiries.

My dreadful indignities ought to be reported to the police—but now, as I slowed to a more reasonable pace, I wondered how it should be done. I had been held prisoner by a madman and his wife for two hours and had been forcibly made to dance! It sounded absurd: one of them was a cripple, the other a middle-aged lady. How was it that I hadn't made my escape? Was it because I knew that in a way I was getting what I deserved? What had the man meant when he said "We know why you came"? How could he? But what might he say if I brought them to court? By the time I had reached the public house I had decided to let the matter drop.

The pub's saloon bar was nearly empty and I ordered a double Scotch.

"Do you know the people in the cottage just before you get to the river?" I casually asked of the landlord as I took the drink.

"Mrs. Allerdine. She comes in sometimes with her dog—a great big black beast. She and her husband were dancers . . . had their own dancing school in Seatry before the war."

"So I've heard. Of course it must have been a shocking blow to both of them when he was so badly injured that he had to give up dancing."

"Injured? Her husband? No you've got the story wrong, sir. Her husband was killed outright, sir, in an air raid."

"But I've just seen him at the cottage . . ." I burst out.

"Couldn't have done, sir. I well remember reading about it in the paper. In any case, Mrs. Allerdine lives there alone, except for the dog —it belonged to her husband. I'm told that he used to treat it as if it were human. But she dotes on it now; I suppose it's the only link she has now with her husband. It was with him in the air raid—terribly injured poor thing. It really ought to have been done away with . . . but she wanted to keep it. Its foot is all twisted out of joint and, ugh!" the publican shuddered, "it has the most hideous scar that I have ever seen . . . right across its face where one of its eyes was blown out."

A CASE OF BUTTERFLIES

G. DE SELINCOURT

Illustrated by Woodward

THE LID WOULDN'T come off. Stamping his foot with impatience Reginald looked around for something to prise it open. He found a small screwdriver on the shelf, pushed it under the lid and pressed with all his might. The lid flew off and with it a spattering of dark grey powder. Ugh, he thought, wrinkling his nose, what a funny smell. He looked again at the label. On it was printed the words "Angel's Special Preparation. Apply in small . . ." here the label was torn off.

Reginald pondered this for a long time.

Suddenly he wriggled with delight and jumped up and down. A most beautiful thought had come into his head. Supposing. Just supposing. He must at once consult Rufus about this.

Clutching the tin, he made off again to the garden.

But Rufus was no longer there.

Bother Rufus. He was never there when you wanted him. What should he do now? He stood perplexed, scratching the top of his head. He was not at all sure about the dark grey powder. Was it all right? Would his beautiful idea work? If only he could know for certain, how wonderful it would be! It would make up for everything.

He shouted for Rufus once more, but there was no answering grunt. He turned slowly on his heel, gazing again at the fascinating label and wondered if he dared risk it.

Thoughts of the morning came back. Miss Fairclough and himself in the library.

He had just come out of his great-uncle's room, and had banged the door, he remembered. But then, he was feeling sad. It was sad that he couldn't ever bring any happiness to his great-uncles and great-aunts living in this huge house. And he loved them so much. But they were all so cheerless always. He had heaved a deep sigh, and pulling a russet apple from the pocket of his light blue shorts, taken a consoling bite, then, flinging one leg carelessly over the bannisters of the great staircase, had slid gloriously down to the bottom.

Miss Fairclough, his governess, was standing there, very dark and almost invisible in the shadows, and he nearly tumbled her over.

"Oh, sorry, Miss Fairclough," and looking up he saw she seemed very upset and was dabbing at her eyes with a small black handkerchief.

"Oh, Reginald," she began. "How *can* you slide down the bannisters on a day like this?"

"Why, Is it a special day, Miss Fairclough?"

"Come in here a minute, Reginald. I have something to say to you." Miss Fairclough raised the handkerchief to her nose, large and jutting like an eagle's beak, and sniffed as she led the way into the library.

"Close the door quietly, now," she said in a small voice. She walked solemnly over to the window and stood there quite a while, very tall and thin in her black dress, gazing outwards and upwards as if she were seeking help from above.

Reginald fidgeted a little, and polished the toes of his shoes against the back of his stockings.

He thought again about his great-uncles and great-aunts who lived each in their separate apartments.

He thought of great-uncle Harold who was ninety-two. Whenever he went to visit great-uncle Harold the only thing he ever found him doing was a few words of *The Times* crossword puzzle, though just occasionally he would talk in a mournful way about the slothful life of great-uncle Henry, ninety-four, who, he said, had wasted his whole life and was now unwilling to help anybody, even with the crossword.

He thought also of great-uncle James, well over ninety.

He remembered Miss Fairclough telling him that great-uncle James still plied a redoubtable knife and fork. He tried the words over on his tongue, thinking they were nice words and wondering what exactly they meant. Something to do with the

weary length and sadness of the hours between the tender steaks his great-uncle was always talking about and which he endured with declining fortitude.

And great-uncle Robert, ninety-seven, so cheerless he didn't ever have any hopes for the day at all, but just sat in his chair mumbling.

He thought of his great-aunts Sarah, Mathilda, Agnes and Amanda. All so old and so sad with such dull lives, and all smelling so fusty.

Yet he visited them all almost every day, bringing them some little gift from the garden to cheer them, a charming weed freshly dug up from the flower bed by Rufus the gardener. Perhaps, too, a few interesting insects wrapped up in moss and carefully placed in an empty matchbox.

He did all this, he thought wistfully, to try and show his love for them; but it never worked very well. They didn't care for interesting things.

How he wished he could make them happier.

"Reginald," began Miss Fairclough turning slowly round, her long wriggly fingers clasped round the silver cross that hung down in front. "I have something very sad to tell you. You must be brave, Reginald." She paused and fixed upon him her small eyes glistening behind her glasses. Like moonshine on a twisted pin, he thought. Here was really the great moment. He took his hands out of his pockets expectantly.

"Your great-aunt Sarah was called away from us this morning. She has passed on. We are all heartbroken." Miss Fairclough wiped away a tear.

"Passed on?" he asked. "What is that, Miss Fairclough?"

"Your great-aunt Sarah is now in Heaven, Reginald."

Reginald's blue eyes widened. "In Heaven? Will she be there very long?"

"Yes," Miss Fairclough said. "We shall never see her here again. It is very, very sad."

"Is it nice in Heaven? I mean . . . is great-aunt Sarah happier now?"

"She is happy, yes. We believe it to be so."

"Why do we have to be sad then, Miss Fairclough?"

"We who are left behind in this vale of tears, Reginald, are happy for *her* of course. But she is gone from us. It is a great loss. A terrible loss." Miss Fairclough's voice broke on the last note.

"Yes," Reginald said thoughtfully. "May I go into the garden now, Miss Fairclough?"

"I suppose so. Seven is too young to understand these things. You are not a serious boy, Reginald. You are always slamming the doors, dashing about the house, sliding down the bannisters. You are not very kind or considerate to your great-uncles and great-aunts, are you?" Miss Fairclough wept again. "You are a great trial to me, Reginald. I hope, while you are in the garden, you will think a little about your poor great-aunt Sarah, and of how much kinder you could have been to her while she was still with us, and feel sorry that you weren't."

"Yes, Miss Fairclough," said Reg-

inald and left the room slowly, his brow puckered in thought. He must consult Rufus the gardener about all this.

He found Rufus removing buttercups from the flower bed.

Rufus also was very old; almost as old as great-aunt Sarah. Reginald loved him dearly.

"I say, Rufus," he cried, sauntering up. "Have you heard that great-aunt Sarah has passed on?"

"Aye, Master Reginald," said Rufus, straightening up reluctantly and caressing the spiky end of one sandy whisker, "I did hear that."

"She is in Heaven now."

"Aye, she'll be an angel in Heaven. That would be it."

"An angel, Rufus?" Reginald queried, wrinkling his brow. "But wouldn't she be rather a wizened angel, don't you think?"

"Wizened, Master Reginald?" Rufus looked extremely shocked. He heaved a despairing sigh and pushed his spade into the soft earth, folding his great knobbly hands around the handle. He fixed Reginald with a fierce blue eye. " 'Course she's not wizened. She's young and beautiful now, like when she was a young girl."

"Great-aunt Sarah was once a young girl?"

"Of course she was. What things you do ask."

"Were you too, Rufus? I mean . . . not exactly a young girl, but like me?" Reginald asked politely, gazing at the heap of uprooted buttercups.

"I was, yes. Though you mightn't think it."

Reginald pondered this. Then he picked up an uprooted buttercup and tenderly replanted it in a corner of the flower bed.

"Now, Master Reginald, that's an aggravating thing to do. I've spent the whole morning digging up them dratted buttercups and you must needs go and stick them in again."

"Only one, Rufus. I thought it looked sad."

"A good thing too. Pernicious things."

"Have they passed on, Rufus?"

"What's that?"

"I mean, have they left this vale of tears?"

"Oh, I see. You might say they are for a better land. A nice warm bonfire." He rubbed his hands and chuckled.

"Are you sorry, Rufus?"

" 'Course I'm not sorry. Would I spend the whole morning digging them up if I was going to be sorry?"

"*I'm* supposed to be very sorry about great-aunt Sarah," Reginald said.

"That's a different matter," Rufus said in a serious voice, the furrows in his cheeks lengthening. "She was your great-aunt."

"Rufus," inquired Reginald after a moment's pause and careful thought, "if great-aunt Sarah is now a *young* angel in Heaven, what happens to the great-aunt Sarah we knew . . . and weren't very kind to?" he added sadly.

Rufus scratched his head with one earthy finger as he gave this his full consideration. "Well, Master Reginald," he began slowly, after deep thought, "it's like this, see. It's like

the cocoon and the butterfly, I reckon. Now she's a butterfly in Heaven, isn't she? And the cocoon, well, it's just swept up. Yes, I reckon that would be about it, Master Reginald. When we gets too old we're just swept up like the cocoons and the dead leaves."

"Will great-aunt Sarah rustle, when she's swept up?"

"Now don't you go worrying about things like that, Master Reginald. And just you let me get on with my work a bit. Rustle indeed!"

He plunged his spade into a polyanthus and dug it up. "Now look what you've made me do," he exclaimed, glaring at Reginald as fiercely as he could. He replanted it still more fiercely.

Reginald wandered off.

He didn't really feel very sorry about great-aunt Sarah, particularly if now she was a very young angel. He wondered if all his other great-uncles and great-aunts wouldn't be happier in Heaven too. All in Heaven. It was a lovely thought and with it he strolled towards the potting-shed.

He loved the potting-shed. It had a lot of very interesting things. Broken spades, battered bowler hats belonging to Rufus. Then there were large sacks, heavy with mysterious grey contents.

That morning he discovered a catalogue lying on the bench. He leaned forward gazing at it. On the cover was printed in large scarlet letters "Angel's wonderful bulb and flower catalogue."

Excitedly he turned the pages. Inside, were various items, all beautifully illustrated in colours. "Angel's double chrysanthemums, heavenly crimson blooms," "Paradise peonies, perfect flowering in sunny vales. No tears with Angel's peonies. Young shoots guaranteed." "Butterfly crocuses."

Without doubt, he thought ecstatically, here were the flowers which grew in Heaven for the angels. He must show this to great-uncle Harold; it would cheer him up.

He trotted out of the potting-shed with the catalogue tucked under his arm.

Making his way to great-uncle Harold's room he knocked carefully on the door, once.

"Come in, then. Come in, whoever you are," answered a voice quavery with cheerlessness.

Reginald entered. He saw his great-uncle sitting as usual in his high-backed chair, *The Times* crossword puzzle on his knee and a silver pencil poised in trembling hand.

"May I come in, great-uncle Harold?" he inquired politely.

"I said so, didn't I, my boy?"

Reginald approached tactfully, so as not to jolt his great-uncle, who hated speed and exuberance.

He thought he looked especially sad today. His heavy tweed coat hung a bit sideways from one shoulder and his waistcoat wasn't properly buttoned up, so that his tie trailed out all anyhow.

"I've brought you a very interesting present," Reginald began cautiously. "At least, it isn't exactly a present because I have to put it back again. But just to look at, I mean."

"Ah," said great-uncle Harold with a disappointed expression. "Not exactly a present, eh? A loan, you might say."

Reginald handed him the catalogue and putting his hands into the pockets of his blue shorts stood with his legs planted firmly apart, considering that this would be the right attitude for a man-to-man conversation.

He thought great-uncle Harold looked rather like Archibald the tortoise who lived in the garden on Rufus's lettuces. His eyes were a bit bleary, like Archibald's, and his neck very wrinkled and thin. He wished he could tickle him under the chin, to bring him a little pleasure like he did to Archibald—it was always such a success, Archibald's neck sticking out farther and farther in trustful happiness. Would his great-uncle's neck stick out too?

"This is a Heavenly catalogue, great-uncle Harold," he explained earnestly. "You see, all these flowers grow in Heaven, for the angels."

"What makes you think that, my boy?"

"Look, great-uncle, it says so, here. 'Angel's catalogue', you see? And again here, 'Paradise peonies'."

"A fine idea, my boy. A very fine idea." Great-uncle Harold twirled up the ends of his moustache which had been drooping a little.

"Wouldn't you love to see them?" Reginald asked, swaying a little forwards and backwards in his anxiety to bring good cheer to his great-uncle. "I mean, it would be wonderful for you to be in Heaven and see all these."

"In Heaven, my boy?" great-uncle Harold asked, sitting up dead straight and dropping the crossword. "Did you say, in Heaven?"

"Why yes," Reginald said, leaning forward in his earnestness. "An angel in Heaven . . . very young . . . like great-aunt Sarah. Wouldn't that cheer you up? Miss Fairclough says this is a vale of tears. I would have thought. . . ." he trailed off.

Astonished, he saw his great-uncle's neck go down rapidly into his collar. His eyes popped out.

"Angel in Heaven, my boy? Me. Now? I don't think that is at all a good idea," and his thin grey hair seemed suddenly to stick up round his bald patch. "Whatever put these ideas into your head?"

"I want so much to make you happy, great-uncle," said Reginald sadly. "You and all my other great-uncles and great-aunts."

"Now you just run along, my boy. You and your great ideas. Be a good boy, now. I never heard of such a thing. Angel in Heaven, forsooth. Anyhow, I'm busy now. Lots to do."

Reginald went sorrowfully away, the catalogue under his arm. If only he could find a way to make them all happy. They were so terribly sad. They never enjoyed anything at all. Miss Fairclough was right, it was a vale of tears, really.

Then it was that he had returned to the potting-shed and discovered the tin.

Unable to find Rufus, he must decide for himself. Would it be all right? A success? What exactly was the dark grey powder?

He remembered how he had often heard Rufus say that you must help the flowers to become beautiful, and that if you sprinkle a little powder here and there it prepares them, and then they bloom beautifully. He wriggled a little at the thought.

Great-uncle Harold couldn't have understood properly how happy he would be if he became a young angel.

In fact, all his great-uncles and great-aunts would surely be far more happy in Heaven than they were now, in this vale of tears, wizened and cheerless. Surely this "Angel's special preparation" would prepare them for the idea, just like Rufus had said about the flowers.

And so, at last, he would be able to show his love for them.

He closed his lips firmly and decided definitely. Putting the tin in the pocket of his jacket he sauntered off to the kitchen.

He saw through the window that the cook and the maids were hanging up the week's washing. He could hear them giggling and gossiping in the yard. The kitchen was empty. This was good as he didn't really want to explain all this. He went in.

A wonderful rich smell rose from the range on which stood a huge cauldron of stew thick with many vegetables and bubbling brown gravy.

This was the midday meal, he was

sure, for his great-uncles and great-aunts. The maids never had this sort of thing.

He approached and sniffed. He stirred the stew a few times with a great wooden spoon which lay near-by. Then he took the tin from his pocket and emptied the contents into the cauldron, stirring once again a few times. To prepare them, he murmured to himself happily.

He strolled out of the kitchen his hands in his pockets, whistling a gay little tune, very softly. He replaced the tin carefully on the bench in the potting-shed.

Reginald had his meals always in the nursery upstairs. Light, special meals, Miss Fairclough had told him, suited to his tender years. After lunch he had to rest for an hour in his little bedroom which was just over the great dining hall. From there he could sometimes hear sounds of conversation, rather indistinct and mumbling.

He had been resting for about half an hour when he became aware of a curious sound coming from the dining hall. He could not make out what this sound was. It was like a loud creaking and groaning and rattling.

He felt he must know what this was. He'd simply got to find out, even if Miss Fairclough caught him out of bed.

He got up and tiptoed down the great staircase.

When he was half-way down the sounds stopped. There was a dead silence. He put his ear to the keyhole of the dining-room door. Still no sound. Completely mystified he turned the handle and pushed the door cautiously. He peered in and stood staring. His mouth fell open and his eyebrows shot up in his astonishment.

All his great-uncles and great-aunts were still at the table, some half in their chairs and some half out. All stiff as pokers.

Miss Fairclough had collapsed on the floor with one leg stuck out and still resting on her chair. They all looked smaller and even more wizened.

What could have happened?

He went nearer, holding his breath, peering from one to the other. Then he prodded great-uncle Harold very gently in the waistcoat to see if he would do anything. His neck had almost altogether disappeared into his collar, and he made no move.

Reginald pondered this mystery for a long time and at last the light dawned.

"I know," he cried, enchanted, clasping his hands together, "It's like a miracle. They have all become young angels straight off, and have gone to Heaven. These are just the cocoons they have left behind. Oh, I'm so glad for them. I must go and ask Rufus to come and sweep them up."

THE RED LEATHER BELT

ELISABETH ROBERTS

Illustrated by R. D. Farley

HUBERT DRYSDALE was thinking deeply about his wife. Alice had occupied his thoughts for some time now, and this morning he felt that he had practically reached a decision. He sat waiting for his breakfast, eyes half-closed against the sunlight streaming through the dining-room windows. Then he squared his shoulders. He had finally decided what to do.

He glanced momentarily at the silver-framed portrait on the sideboard. Could it only be fifteen years? Fifteen years since she had looked like that? He studied the pretty, laughing face, dropping his eyes almost guiltily at the slopping sound of Alice's slippers as she brought his breakfast from the kitchen.

"I shall have to hurry," he said quietly, as she entered. "We're a little late again."

"I know." Wearily Alice brushed a wisp of hair from her forehead as she placed the plate in front of him. The lines on her face were revealed even more clearly in the morning light. "I'll pour the tea."

Her husband looked at the custard-like mess that spread across his plate. It was Alice's idea of scrambled eggs. Idly his hand slid over the tablecloth and grasped the handle of his knife. He sat for a moment twisting it gently, watching the sunlight dancing from the blade. He dropped it abruptly to take the cup of lukewarm tea from his wife's outstretched hand. He was about to grasp this when her fingers trembled suddenly, spilling a quantity of the liquid into the saucer.

"Oh! Hubert, I—I'm sorry." Alice pressed her knuckles against her mouth. "Shall I empty the saucer for you?" She faltered.

Hubert watched the tide of colour sweep away the pallor from her thin cheeks.

"No," he said calmly, "don't bother, it doesn't matter."

He looked at his watch and began to eat. He would have to hurry if he was to catch his train, and before he left there was something he must do.

Ten minutes later, he stood at the head of the stairs, waiting till he heard Alice clattering about in the kitchen. Then, swiftly, he stole across the landing and went into the bedroom. Where did she keep it? Silently, methodically, he began to open drawers, glancing rapidly at the contents, before easing them quietly back.

He found what he was looking for in the dressing-table. Carefully he withdrew the long leather belt from beneath the clutter of pins and boxes; deftly he folded the deep red leather neatly and placed it in one of the out-

side pockets of his jacket. Then he looked at himself in the mirror. If he kept his right arm down, the slight bulkiness would never be noticed, he decided. It could easily be taken for a handkerchief or a bunch of keys. He smiled slowly at his reflection. He hoped Alice wouldn't notice it had gone.

When his wife shut the front door behind him some moments later, she found her legs beginning to tremble and she sat down abruptly on the hall chair. She pressed her hands against her face to stop them shaking. If only she could remain calm, if just for a little while she could stop the aching turmoil in her head. Stop worrying, her friend Millie was always saying. Calm, stout, comfortable Millie, what did *she* know about worry, thought Alice bitterly.

A bundle of nerves, Millie called her. Alice got up and began to walk slowly towards the kitchen. The trembling in her limbs had stopped. She made an effort to straighten her shoulders and began to clear up some of the disorder in the sink.

Half an hour later, Alice went out of the back door and walked up the path towards the garden shed. As she had expected, the door was locked. Hubert always locked it, but yesterday evening she had watched him from the window, and she knew now where he kept the key. Alice's hands began to shake again slightly as she bent towards the row of neatly stacked flower-pots. The fourth from the left. She picked up the key and turned it protestingly in the rusty lock. Then she pushed the door open and went in. The tin was on the shelf where she had first seen it a month ago. The word "Poison" printed on the side seemed to grow larger as she stared at it. Her heart began to beat wildly as she picked up an old screwdriver and levered feverishly at the lid.

"Oh, *no*!" The exclamation tailed off into a sigh of despair as Alice stared down at the contents. She looked at the depression in the centre of the white crystals. There was a teaspoon lying on the shelf beside the tin. She shut her eyes and held on tightly to the bench in front of her for a moment. So he had used it. Carefully, determinedly, she made a supreme effort and pulled herself together. She replaced the lid, locked the shed door and put the key back under the flower-pot. Then she went back to the house and sat down beside the telephone in the hall.

She might never have noticed anything, Alice thought, if she hadn't shown Hubert the red leather belt. She had bought it on a sudden impulse about a fortnight ago. Hubert had seemed to like it.

"M'm," he said appreciatively, trying it round her waist, "it's a nice colour, you ought to get something to go with it." He had chuckled suddenly and then picked up the evening paper.

"Funny thing," he had said, glancing down at it, "I've just been reading a tasty little bit here. A girl was found yesterday in a doorway. She was strangled. With a red leather belt."

Alice hadn't been disturbed by

Hubert's remark until the next morning, when she woke up drenched in the horror of a nightmare! It was she who had been in a doorway, with Hubert, and the red leather belt. Even now Alice gripped her fingers together at the memory of it. This had been on a Friday. During the whole of Saturday she had felt wretched, and on the Sunday morning Hubert had looked at her strangely.

"You're going to stay in bed," he had said firmly. "I'll bring you some breakfast."

Alice had protested weakly, but she had felt sick and dizzy and was glad to lie quietly. She had felt better after Hubert's toast and marmalade. Then she had tried the coffee. One taste of its acrid bitterness was sufficient to send her stumbling to the bathroom, where she rinsed her mouth and poured the rest of the cupful into the basin. Inexplicably, the picture of the tin in the garden shed had flashed across her mind.

It was since then that she had begun to tremble so badly. And it was since then that she had noticed Hubert continually watching her. What had he been doing upstairs this morning after breakfast? She had heard him hurrying about in the bedroom overhead, and his face had looked queer and secretive as he left with scarcely a word. Alice sighed suddenly. Perhaps it was her own fault. It was so easy to let things slide, and the eternal housework and

the cooking tired her so. In a few days she would be forty-eight; two tears of pure misery ran down her face as she reached for the telephone.

The following morning Alice took a firm grip of the newel post at the foot of the stairs and spoke to Hubert as he collected his hat and coat.

"I spoke to Millie yesterday," she said, enunciating with great care. "She wants me to go and stay for a few days."

"Eh?" Hubert swung round, half into his coat. "When?" he said abruptly.

"I'm going today, this afternoon, by the four-thirty train." Alice kept her voice steady with an effort.

Hubert stood still.

"Why didn't you mention this before?" he said softly. "You could have told me last night. Why now, when I'm just going?"

Alice felt the trembling beginning again. Her voice rose a tone. "I don't feel very well, I need a change. I—it's only for a few days . . ." Her voice rose higher.

"All right, all right," Hubert stopped her. He paused. "I'll have to go or I'll miss my train, but I'll get away early." He smiled oddly at her. "I'll come back and see that you get off safely."

"No! Oh, no!" Alice's voice was lost in the slam of the front door. She stared dully in front of her. "He's coming back," she muttered.

Suddenly she seemed to spring to life. I'll order a taxi for three o'clock, she decided. I can wait at the station, there'll be people there. As quickly as she could, Alice set about tidying up the house. She felt she wouldn't like to leave Hubert with the place in such a state. She washed up, dusted, went shopping, and with unusual care made a meat pie for her husband, which she placed in the oven. Then she began to pack. Two suitcases, for she did not intend to come back. By a quarter to three Alice was ready. She adjusted her hat in the mirror, feeling younger and more carefree than she had done for months. Not long now; Millie would help her, Millie would tell her what to do. Dear, kind, normal old Millie. Alice had just picked up her gloves when she heard the footsteps on the front path. Surprised, she looked at the bedroom clock. The taxi was early. At that moment, she heard the key turn in the front door, it opened, and after an interval, was pushed shut.

"Alice!" called Hubert from the hall, "where are you?"

Alice stuffed her gloves against her mouth, her eyes wide with horror. She started to shake, and with a little moan she backed across the room until the wardrobe was at her back. Hopelessly she pushed herself into the space at the side of it, hugging the corner of the wall.

Hubert was coming up the stairs.

Alice was trembling uncontrollably. Her head began to loll weakly from side to side, and a great dizziness seemed to fill her brain. He was coming and she was too late. He would get her after all.

Hubert was standing just inside the bedroom door. For a moment he couldn't see his wife. She focused

swimming eyes upon his reflection in the dressing-table mirror. His hands were behind his back.

"Alice?" He called softly. His face wore a strangely gleeful look. "Where are you? I've got a surprise for you!"

Alice Drysdale fell forward from the corner and crumpled on to the carpet like a broken puppet. She died in the fraction of a second before her head hit the floor.

An hour later, the doctor was endeavouring to comfort Hubert. "You mustn't keep blaming yourself, old man," he said briskly. "It could have happened any time, any time at all. You can't always tell with these hearts."

Hubert sat with his head between his hands.

"I knew she wasn't herself," he said brokenly, "this last fortnight she's been—well—quite strange. I thought it was her nerves." He lifted his head and looked wearily at the doctor. "It was her birthday tomorrow, you see. I'd planned a surprise." Absently he fingered the expensive-looking red handbag in the chair beside him.

"I bought this to go with a red belt she was particularly fond of. I had great difficulty in matching the colour. I thought it would cheer her up. Then she suddenly said she was going away . . ."

"Yes, yes," the doctor interrupted and stood up. "What *you* need is a good rest."

Hubert started to cry weakly as the doctor began to outline his arrangements.

Shortly afterwards, Alice's friend Millie received a letter. It was from a firm of solicitors. Millie's normally florid complexion assumed a greyish tinge as she took in the contents:

". . . that Mrs. Drysdale has bequeathed to you the sum of fifty pounds in grateful acknowledgment of your long friendship . . . you are perhaps unaware of the circumstances leading to the tragic death of Mr. Drysdale, shortly afterwards. It has since been ascertained by the police that he was poisoned following the consumption of a meat pie, prepared for him by his wife. . . ."

UNHOLY TRINITY

ANTHONY A. RANDALL

Illustrated by D. Mitchell

EVERTON CORLEY purchased a return ticket for Farford West and stepped on to the deserted, sunlit station at Barton Town. With long strides he crossed the footbridge to Number One platform where the signal gantry stood. Exhausted, he sat down for a few moments on a wooden bench. Soon now he would be able to enjoy the peace he so desperately needed.

Five minutes later Everton Corley's chin dropped on to his chest. Deep, wonderful sleep. Fretful days followed by haunted nights had taken their toll. Peace, perfect peace, at last.

Peace did he say? Corley groaned. There they were again—those blue specks in the far distance coming swiftly into focus with hands reaching out for him. Norman Fenton on the left, old Miss Parsons in the centre and Earl Barker on the right.

The unholy trinity were back again.

Corley vainly tried to retreat as he always did when they came to plague him with their reproachful expressions. They didn't have to speak—plain enough what they were thinking. "You murdered us, Everton Corley! Murdered us for money, buried us forever in the estuary at Farford West. No, we shall never forget. And never, never let you forget, Everton Corley."

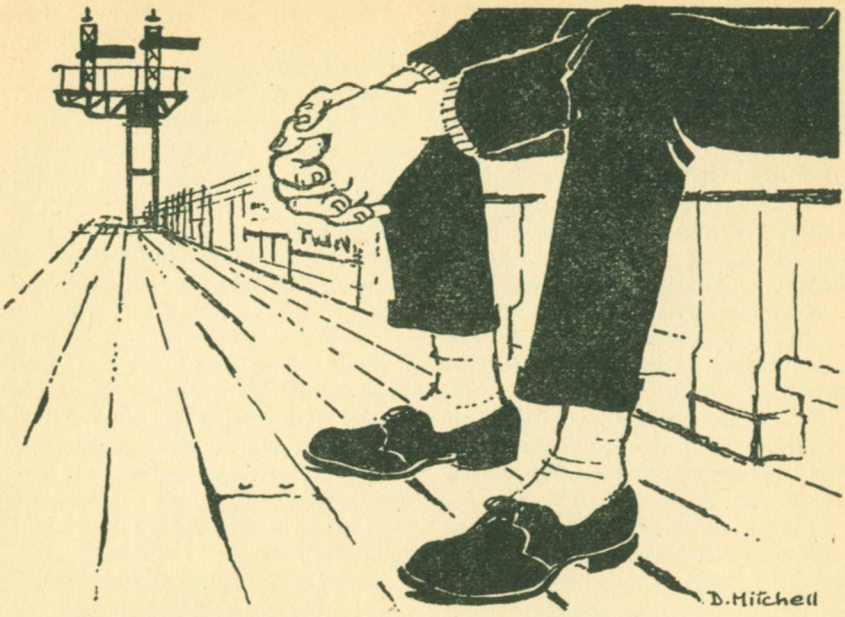
Forget! As if he ever could forget. His tortured mind, jangled nerves, pallid complexion and blue circles under his dull brown eyes were an everlasting reminder. He knew now that a murderer's worries only started after his victims had been buried.

Slowly the vision disappeared, each face receding into those blue specks, three index fingers beckoning him to follow.

With a nervous jerk that shook his whole body Corley woke up. Despite the hot sun and the sweat in his armpits he felt curiously cold. He shook himself, glanced apprehensively round the platform. His neck and jaw ached horribly. The result, he supposed, of sitting in the sun too long.

It was then that he noticed the single-unit diesel train standing at the old Number One platform. Corley couldn't recall having seen a train painted black before. The white linen curtains gave it a curiously hearse-like appearance. Corley glanced at his watch. Ten minutes past ten. The Farford West train left at 10.12 and certainly should be in by now.

Corley rose from the wooden bench and at once found himself walking towards the diesel without any conscious effort on his part. The same irresistible impulse drew him into the coach. He closed the door and sat down, glad to rest his aching neck against the supremely soft upholstery.



He half closed his eyes against the sun pouring into the coach, a sun which, curiously, had no heat. Across the platform lay the gaunt shadow of the signal gantry. Corley shivered.

Smoothly the diesel drew away, gathering speed surprisingly quickly. The deserted platform flashed past the window and in seconds Corley was peering down at the traffic circling the Barton Town roundabout, the crowds shopping in the congested High Street, the block of council houses with their television aerials sharply etched against the summer sky. Sure enough, there was the cricket ground, the groundsman tending the pitch, a young lad painting the sightscreens a duck-egg blue. As the embankment obscured his view Corley relaxed.

The diesel sped into the tunnel. He was relieved that the driver had apparently omitted to switch on the lights. He felt so damned tired again.

It suddenly struck him that the coach was strangely silent in the tunnel. No dull roar, no clatter from the wheels; just empty silence, a sensation of being swept through the darkness. He might be riding on air. He closed his eyes, his head rolled into the corner. . . .

The unholy trinity again! Corley groaned in his sleep. Was he never to be free from those damnable visions? Funny. Only two specks, a strange

whistling in his ears that rose to a piercing crescendo as the two faces and outstretched hands came into a sharper focus than ever before. Norman Fenton's insensitive face on the left, the red scar on his blind eye perfectly visible—and perfectly horrible. To his right Miss Parsons wearing an absurd pillbox hat and a small crucifix which shone brightly round her neck. The old girl's front teeth seemed more protrusive than ever.

"Wake up, Everton," they seemed to be saying. "Wake up! We're here, Everton."

The diesel emerged from the tunnel and once again the sun shone on his face. He sighed, yawned, opened his eyes.

For a moment he stared dully at the seat opposite, his mind clouded as it emerged from troubled sleep. He must be going mad, suffering from acute hallucinations.

He was gazing straight at two of the unholy trinity: Norman Fenton on the left, old Miss Parsons on the right.

Corley sat bolt upright and vigorously rubbed the back of his neck. I'm going out of my mind, he thought, a cold spasm engulfing his stomach. Yet the diesel was gliding smoothly through the cut in the downs heading for the junction with the old Farford West line. Outside the world was as he had always known it.

Miss Parsons adjusted her pillbox hat and sat up as straight as a ramrod.

"So we meet again, young man. You haven't been so foolish as to suppose that we'd finished with you, I hope?"

Corley retreated into his seat. The visions had never been as life-like as this before.

"Wake up, Everton! For heaven's sake don't stare at me as if I was some damn' ghost," Fenton said irritably. "Take it from me, I've been waiting to get my hands on you for a helluva long time."

As he moved from his seat, hands outstretched, Miss Parsons restrained him.

"Sit still, Norman. You know perfectly well you can't touch him in his present state. Young man!" She fixed Corley with a withering stare. "Ever since you saw fit to deposit us in that muddy estuary we have been endeavouring to establish contact with you. I suppose even your unconscious mind has been aware of that?"

Corley nodded, mouth half open.

"Just over an hour ago we achieved a remarkable degree of penetration. Highly satisfactory! It almost seemed as though your mind had managed to shake off some of its habitual stupor."

Fenton grunted. "Wasn't exactly stupid when he destroyed Barker and me and cheated our widows out of their dues under the Partnership Deed, was he? Thought you'd take all the profit from Farford new bridge construction, didn't you, m'lad? D'you know," he turned to Miss Parsons, "he actually enticed Barker and me to the old bridge by saying a study of its construction would help us on the new job. When Barker and I were inspecting the metal fracture where the centre span broke away he calmly dotted us over the head. Down we went."

"So you've told me a dozen times," Miss Parsons snorted. "I can only repeat you were a perfect fool ever to trust the man."

"I like that! What about you?"

Miss Parsons blushed. "I thought he had a certain charm, I admit. How I could have been so gullible as to allow myself to be inveigled into giving you, Everton Corley, a Power of Attorney during my proposed absence in South Africa, I simply cannot think. I certainly paid for my idiocy, I must say."

You did indeed, Corley thought. You made it all so easy by telling your friends you were going to South Africa. Nobody missed you from the moment you were strangled and toppled off the old bridge into the estuary.

"And now, young man," Miss Parsons went on, "you're going to pay for your wicked crimes."

"Like hell you are!" Fenton added.

"Pay!" Corley gasped. "How d'you mean—pay?"

"You're coming with us," Miss Parsons replied with an air of finality. "We're taking you back to the estuary to the very spot where you dropped us. Then," she added severely, "we can keep an eye on you for the rest of time. I, personally, intend to see you don't get up to any more of your nasty habits."

"Better than that, Everton," Fenton sneered. "We're going to torment that rotten soul of yours from here to Eternity. No peace for you, m'lad."

Corley shuddered. "You're mad! Both of you! D'you hear me? Stark, staring——"

He gripped the edge of the seat convulsively. His eyes must be failing him. The train was on the old Farford West line, heading for the bridge with the missing central span. It was over a hundred feet from the bridge to the estuary.

He gasped, terror in his heart. He reached frantically for the communication cord.

"Wasting your time, m'lad," Fenton said with a shake of his head. "There isn't one!"

Corley's breath came in uncontrollable spasms, restricted by galloping heart beats that vibrated every bone and nerve in his body. He dropped to his knees, clenched his hands together until they whitened under the pressure.

"No! Don't do it. Please don't! God, haven't I suffered enough for what I did—haven't I repented a thousand times? Those sleepless nights, days of torture."

"Suffered!" Miss Parsons stormed. "You suffered! What d'you think we've been through? Hell, young man! Sheer Hell! Repented, indeed! You just wanted to pocket my capital and the profit of the new bridge construction at Farford West. That was what you wanted, you miserable, despicable wretch."

Corley stared helplessly at the floor. He must calm himself. Think. When he spoke his voice was low and tense.

"I crave your forgiveness—both of you." He looked up. "You know, unto the merciful shall be shown mercy."

Miss Parsons froze like a statue. "What mercy did you show, Everton Corley?" she asked, raising her chin

like a judge preparing to pass sentence.

Corley jumped to his feet, his temper flaring up like it used to do. "You! You miserable, selfish old devil. What did you ever do for anyone? Ha!" He paused. "Where's Earl Barker? He'd forgive . . . he'd understand."

"I'm here, Everton. As you can see, I can't come. I'm busy." He smiled wanly from the driver's seat, his thin hand resting on the throttle. "We're running a bit late."

Earl driving! Corley lurched into the gangway. He must stop the damned madman at once. Already the train was gliding up the rusty track that ran across the open headland to the old bridge.

"See it, Everton?" Earl whispered, pointing away to the right. "Our home."

There it was, the massive five-span bridge, its gaping void in the middle etched against the white cliffs on the far side of the estuary. Four years ago, to the very day, that centre span had collapsed into the estuary carrying a six-coach steam train with it. There had been no survivors, Corley remembered.

Panic seized him then: sheer, blind panic. He rushed up the gangway, beating his clenched fists against the sides of his head.

"Stop!" he pleaded. "Stop! Earl! Listen to me! I . . . I don't want to die."

Earl gave him such a saintly smile. "Neither did we, Everton."

"My God! Stop—before it's too late," Corley screamed.

Earl laughed gently. "It is too late, Everton. Welcome to the estuary. Here we go!"

Corley pressed his face against the windscreen, saliva trickling down his chin. Paralysed by a cold terror that he knew would never leave him he watched the last stretch of rusty rail disappear under the coach. His stomach caved in, he buried his face in his hands. The diesel shot out into space, rolled over and then plunged towards the glistening estuary which alone would silence his unearthly scream.

The two fishermen glanced down thoughtfully at the body caught in the net that lay on the deck of their boat.

"Neck's broken," the elder one said.

"Wonder what 'e was doin' down there, Pa," the younger man remarked, pointing to a pier of the old bridge.

"Dunno. Defeats me, son," Pa said. "Funny thing. Put 'is 'air back and I'd swear black was blue 'e was the fellah wot 'anged 'isself from the signal gantry at Barton Town station yesterday mornin'."

"If 'e be the same, an' I don't see 'ow 'e can be, that don't explain wot 'e's doing' 'ere, Pa," the son said, shivering, for it was mighty cold on the estuary for a hot summer's day.

"No, it don't, son. I got an idea we're meddlin' with things wot aint naturally explainable." He shuddered.

"I reckon so," the son agreed. And he shuddered too.

They tipped the body back into the estuary and sailed on to warmer waters.

NOT ON SUNDAYS

RICHARD BRIDGEMAN

Illustrated by Jennifer Gordon

THEY CAME UPON the little toyshop one sunny Sunday morning when they were out for a walk. Indulgently, Lomas suffered himself to be tugged towards the window so that Terry could marvel at the bright toys set out in tempting array.

And, strangely enough, it wasn't the fort and its garrison of red-coated soldiers that attracted the child's attention; it wasn't the model train on its gleaming rails that made his eyes sparkle. He set his small triangular face with its crop of tight golden curls against the glass and let go his father's hand the better to point.

"Look, Daddy: a dog with spots."

"A dalmatian," Lomas, who believed in exactitude at all times, explained carefully. Both he and Sheila had made a point of labelling things correctly for their son right from the start. An engine had always been an engine; a dog had always been called such—never a bow-wow; never even a doggie.

"Can I have it, Daddy? Please?" Terry asked.

" 'May I have it,' " Lomas corrected absently, looking at the toy dog. It stood some two feet tall, skilfully made with the head half-turned as if listening for the call that would set the drooping tail waving. The coat was glossily smooth; the brown eyes pleaded in the sunlight. It was obviously an expensive toy. Not that the question of cost would be a factor in the question of whether or not it should be bought. Lomas was a successful writer of mystery stories; Sheila was equally successful in her career as an artist. They lived in a pleasant Georgian house in a quietly expensive, tree-lined cul-de-sac and they each had a car. Money was not the reason for Lomas saying that he wasn't going to buy the toy dog.

"Why, Daddy?" Terry asked with what for him was unusual persistence. Normally he accepted his father's word without question. Now he had fixed himself firmly against the window with the faintest suspicion of a whine in his voice.

Lomas, surprised, explained. "You're six, Terry, and that's really too old for a toy of that kind. It's intended, I'm sure, for a little girl. Boys usually prefer something mechanical. Now, what about this train?"

"Yes, Daddy, it's a nice train. But I like the dog better."

Lomas felt a surge of annoyance. This obstinacy was a new departure for Terry. Toys had never held all that much interest for him before today; he had always seemed happy enough with his picture books. And now he had to set his mind on a toy that was so unsuitable.

"What about the soldiers?" he tempted. "Or that crane?"

"I want the dog," the child said almost defiantly, tears beginning to well.

Lomas spoke sharply. "It's Sunday; the shop's closed." He was beginning to fear the one thing that had never happened before. A scene in the street. A woman with a little girl had come to look in the window. He watched them from the corner of his eye, fumbling for Terry's hand but unable to find it. The woman smiled indulgently and with understanding; just as if Terry was an ordinary child.

"We'll think about it," he prevaricated, anxious to get away. Terry allowed his hand to be taken. "Tomorrow?" he wondered.

"We'll see," Lomas said with relief as they left the window. Then, with another attempt to dissuade: "But you have a real dog. What do you want a toy one for?"

"Pimmy belongs to Mummy," Terry reasoned. "I want one all for my own."

"We'll see," Lomas repeated.

If he had hoped that the desire for the toy was only a passing fancy he was mistaken. Throughout the rest of the day the subject was brought up at every opportunity. Sheila was amused at first and then joined Lomas in his annoyance. When Terry was in bed they sat together on the balcony overlooking the quiet street.

"It's not that I don't mind spending money on him," Lomas said, "but it's such an unreasonable toy for a boy. Now if he had asked for the train set. . . ."

"We must be careful," Sheila said thoughtfully. She sat with one elbow on the balcony rail, drooping like a delicate golden lily, her silken-soft hair in its usual slight disarray. She knew a lot about repressions and inhibitions and how a child's character could become distorted by having urgent desires thwarted.

"We mustn't refuse outright," she mused. "A gentle channelling of his desire into a fresh field . . . A new focal point. . . .

"His mind seems fixed," Lomas said heavily.

"For a child of his age he has great intensity of purpose," she said proudly. "And a virile imagination." She pursed her lips. "It would be a pity if we were to harm him in any way. I think that if he still feels the same way tomorrow, we ought to buy it for him. Perhaps he will soon tire of it."

Then Pimento the white poodle came pawing at her knees and she took him on her lap, caressing his ears and crooning endearments.

When Terry woke the next morning his first words were about the dog. Sheila promised that it would be bought for him that very day and then sent him off to school. Lomas resignedly got out his car and drove to the shop. He felt that Sheila might be making a mistake in pandering to the child. He wanted his son to grow up like other boys, fond of soldiers and trains. He hoped that she was right when she suggested that Terry might soon tire of the dog. It would

help, he told himself, if there was a suitable alternative on hand to divert attention.

"I'd like that dalmatian dog you have in the window," he told the stoop-shouldered shopkeeper. "There's no need to wrap it up, I have the car. And I'll take one of those train sets."

The shopkeeper, pleased at the sale, was facetiously jocular. "I hope you have a nice warm kennel waiting for it, sir. And a dish of biscuits—" Lomas stayed silent.

Back home he set the dog in one corner of the lounge and then started to assemble the train set. Sheila, with Pimmy at her heels, came in while he was connecting the rails.

"So that's the idea," she said. "An alternative attraction." Then she smiled. "I believe you only bought the train because you wanted to play with it yourself."

He was immediately on the defensive, almost angry. "You said yourself that there should be another focal point. A train is what most normal boys want, not a toy dog." He emphasized the word "normal" and then it was Sheila's turn to become angry.

"Terry is normal. You've no right to say things like that."

Then Pimmy discovered the toy dog, investigated with an inquisitive nose, and passed on without showing interest.

"Pimmy doesn't think much of it, anyway," Lomas said in an attempt to smooth the brewing quarrel.

When Terry came home from school that afternoon the lines were all set out in an oval, with signals, crossings, two stations and a tunnel. But much to Lomas's chagrin, it was only given a cursory glance, the boy going straight to the dog, crouching by its side and cradling the head in his arms.

Sheila smiled indulgently. "It's a lovely dog, Terry."

Disappointed, Lomas made another attempt to divert the boy's attention, winding up the loco and setting it racing round the track. But Terry didn't even lift his face from the dog's neck.

That evening, when Terry was in bed and Sheila taking Pimmy for his walk, Lomas sat on the balcony and smoked a cigarette. He found something almost distasteful in the disdaining of the railway for the toy dog. He felt that he had done wrong in agreeing to buy it. Child psychology was all right so long as it didn't get out of hand. How did the new creed go? Spoil the rod and spare the child?

It was an evening of soft golden light. The city traffic was muted to a murmur. Peace rose from the enclosed cul-de-sac. He found himself seeking excuses for Terry's fancies. He was much more imaginative and sensitive than the ordinary child. Probably a question of heredity. One parent a writer, whose stock-in-trade was a virile imagination; the other an artist, equally imaginative.

He decided that he would let matters take their course. Relieved at the decision he went back inside. But the vague feeling of disquiet persisted.

A week later Terry started his summer holidays from school. He played

indoors when it rained and out in the enclosed back garden or the street when the weather was fine. And always, no matter where he went, the toy dog had to accompany him. He called it Danny and talked to it as if it could understand. Lomas waited and watched for the first sign of waning interest; but it never came. As the days passed it became increasingly clear that his son would much rather be on his own with the dog than in the company of his parents.

The days gathered into weeks with the relationship between boy and dog hardening steadily. Lomas and Sheila spoke about it from time to time; he arguing that they should take positive action; she pointing out that if they took the dog away now they would probably do incalculable damage to Terry's character.

Then one Sunday morning, about a month after the purchase of the dog, Lomas left his typewriter for a stroll in the garden. Terry and his companion were there, the dog standing in the middle of the lawn, the boy playing happily a few paces away. While Lomas watched broodingly, Pimmy came prancing from the kitchen to go tail-wagging in welcome towards Terry. He stopped suddenly in front of the toy dog, his hackles rising, his teeth bared, growling deep in his throat.

The tableau was held for a long moment, then Terry shouted and made a gesture and Pimmy raced back indoors with his tail between his legs. Lomas returned thoughtfully to his work.

On the evening of the following day he was sitting reading in the lounge, Sheila out with Pimmy, and Terry fast asleep, the toy dog in its usual place close by the side of the bed. The house was as still and silent as the grave. A sound brought his head from the book and he listened, wondering if he had imagined it. Then it came again, a soft padding that turned into a scraping, as if something had left the carpeted stairs for the polished floor of the hall.

Then the sounds stopped and there came the familiar snuffling at the bottom of the door which meant that Pimmy was asking to be admitted. Puzzled because he hadn't heard Sheila return, Lomas called "Pimmy?" and when there was no answering bark, came to his feet, laying the book aside. As he walked to the door he heard the scraping and the padding again, this time becoming fainter. And when he opened the door the hall was empty. The draught curtain at the top of the stairs was swinging gently, as though caught by a breeze. But the evening was still.

Frowning, he called again, then went to the front door to look into the street. It was deserted. Wondering if he had imagined the sounds, he turned and went up the stairs. There was a faint smell that he sought to put a name to. Animal; but Pimmy never smelled "doggy", as Sheila called it.

He looked in at Terry's bedroom. A thin ray of waning sunlight came through a gap in the curtains to halo the fair hair on the pillow. The boy was fast asleep, only one hand moving; the hand that usually rested on

the dog's head and was now stirring restlessly as if seeking a place that had been disturbed. While Lomas watched it came down on the dog's head and was content.

He went back on the landing. Imagination can play strange tricks. A house has its own private noises; it is never completely silent. There were creakings and settlings as the place cooled after the warmth of the day.

On the dark red curtains at the top of the stairs he found a hair. A crisp white hair that could only have come from a smooth-haired dog. Not from the clipped curly coat of a poodle. It was the sort of hair that would have come from a dalmatian.

It was then that uneasiness was replaced by positive fear. Four things had happened, and he collected them together in a whole. The change in Pimmy's attitude to the toy dog; the sounds he had heard in the hall; the way a small hand had sought the comforting resting place of a head that had been removed for a while; and a white hair on the curtain.

There was something here that was beyond reason. How strong could the belief of a human being be? What miracles could it achieve? His thoughts roved and probed, seeking any explanation. Faith, someone had once said, could move mountains. Could a child's faith instil life into a thing of cloth and sawdust? The idea was terrifying and impossible.

But there could be no doubt that Terry was different from most other children. They had always known of his powers of imagination. It was undoubtedly a question of heredity; the child of two similarly equipped parents. But could it be possible that his imagination was strong enough to create life, just because he wanted it created?

Aware that his thoughts bordered on madness, Lomas pressed his hands to his forehead. One thing was clear; the toy dog was the basis of all the trouble. He couldn't even breathe a word of his suspicions to Sheila. The idea was unthinkable. At the best she would laugh, telling him how ridiculous he was.

And perhaps he was. Perhaps there were logical explanations for everything that had happened: the morbid fancies of a mind already bitterly antagonistic towards the boy. But both for Terry's sake, and for his own peace of mind, he would have to do something.

His thoughts suddenly ordered, he knew what had to be done. The toy must be destroyed. Now, before it caused any further trouble. Now, before Sheila returned.

Back in the bedroom he fought down a sudden revulsion as he carefully slid the dog from beneath the caressing hand. On the landing he listened for the clatter of Sheila's sandals on the cobbles of the street. When he heard no sound he came quickly down the stairs, the toy under one arm, gathering a knife from the kitchen as he passed through to the garden. Hidden in the bushes he set the dog down and poised the knife. Again the fear came, staying his hand as if it were a living creature he was about to kill. He brought the blade

down in a ripping movement from neck to tail. The fabric gaped, spilling sawdust and packing. He worked in a sudden fury, slashing and hacking, thrusting the pieces out of sight beneath the bushes. When it was all done he pulled the branches back into position and returned to the house. Sheila was just letting herself in. Pimmy came dancing round his legs, whining his pleasure, almost as if he knew. . . .

As he had expected, the disappearance created something of a panic. Terry, in tears, searched everywhere, Sheila first helping with suggestions then becoming suspicious. When she tackled Lomas he told her that he had got rid of it because he was sure it was having an unhealthy effect on Terry. Fear of the outcome made him speak so vehemently that she was reduced to a thoughtful silence, admitting finally that she had come to feel much the same way herself. The possible harm done to the boy's character by the loss, she said, might be far less than that done by his constant preoccupation with it.

Relieved, Lomas went upstairs and brought the train set down, setting it out as he had done once before on

the lounge floor. While he was on hands and knees, assembling the track, a disconsolate Terry wandered in, watched, then came to crouch by his side.

"Danny wasn't a real dog, Daddy," he said after a while, and picked up one of the coaches. "It has six wheels, just like a real one," he discovered. "And they turn. . . ."

"Bogeys," Lomas explained with relief. "That's so that they can move on a curved rail without falling over. Look, as soon as we've joined the track together we'll set the train going and you can see what I mean."

"I liked him better'n Pimmy, though," Terry said thoughtfully, eyeing his father sideways. "I wonder why he ran away?"

Lomas sat back. "There, now we can set it going."

Half an hour later he clambered stiffly to his feet, and leaving Terry playing happily enough with the train, went in search of Sheila to bring her to the lounge door.

"That's all right," she said with satisfaction. "I was afraid that it would take him longer than this to get over the loss. He seems happy now.

"You know," she added with some embarrassment, "I'm glad that you got rid of that dog. I mean, apart from the harm it might have been doing. You'll think I'm silly but there were times, seeing Terry playing with it and chatting away, that I almost fancied it was alive. . . ."

Lomas wavered for a moment. Then: "It's all over now, anyway. He's got a fresh interest. After a while I'll get more parts for the layout; another station, perhaps; more coaches. . . ."

"Out with the old love," she quoted, smiling. "The train must have caught him on the rebound. I wonder if it will last?"

A few days later, on a Sunday morning, Terry came to his father.

"There's something I'd like for my trains," he said earnestly.

Lomas put his arm about the thin shoulders. "Ask away, old son. What is it? Level crossings? A bridge? Another loco?"

"A railway guide," Terry said. "So's I can run it prop'ly."

"There's an old one somewhere in my desk," Lomas promised. "I'll look it out for you after lunch."

That afternoon he sat to his typewriter in the study and listened to the clear, happy voice of his son in the next room as he called out the train times to imaginary passengers. Sheila came in smiling and nodding towards the dividing wall. "He sounds happy enough now. He's got things organized. A regular service running to a strict schedule."

They went to the lounge together. The train raced round the oval track, rocking over the points and pulled up with a jerk as it hit the brake line at one of the stations. Terry called out the times of departure and the destination, reading from the guide.

"The next train is the one standing in platform two"—Lomas smiled, recalling his own boyhood days—"for Armington, calling at Spendwell and Treading."

As the train was sent off on its

journey he leant forward. "I had a train when I was small," he said. "Not so good as this one, but I had points like these. I used to arrange accidents, crashes, you know? Shall I show you how it's done?"

But Terry was aghast at such an idea. "This is a real railway," he protested.

Sheila smiled indulgently and with understanding. Lomas went thoughtfully back to his work.

At bedtime the boy had to be almost forcibly removed from the train. He took one of the coaches to bed with him. Sheila still smiled, but Lomas was beginning to feel uneasy. In the new passion he saw a parallel with what had happened before. The child was too intense, too imaginative. That was the crux of the matter. Was it going to be the same with everything with which he came in contact?

On the Monday it rained, and Terry spent the entire day with the railway. Tuesday dawned dry and sunny, but the boy showed no inclination to leave his new toy. Lomas tried to persuade him to come for a walk but the attempt proved fruitless. The rest of the week passed in the same way, Terry staying in the lounge and only emerging briefly at meal-times. On the Saturday, Lomas, more worried than he cared to admit to himself, decided, with some idea of diverting his son's attention, to join in the game. But his presence was obviously resented. Terry ran the train into a station and left it there while he took his railway guide into a corner of

the room pretending to be deeply engrossed in its contents. Discouraged, Lomas took his hardening worry into the garden. It was clear now that the train set had become as great an obsession as the dog had been.

At supper-time on the following day, Sunday, with Terry having spent yet another day alone in the lounge, Sheila called, "Terry. Supper, darling."

When there was no reply she said rather crossly: "Lomas, go and drag him away from those wretched trains. The child is turning into a hermit; I never see his face now except at meal-times."

Lomas opened the lounge door. The little train was running round the track. There was no sign of Terry.

He went over the house, looking in each room, wondering absently at first where the boy had got to, then with the puzzlement turning to the now familiar surge of worry when he realized that Terry was nowhere in the house.

He took the news to Sheila and together they went over the place again, even pushing up the trapdoor of the loft. Then Lomas, a coat thrown over his head against the rain that had been falling all day, went into the garden.

Back inside again he took off his coat, shaking his head at Sheila's white inquiring face. "Not there," he said bleakly, and went to the front door to look out into the rain-swept street. A youth in a black mackintosh was lounging under one of the dripping trees, glancing impatiently at his watch and then turning a disconsolate face to the door of the large corner house as if waiting for someone to emerge.

He shook his head to Lomas's breathless inquiry. "I've been here the best part of an hour," he said. "I've not seen a soul. . . ."

Back indoors he threw the coat over the hall-stand, shaking his head again at Sheila's now distraught face. An idea was taking shape in his mind; an idea that was even more impossible than those he had suppressed earlier. And yet—there seemed no other possible explanation. It was all part of a pattern.

But there was a routine that had to be brought into play. A child was missing. He picked up the phone. Sheila sat hopelessly on the stairs, her face white and staring, her mouth working.

The call made, the description given, Lomas replaced the receiver and went back into the lounge. The train had run itself out and was standing between the stations. The fear of the unknown was all round him now, blanketing all other emotions. Crouching, and not knowing why he crouched, he peered at the name of the station which the train had failed to reach. It was printed in a childish hand, pencilled on a small piece of cardboard. Armington.

The open railway guide lay nearby where a small hand had thrown it aside. It was open at a page that was dog-eared and thumb-marked from much usage. A circle had been drawn round one of the place names. Armington.

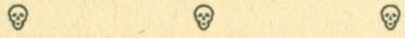
Sheila came in while he was still

crouching, staring sightlessly at the page.

"It's Sunday today," he said, his voice seeming to come from far away. "The trains only run to Armington on week-days, never on Sundays. It says so here, in small print at the foot of the page. It's Sunday today. Terry must have forgotten. Or else he didn't notice. People never bother to read the small print. . . ."

He knew that what he was trying to say was impossible; that she wouldn't understand. But he had to try.

"Don't you see?" he cried, and now his voice bordered on hysteria. "He started off to go to Armington. But the train never reached there. Now we don't know where he is—we don't know where to start looking for him. . . ."



HORRIPULATION

Dear Editor:

Your "London Mystery" issue number fifty
Now lies in my hand; and what a nifty
Lot of nightmares are confined in there!
Each one a grisly gem, to fright and scare!
There is that one about a dreadful ride
In which a lorry-driver surely died
Because of magic, practised by his mother.
That tale about the railway coach! That other
One, "The Labyrinth"; where, once again,
'La Belle Dame' drives a poor young man insane.
(No brains does he keep now beneath his hat.)
Another yarn which is disturbing: that
Of Mrs. Pensum—present-day Medusa.
With success she managed to reduce her
Husband to an effigy of stone
In his back garden.
These four yarns alone
Are perfect samples of what can be done
To raise, in fear, the hair of everyone!

NORMAN D. PAVITT.

SEA FOOD

WILLIAM CHRISTIAN

PENCER PRESSED ONE ear to the door of his beach hut and listened to the Wind rising. The steadily growing hum tugged at the rotten planks and blew dirt into little grey twisters where it came in through the cracks.

He came away from the door and sat on a chair in the centre of the room. Outside, the Sea sucked and squirmed on the shore, whispering obscene love-words to the shingle as it inched its way towards Spencer. . . .

He took a pull from a bottle of whisky that he kept under his bed and then sat still and listened to the Wind talking through the door. "We're hungry, Spencer, both of us are hungry. We've got no inside left; we need food quickly. Have you got some food for us, Spencer?"

The little old man looked over his shoulder to quieten the growing fear that there was something behind him. The dirty boards stared back, the ancient cobwebs stirred briefly in the icy draught. He looked back at the door. Through the cracks he could see the white crests of waves as they flung themselves with angry explosions of foam on to the battered seashore.

The Sea was hungry; it had been hungry for days and now the time of waiting was over. It was the old man's task to feed the Sea; in return the Sea fed the old man. The morning would bring oysters and mussels, prawns, squids, edible seaweeds and many other sea foods. But this was only providing the Sea was regularly fed; it had to be fed, if it wasn't, then the old man had failed in his task, he was no use to the Sea, he had no right to live on the shore.

The Wind increased in strength, its voice becoming a howl instead of a moan. The roof of the cabin shook, the walls creaked and warped. Spray flung from the Sea hissed through the cracks and hit him hard on the face, the salt soaking deep into the lines and wrinkles of many years.

The little old man shivered with fear and cold. It wasn't his fault that no one ever came to this part of the shore. There had been too many "accidents" here. No one wanted to drown, no one wanted to die. Why couldn't they leave him alone, all he wanted to do was live here in peace, why couldn't they leave him alone.

The sucking, hissing, grinding, screaming water stretched its icy fingers over the front of the hut. The Wind, impatient as ever, tugged and twisted until the roof was wrenched off and hurled to the ground several yards away. The game had begun: the long dalliance with the meal that always ended in death. Spencer felt alone and afraid. "Oh God!" he thought. "What is it like to die? What does it feel like? Does it hurt?

How much does it hurt? Oh God!"

The pathetic old man clutched at his whisky bottle like a life-jacket and watched the Sea swirling around his feet, probing, sucking, tasting. He became hysterical with fear, chattering to himself, pleading, moaning.

Then he remembered.

"The dog! The dog! That's alive, that's food. Quickly!"

His voice began calling above the howl of the Wind. "Come here, boy, here, boy. Some dinner for you fella, here, boy, here!"

The Wind screamed, the Sea rose, the dog never came. Glass bit deep and blood swam in crimson streams as Spencer's tightening grip smashed his bottle of Hedge's fine old Scotch whisky into fragments. He screamed and held his hands up in front of his face as if he didn't believe what he felt but had to look to make sure. The blood was flowing down his arms and staining the damp rags that he wore, a ruddy brown colour.

The waves tugged at his feet more fiercely now, their appetites whetted by the drops of blood that had fallen from his cuts. And then suddenly they swept away, the undertow over balancing him and causing him to fall backwards on to the dripping boards of the hut. He raised himself on one elbow just as another wave swept in. It caught him full in the face and snapped his head back hard on to the floor, then it dragged his semi-conscious form out of the door as it subsided.

A minute later a thin, worn arm raised itself from the trough of a wave, was immediately stained with blood and was then withdrawn.

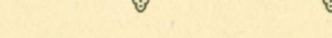
"Ouch!" said Spencer. "It hurts when you drown. Why couldn't they leave me alone." Then, as the darkness spread through his mind, his last emotion was a feeling of being cheated somewhere along the line.

No one had heard Spencer, no one saw Spencer. The beach hut was now vacant.

The Sea was calm and still. Soft ripples spread across its gently breathing surface. Emerald droplets fell soundlessly on the sand. Birds hovered on air currents high in the sky.

Stretching from the circle of palms at the start of the beach and wending their way down to the decapitated hut was a line of footprints. A tramp looked around the inside of the hut; felt the walls to see how strong they were, swung the door and listened attentively to its squeak, then stamped on the floor to test its strength. Leaving the hut, he walked to where the roof had fallen the day before. He kicked it several times, and when it didn't fall to pieces, he picked up one end and began to drag it back to the hut.

As he walked, the Wind began to whisper in his ears. . . .



THE DREAM PEDLAR

LESLIE VARDRE

Illustrated by Roy Jackson

LIKE MANY OTHERS before him, ineffectual men for the greater part, who have taken worry and suspicion for their constant companions, he found the little shop purely by accident, sandwiched out of existence as it was between a café with faded green curtains and the grime-blackened towering walls of a warehouse.

He had been walking for an hour, two hours, a week, seeing nothing of what was happening around, turning the combined problems of the past and the future over and over again. Wondering why the past was as it had been; fearful of the future being the same.

Three capital-sapping ventures that had come to nothing. Experience gained? Lessons learned? And what lessons had he learned from the dismal failures? That no matter how hard he tried, through no fault of his own he would never be a success.

Three times he had put money into schemes that were, on the face of it, foolproof. Three times he had failed. He walked with bowed head and shoulders and with pavement-staring eyes that were filled with the facile tears of self-pity. And then, in a part of the city that was as strange to him as an unvisited foreign country, he came upon the shop with the small window that was empty except for a framed, badly-printed sign.

"Purveyor of Dreams" it read in letters that danced so that the focus was distorted. But perhaps that was because of the tears in his eyes. "All types and sizes in stock. Parties catered for. Please step inside. No inducement to purchase."

Mr. Gee put his hand to the door and it opened as if all it had been waiting for, ever since the day it had been made, was the touch of his hand to set it swinging invitingly and to stir a distant bell into remote, tinkling life.

He found himself in a small world of dust and cobwebs, confined within grey walls and a grey ceiling. There was a counter and an old man suddenly waiting, setting a large, leather-covered book on the dusty boards in front of him.

"You have been recommended?" asked the Dream Pedlar.

"No—" Mr. Gee was vague. "I saw your sign; in the window. . . ."

"Name?" The book was opened and a finger poised. A long, thin-knuckled finger that was as grey as the walls.

Mr. Gee told him.

There came a knowing peering over the tops of steel-rimmed spectacles from eyes that could have belonged to any old man, set in a face that could never be brought to mind.

"You will understand," Mr. Gee was told, "that while we carry a large and varied stock we have only one of each type available. Once that is sold," grey hands were spread, grey shoulders shrugged, "it cannot be replaced. They come in three sizes. Christian names?"

"Manfred William," said Mr. Gee. A page was rustled; two pages. The finger moved and stopped.

"Of the firm of Potter and Gee, Estate Agents?"

"Late of that firm," Mr. Gee corrected bitterly.

"Late? Just so. Understandable. Mr. Potter, I see, has been a customer of ours for some time. The last dream he bought—now let me see—a year ago. Large size. The dream of the business coming under his sole control at the expense of his partner. That being yourself."

"That is just what happened," agreed Mr. Gee bleakly.

"Excellent. Excellent." The hands rubbing together produced the sound of parchment on parchment. "We always guarantee the complete reliability of all our products. But for all that it is most satisfying to have it confirmed. And what may we have the pleasure of doing for you, Mr. Gee?"

"Success. In the largest size you have."

"Just so. One of our most popular lines. Now"—becoming brisk and business-like—"a few details. If you would be so kind. What is your present position?"

"Potter bought me out when it seemed the business was going to fail," Mr. Gee told him. "I felt that I couldn't take the risk of carrying on. I accepted a fraction of what I had put into it. Then things took a turn for the better. As I see it now he must have deliberately made it look worse than it was. . . ."

"That is of the past," the other said with the impatience of age. "Now we are only concerned with the present."

"I had a little capital left. I've joined with a man called Riley, Merton Riley, in the same line of business as before. We open the office on Monday. I can't afford another failure. It has to be a success. I've been walking and wondering; wondering if the same thing is going to happen all over again. This will be the fourth time."

"So that was how you managed to find the shop," said the old man. "I was wondering about that. There has to be a reason you know. Merton Riley you said?"

Pages moved beneath the grey hands. A finger poised and struck.

"The dream of success in your new venture has already been sold. To Mr. Riley, only last week. Large size, I see, and of the best quality. I'm afraid that we cannot be of service to you in this instance. But then, of course, there is no need for you to worry at all. Mr. Riley purchased the dream of your combined success."

"You're sure of that?" Mr. Gee asked eagerly.

The Dream Pedlar closed his book with a slam that set dust swirling.

"If I'm sure that he bought the dream, yes; the records are infallible. And if I'm sure that you'll both be a success, yes again. Our dreams never fail. It's been a pleasure, Mr. Gee. If ever you find yourself in need of our services again, the shop will be ready and waiting."

Then he smiled and became transparent so that a cobweb could be seen very clearly through the fabric of his chest. The walls started to shrink, closing the counter like a concertina, and Mr. Gee found himself blinking in the sunlight on the pavement. The café was still there, and the warehouse. But the shop had vanished as if it had never existed. He set off briskly, his shoulders straight, his heart filled with supreme confidence.

On the following Monday he and Mr. Riley, who was a youngish man with very definite ideas, opened their office. They inserted advertisements in all the better papers and periodicals and settled back to wait. Answers came pouring in. Flats to be rented, houses for sale, country cottages to be disposed of at give-away prices.

Those who were selling were reasonable and co-operative, wishing to dispose of unusually desirable properties. Those who wished to buy were eager and easily satisfied. Houses were sold as if money was no object; cottages were much in demand by artists and poets in search of rural seclusion; flats were let at exorbitant rates. Money flowed freely.

First one, then a second and a third new office was opened to cope with the volume of business. The firm of Potter and Gee became a byword where good property was concerned. Success had come to Mr. Gee after long years of disappointment.

But with success came a twinge, an undercurrent of worry and uncertainty. Once before he had been on the verge of making good. Then the crash had come almost overnight. One day, riding the crest, the next, back to where he had started from and considerably worse off. That had been the time when his partner had been quietly feathering his own nest against such a contingency. The same thing could happen again, Today, the boom; tomorrow, no more clients. And with no money left to cover the slack time. He found himself watching Potter more and more each day.

He took to returning to the office after the day's work was done, checking and double checking books, letters and bank-statements, balancing one against the other. One night he sat poring until the early hours of dawn, trying to trace the deposit paid on a large country manor. He found the entry at last. On the face of it it was all in order. So far as he knew.

But his partner had bought himself a new house. And a car that must have cost a pretty penny.

He found his worries hardening and growing. He became unable to sleep at night. His health suffered. First there was a visit to the doctor and a few days in bed. Then a week, a month. History was repeating itself. The reins of authority were gradually being taken into Riley's capable hands. Soon he would be little more than a sleeping partner. One day Riley would have a proposition; an offer to buy him out. That was how it always happened. But not this time. Something would have to be done about Riley.

Recovering from what the doctor had called a near nervous breakdown he went walking in a strange part of the city with worry weighing his shoulders. The shop was there almost as if it had been waiting for him.

Before he pushed the door open he knew what dream he would ask for.

"Mr. Gee," said the Dream Pedlar, recognizing him immediately. "I wondered how long it would be. And what may we have the pleasure——"

"A dream," said Mr. Gee. "One of your best. The dream of the death of my partner."

The old man was unperturbed at the request, opening his book and asking, "The details, please?"

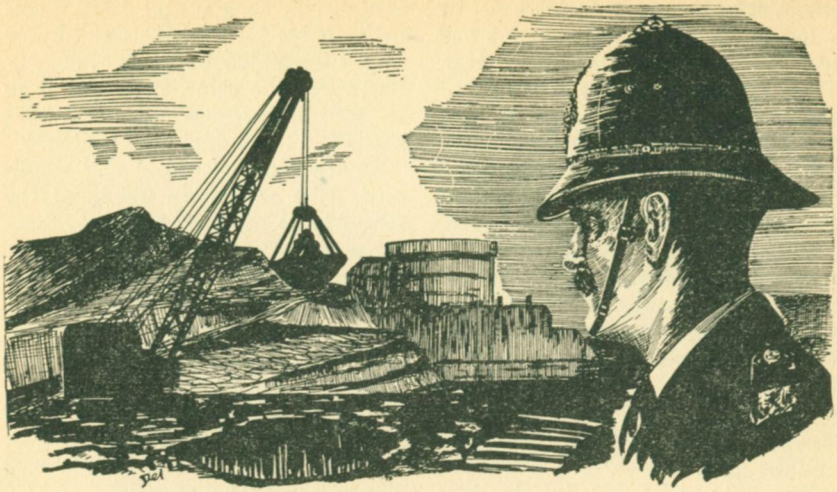
"His name is Riley. Merton Riley."

The finger searched and struck and was delighted. "Now here's a coincidence. We did have that dream in stock up until a week ago. But we sold it. And, of course, it was the only one. That particular type comes only in the one size. Where death is concerned there can be no question of a cheaper quality."

Mr. Gee was dismayed. "You sold it?"

"To Mr. Riley himself," replied the Dream Pedlar. "Now isn't that strange?"

He seemed quite taken up with the coincidence.



THE GRAB

ROSEMARY TIMPERLEY

Illustrated by Del

THERE WAS SOMETHING sinister about it: the way it towered above the rest of the machinery on the site, the way it dwarfed the workmen, seeming to control their movements rather than the other way round—and its enormous, insatiable hunger.

To the casual passer-by it was simply a mechanical grab, like any other. But people in the houses near the building site began to talk about it as if it were alive. They called it "he" rather than "it", and said things like: "He does his job all right, but he's an evil old b."

Evil. It was true. The grab did have a grasping, black-hearted look. By day it took in zestfully great mouthfuls of earth. The man in charge of it said that it worked at the merest touch—sometimes almost seemed to start work before he'd pressed the lever. And he found it hard to stop the thing at knocking-off time—had to pull the lever back with all his might.

"He fights me," the man said. "He doesn't want to stop. He's always hungry, that's what's the matter with him. And after a night without a mouthful of anything he's near starving."

At first he spoke that way half in

jest. Yet he meant it. In his heart he was afraid of the giant grab, and had to talk about it to ward off his fear. Then the fear went too deep for speech. When work was over he tried to forget it, and when he went to the site in the morning, he wiped sweat off his brow and pretended it was caused by the heat.

But the weather was far from hot. It was the end of summer.

When the autumn clocks were put back an hour, darkness fell early. Even the schoolchildren were coming home in the half-dark and by the time they reached the site work had stopped. There was just the silence and the grab.

The children let their imaginations run wild. They swore that "he" was out to get them and, filled with delicious terror, would run past the site as fast as they could.

It was only a joke, a game, like pretending that a house was haunted, or that one had seen a hand hanging out of a letter-box. Then they became genuinely afraid, and expressed their fear by defiance.

As they passed the grab, they would stop, shout some insult, like: "Mucky old grab, you can't catch me!" and then run. It became a test of courage to see which child dared stay longest facing the grab and shouting insults before running away.

The parents knew nothing of this, for children are secretive, and somehow they knew that their half-savage rites would be condemned by the adult world. But the parents did notice that their children were restless and edgy, and gradually the mothers confided in each other: "My Tommy's off his food lately—don't know what's the matter with him" . . . "My Bert's just the same. He don't sleep so well either—has terrible nightmares" . . . "So does my Gordon."

So the mothers talked and wondered. Was something wrong at the school? A teacher bullying them perhaps?

Mrs. Poole, Tommy's mother, went to the headmaster, explained that Tommy "wasn't himself", and told of the other mothers' concern for their sons.

The Head listened, took down the names of the boys concerned, then said that as they were in different classes, being taught by different staff, it was unlikely that any teacher was involved.

"Do they perhaps get into some sort of mischief on their way home?" he said. "I notice they all live in the same streets, near the building site."

"Then maybe someone there is upsetting them, telling them stories," said Mrs. Poole.

"Have you questioned your son?"

"Only asked him what's worrying him. He says 'Nothing'."

The headmaster sighed. "The favourite word among children when you ask them what they're doing or what's the matter is 'Nothing'. I suppose it's their only defence against adult probing."

"But I think we should probe. It isn't only my boy, you see. It's all of them."

"Leave it to me. I'll do what I can," said the headmaster.

He went to the police station and

asked if a constable could keep an eye on the building site when work was over in case someone was hanging about there, frightening the children. The sergeant said that an old watchman was usually on duty there, but one of his men would certainly take a look.

P.C. Fellows was on the beat that evening. He usually stayed in the high street when the children came out of school because of the traffic, but tonight he went to the site instead. He called at the hut where the old watchman was making himself a cup of tea.

The old man explained that it was unlikely that anyone would "try anything" until it was really dark, so he usually stayed in his hut at this time. Yes, he often heard the kids passing, and an unholy row they made. Always seemed to be screaming and shouting. Kids nowadays, and so on.

Fellows had a cup of tea, then went outside again. The grab loomed high above him. The dusk-laden streets were fairly quiet. Then he saw the children coming.

They walked without talking. He concealed himself in the shadow of some machinery. The children stopped and began to shout: "Yah, you big black ugly old beast" . . . "You horrible stinking old thing" . . . "You old black death." The shouting was repetitious, becoming hysterical, then thinned out as one by one the children cried: "You can't catch me," and fled the spot.

At last Tommy Poole was the only one left.

"You filthy old stinker . . . You old ugly mug . . . You . . ." He looked round, saw that he was alone and gave the final, defiant: "You can't catch me!"

He turned to run. His foot caught in some rubble fallen from lorries leaving the site. He fell flat on his face. At the same moment the grab gave an enormous creaking groan, lurched, trembled, swayed, like a monstrous metal tree trying to uproot itself. Tommy, still on the ground with his ankle twisted under him, turned his head. He screamed, tried to get up—but was too late.

The giant grab, with unerring aim, fell with a thunderous crash right across the boy's body.

It was reported in the papers as an accident, of course. Some structural fault, they said. Even the policeman who'd witnessed it regarded it as a tragic accident which he'd been too far away to prevent.

But the man who'd worked the grab said: "You know, I'm not surprised. He was out for blood. I could tell by the feel of him. Earth wasn't good enough for him any more. He was out for human blood." His mates glanced at each other and tapped their heads significantly, yet they didn't talk much about the incident. It was as if they were afraid to.

As for the children, when they heard of Tommy's death they didn't say a word. They'd known all along how dangerous their game had been; how potent the powers they'd challenged.

They knew that the grab, goaded into evil and hungry rage by its puny tormentors, had claimed its victim.

MURDER OR SUICIDE?

THE CALAS CASE

S. JOHN PESKETT

Illustrated by Vera Jarman

ON THE 10TH OF March in the year 1762 in the Place Saint-Georges at Toulouse a man was broken on the wheel. In the whole history of man's inhumanity to man, there is perhaps nothing quite so savage as judicially breaking a man on the wheel. The wretched victim is tied face upwards to a horizontal wheel or St. Andrew's cross and his bones are broken by the executioner with an iron bar. It is not necessary to go into further details. It is a shocking thing to realize that this happened as recently as the lifetime of my grandfather's grandfather. It is still more shocking to know that the same man who was so brutally executed in Toulouse in 1762 was innocent. That man was Jean Calas and his story has gone down in history as the Calas Case.

It was a period of religious intolerance in that part of France. Though the Massacre of St. Bartholomew had taken place nearly two hundred years before, the spirit of St. Bartholomew's Eve was by no means dead. The Catholics in the capital of the Languedoc were still bitterly anti-Protestant. And Jean Calas was a staunch Protestant.

The story begins at the house of Jean Calas, who was a successful draper, in the rue des Filettiers. There he lived with his large family in relative comfort. He had four sons and two daughters. His business was conducted on the ground floor and he lived in the upper part of the house.

One evening in October of 1761, the Calas parents and two of their sons had been sitting at table since seven o'clock, together with a friend of the Calas sons, David Lavaysse. About eight o'clock, one of the sons named Marc-Antoine left the room, presumably to go to a café in accordance with his usual custom. Talk continued at table for about an hour, when Pierre Calas got up to conduct David Lavaysse to the door. Apparently they found, when they arrived downstairs, that Marc-Antoine, instead of going to the café, had carefully folded his coat and waistcoat and hanged himself at the entrance to the door leading to the shop. They cut him down and gave the alarm. Jean Calas came running downstairs with his wife and an old serving woman to find the body of their son lying there. They tried to revive him and threw water in his face, but Marc-Antoine was beyond recall. Pierre

rushed off to find a doctor, who arrived and pronounced Marc-Antoine Calas to be dead. He examined him and found no obvious cause of death until he perceived under the dead man's black cravate the marks of a ligature. "Your son has been hanged or strangled!" he announced to the agonized parents. "But who could have done it? The bolts are on the door!" Jean Calas replied. "Who could have done it?"

The servant's cries had roused the neighbourhood and the neighbourhood was by no means friendly to the Protestant Calas, who was known to have had differences with one of his sons over religious matters. Five years before, his son, Louis, had left the paternal roof to become a Cath-

olic. This is said to have caused violent family quarrels. The father had refused to maintain his son and a law case had eventually been brought against the father, as a result of which, in September 1761, Jean Calas had finally agreed to pay his son an annual pension. It was also known that Marc-Antoine was subject to fits of melancholy. The story spread almost from the beginning of the inquiry that Jean Calas, thinking Marc-Antoine was about to join his brother Louis in the Catholic faith, had murdered him in a dispute.

The inquiry was conducted by one David Beaudrigue. He established that on the fatal evening there were six people in the house; Jean Calas and his wife, the sons Marc-Antoine and Pierre, the guest, and an old servant. The two daughters were away with friends in the country. Donat, another son, was an apprentice at Nîmes and, as we already know, the fourth son Louis had left home.

David Beaudrigue was a kind of examining magistrate. According to the unanimous evidence given to him by the occupants of the house, the outer door was bolted and it was clear that no one could get in unobserved. All those present confirmed the finding of the body and the fact that the coat and waistcoat had been removed. They appeared to wish to avoid the disgrace of suicide in the house and at first gave the impression that the body had been found *lying* where it was. The magistrate waited for the doctor's final report, which stated definitely that Marc-Antoine Calas had died from hanging.

Then the whole family went back on their former statement and said they had departed from the strict truth only because they were anxious that the body should not be ignominiously buried, as suicides were. They said that Marc-Antoine was a failure in life, that he was given to fits of melancholy and thought only of death, which he had finally sought by his own hand. They admitted then that he had been found hanging.

David Beaudrigue was far from satisfied. He caused the whole scene of the tragedy to be carefully examined. Apparently no chair or stool had been found nearby, where the dead man might have kicked it away. The witnesses asserted that Marc-Antoine's feet were almost touching the ground when he was found. Another strange thing was that the room where the suicide took place was in complete darkness. Beaudrigue examined the door, from a peg of which the body was said to have hung. He maintained that it could not possibly have held the body of a man writhing in the throes of strangulation. In addition he noted that, where the peg was fixed to the door, dust was undisturbed: undisturbed over a long period!

It must be admitted that Beaudrigue had some ground for suspicion. The whole family had lied first of all and then gone back on their original statements. They had been unanimous in saying that Marc-Antoine had been found lying in the passage and that his clothes were carefully folded close by. Then they had said that he was found hanging.

Beaudrigue could not believe that a man would carefully fold up his clothes in a pitch dark room and, above all, that he would put on a black cravate, when it was well known that Marc-Antoine never wore a black cravate! After all, a man who is about to hang himself is not likely to put on a cravate at all. "Did you cut him down?" asked Beaudrigue. They couldn't remember. "Then why was the cord intact?" insisted Beaudrigue. He was far from satisfied.

Despite Calas's protestations of innocence, the inquiry went forward. Witnesses were commanded to come forward under pain of excommunication, if they had any light to shed on the affair. The usual gossips appeared. One had heard the cry, "Assassin! Assassin!" Another had heard someone shout, "They're strangling me!" Two women claimed to have seen Jean Calas holding his son by the neck that day and saying, "You rascal, this will cost you your life!" Even the mother was accused of saying, at the time of Louis's departure, "If I had known, I would have strangled him!" But Jean Calas denied everything and stated categorically, "Marc-Antoine had no intention of becoming a Catholic." More gossips turned up to say that they had seen Marc-Antoine at Mass and showing other signs of partiality for the Catholic faith. Jean said they had mistaken Louis for Marc-Antoine. Then other witnesses came forward to deny the evidence of the first gossips and to support the statements of Jean Calas.

Nevertheless, Jean Calas, his wife and the son Pierre were condemned to the *question ordinaire et extraordinaire* or examination by torture. They appealed successfully, but despite further evidence in his favour, Calas was eventually brought to trial for the murder of his son.

In that atmosphere of religious prejudice, witnesses for the defence were suppressed or afraid to come forward. Finally, at the trial in February 1762, Jean Calas was found guilty. The Parlement of Toulouse sentenced him to be broken on the wheel. Right to the last moment Beaudrigue hoped to extract a confession from Calas and was even present when he was tortured. He conjured him to confess and to name his accomplices. "I am innocent!" declared Calas, "and could not have had accomplices." Beaudrigue even went to the place of execution with him, which seems to indicate that he had doubts and hoped to have them cleared up at the last moment. Even the priest failed to obtain a confession. "Do you think, Father, that I would kill my own son?" Calas asked him.

So Jean Calas was taken in a cart to the Place Saint-Georges. That morning he had been taken, dressed in a shirt only and barefooted, with a rope round his neck, to hear the condemnation in the Judgment Hall. There he was tortured but did not falter in his protestations of innocence.

At the Place Saint-Georges he was tied to St. Andrew's cross. Afterwards his broken body was to be placed on

a wheel till he died. As the executioner went about his horrid task, Calas cried out for pardon for his accusers, who had been deceived, and called on God to receive his soul. Even the executioner was touched and paused, asking him to confess and promising him a quick death. Calas continued to deny his guilt. Before he died, he said that Our Lord had died a worse death and He was innocent too. So why should Jean Calas complain?

Even that did not satisfy the judges of Toulouse. They had deferred sentence on the other accused members of the Calas family in the hope that Jean Calas would denounce them in admitting his own guilt. Pierre was condemned to banishment. The two daughters were placed in convents. The property of Jean Calas was confiscated. The youngest son, Donat, escaped to Geneva and there enlisted the interest and sympathy of Voltaire.

Though subsequent evidence came out from reliable sources in favour of Jean Calas, it was Voltaire who finally, three years later, obtained a reversal of the judgment against Calas from the Court of Appeal. But that is another story. Suffice it to say that the innocence of Jean Calas was established. Louis XV followed the case for his rehabilitation with the greatest interest and gave generous compensation to the widow, the sons, daughters and the old servant.

Of one thing we can be sure. Jean Calas did not murder his son. But how *did* Marc-Antoine die? Was he murdered by Pierre Calas and David Lavaysse, who were supposed to have found him hanging? Was Jean Calas "covering up" to save his son and David? Or did Marc-Antoine somehow contrive to hang himself in a fit of melancholy? We shall never know.

NOBODY WILL BLAME YOU

W. E. DAN ROSS

Illustrated by D. C. Forbes

RICHARD EVANS WAS standing on the verandah of his log cabin retreat when he suddenly became aware of the sound of a rapidly approaching car. His thin, sensitive face clouded with apprehension and annoyance. Visitors were the last thing he wanted.

Now the reflection of oncoming headlights could be seen jogging up and down against the darkness of the November night. Evans wondered who might be in the car. All at once it rounded the bend at the top of the hill and came into full view. He recognized the car as belonging to his neighbour in the city, Jim Whelly, and cursed to himself.

It was typical of the meddlesome Whelly to show up when he wasn't wanted. A time when he was trying to sort things out and think them through. Evans moved slowly to the head of the verandah steps, his tall, erect figure strangely resembling someone sleepwalking.

A short, rotund man in topcoat and light hat clambered out of the grey convertible and called to him in a worried tone: "That you, Dick?"

"Yes," Evans's voice had an odd vagueness, "I wasn't expecting anyone."

The little man came up to the verandah and stood with a chubby hand on the railing. "I visit the banks up here for inspection three times a year. Madge mentioned that you and Ethel were up here for a few days so I drove across from the hotel. It takes less than a half-hour."

"Madge mentioned it?" Evans stared at his neighbour's round, pink-and-white face, slightly puffed with middle-age. And he fretfully decided this was the high-point of Whelly's interfering in other people's business. He remembered when he'd had the city house painted Whelly had bristled with suggestions, insisting that peach would be a much better colour than white. And he'd had detailed instructions for improving the landscaping. And then there'd been those unheralded, boring visits when he'd hold forth endlessly with his perverse views on politics and the condition of the economy. Evans had felt reasonably secure from Whelly's neighbourliness at the lodge, forgetting that the little man's occupation of bank inspector often took him to this area.

"I guess you'll think I'm crazy," Whelly forced a chuckle, "but I had an awful dream about you and Ethel. Funny thing is I've had it a couple of times before. But this time it seemed almost real. Bothered me!"

Evans studied him with expressionless silence for a moment, knowing Whelly really believed in dream lore

and superstition. Then with no attempt to hide the sarcasm in his tone he asked: "And you made this trip on the basis of a dream?"

Whelly didn't seem to notice the sarcasm. He climbed the verandah stairs and stood beside him. "That and because I thought I'd enjoy a couple of hours' talk with Ethel and you. Where is she?"

Evans's strangely bright eyes stared past the little man, out into the dusk. He said: "Gone to the village."

Whelly glanced at the blue hardtop parked by the side of the cabin and asked: "How did she go? The car's still here. Swim across the lake?" He laughed weakly at his own joke.

"With the hired man," Evans said. "In his old truck."

"Ethel drove to town in a truck when her car was right here. That doesn't sound like her."

The insistent prodding of the little man infuriated Evans. "It was an emergency," he said brusquely.

"Emergency? What happened?"

"The guide cut his hand when he was splitting some wood. It was pretty deep. Ethel thought he should see a doctor and she had some errands in the village."

"But why use the truck?" Whelly persisted.

"He thought he might want to bring back the new refrigerator we'd ordered if it had arrived on the afternoon train."

There was a pause. The little man shifted uneasily from one foot to another. "I'm sorry Ethel isn't here. But then she'll be back soon."

"I can't promise that," Evans said. "They've only been gone a little while."

"But she'll be anxious to get back now that it's dark. Don't know how you ever managed to get her up here anyway." The fat face peered up suspiciously in the dim glow of the single verandah light. "First time she ever came with you on a hunting trip, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Didn't think you'd ever get her to budge from the city."

"No?"

"But you did."

"Yes."

"You never can tell about women. They change their minds."

"Yes," Evans's face was grim and weary looking.

"Look here, Dick," the little man frowned, "you don't seem overly pleased that I took the time to come away over here. I thought you'd appreciate it."

"Sorry," Evans gripped a hand around the verandah post and stared past him, "I'm tired. Upset. I came up here for a rest. Things haven't been going well for me."

"That's too bad," Whelly sounded genuinely concerned. "Be glad to listen to your troubles if it'll help. And how about going inside for a drink?"

Evans hesitated and then went over to the front door and opened it, at the same time switching on the living-room light. Whelly trotted past him out to the kitchen. He slumped into an easy chair before the large stone fireplace. There was the sound of the little man bustling about in the kit-

chen for a glass, the tap being turned on and the flow of running water. After a minute Whelly came back into the living-room.

"Sorry I disturbed you," he said standing awkwardly before Evans's chair. "I suppose you think I'm silly or something but that dream last night really got me. Happening two or three times in a row like it did. I tell you I woke up in a sweat."

Evans looked up at him. "It must have been a strange sort of night-mare."

"Oh, it was! I dreamt you and Ethel were out in the woods alone. You both had guns and were wearing hunting clothes. The same sort of thing you have on now. Well, to make it short, you deliberately let her walk ahead of you and then you shot her."

For a moment Evans registered shock and then he stared at the burnt-out logs in the fireplace. "Don't be a fool!" he said, dully.

At that instant Whelly's expression changed as he gaped at Evans's plaid hunting jacket. He stammered: "Your —your sleeve. And the arm of your jacket. They're stained with blood!"

Evans jumped to his feet. "Why make so much of it? I told you the guide had an accident. I happened to get some blood on my shirt and coat when I helped him bandage his hand. I was just going to change when you came."

The little man backed away from him. "It's all right, Dick. You can trust me. I'm your friend," he croaked.

"What are you saying?" Evans

grasped the rotund intruder by his coat front. "How dare you come here and say I've done something to Ethel? That I'm a murderer! You and your crazy dreams!"

Whelly grew purple in the face but he shook his head stubbornly. "I know, Dick. I know! It happened just like in my dream! But I don't blame you! You had good reason!"

"Good reason?" Evans repeated the words in a slow, incredulous way. He slackened his hold on the perspiring little man.

Whelly's fat hands moved wildly in a manner that must be intended to placate him. He said: "No one can blame you. Madge always said it would end like this some day. All your neighbours knew about Ethel."

Evans's lean face was a study in disbelief. "I don't know what you're trying to say. But I warn you, I won't stand much of this."

"I'm your friend, Dick. Your good friend," the words tumbled from quivering lips. "And I wanted to stop you from doing it. Get here before it was too late! If only I had!"

"What were you hinting about my wife?"

"I meant everyone understands. No one will blame you."

"Say it! Understands what?"

"Don't make me talk about it now, Dick. Let's think about you first. You can work out some alibi if you're careful. But no nonsense like the stuff you told me just now. Let me help with a story, not that I want to be an accomplice or anything—but she was to blame."

Evans touched a hand to his forehead, his tall figure seemed to sway slightly. "I want to hear you say those things—those things everyone knows about Ethel. Go on or I swear I'll kill you."

Whelly gulped. "It was only a question of time until you got wise. Ethel's a wonderful looking girl, but she's no good, Dick. People back home were wise to that before you came along and married her. And she didn't change at all. It was mighty convenient for those other men, you being away so much. And none of your friends wanted to tell you."

Evans gripped the little man by the shoulders. His voice was low and harsh as he said: "You're enjoying yourself, aren't you? You like going over it. Repeating it! I could close your dirty little windpipe for good, you filthy little swine!"

"No! No!" Whelly protested. "Her brother told me about her first. He was crazy ashamed of what she was like with men. Maybe she couldn't help it, but after you were married there was Clarke and Ryan, both from your office. And there were others too. You may not believe it, she even made a play for me."

There was a silence as Evans's eyes burned into those of the fat man. Then he released him and with a mirthless chuckle he said: "What makes you so sure I didn't know before?"

"You didn't want to. It's like that sometimes."

Evans sank into the chair again. "There must be some way out," he moaned and buried his face in his hands.

"That's what I've been telling you," the little man moved over to him and leaned forward eagerly. "No one knows yet but me. You can still pretend it was an accident. All you have to do is account for the time since it happened."

The tall man sat with his head in his hands and made no reply.

"Shock!" Whelly continued, his enthusiasm growing. "You can blame the time lapse on shock. And that will make it all ring true. Instead of driving into town, walk in. Doesn't make any difference how long it takes to get there. You can claim you've been wandering around in a queer kind of daze from the time it happened. Say you shot her by accident and be sure to make the details good."

Evans straightened up in his chair and looked at Whelly with a stony expression. "You're being most helpful."

"I want to be," the round face was animated. "And I haven't been here at all, that's important. Since it's already dark I'll have no trouble getting back to the hotel without anyone missing me." He walked slowly to the door. "Just get a good story and stick with it and you'll be all right. Good luck, Dick." And he left.

The car drove off; long after it was out of hearing Evans sat there staring at the opposite wall, his face completely without expression. It was nearly an hour later when he heard the noisy engine of an ancient car coming down the road. There were voices outside and the slam of a car door and the noisy motor retreated. Evans still sat there.

Hurried footsteps on the verandah stairs and then Ethel came in the front door. She said: "Oh, there you are."

"Yes," he roused himself and getting up turned facing her.

She was younger than he was and blonde, a beauty. She smiled. "The guide decided to stay in town. His hand is really bad. So he won't be able to come tomorrow. And the refrigerator didn't arrive after all. His brother drove me up again. My, is he a handsome lad!"

Evans took in her flushed, excited face. She'd found another one. He said: "We don't really need a guide. We'll go hunting in the morning as usual."

"Are you sure that's wise?"

"I think it's very wise," he watched her, his eyes shining with an odd light. "You know I've been sitting here wondering."

"About what?" She sat down, and taking a file from her handbag began to work on a bothersome nail.

He smiled mysteriously. "Something quite unimportant. You'll probably think it's silly. I was wondering how long it would take me to walk into the village."

THE FIFTH NAME PLATE

SHEILA RAINFORD

Y NAME IS Jackson. Charles Jackson.

You are with me in a small street in the City of London. We are looking at an old, old house. The time is day. The air is filled with the noise of the clatter of typewriters. Stay with me.

Watch with me. Watch this house. Each morning at 9.30 we will see the glamorous typists and the callow clerks enter through the dark green door. The dark green door is the sole entrance and the sole exit.

Let us follow them. Here we are in the entrance hall. Look at the name plates: they show there are five businesses here. One for each floor: a private detective agency, an employment agency, tea importers, publishers, and the fifth plate, that merely reads Mr A. Farr. As the house grows taller it gets narrower. On the fifth floor there is only one room; a mean little office.

I'll take you to Mr. A. Farr's office. No, of course it is no trouble. There is no lift, my friend, only many stairs. Is your heart strong? Good.

It is very dirty here on the fifth floor. Look at this large crack in the wall. Peer through it. Do you see Mr. Farr? Yes, that's him. That gaunt, ugly little man sitting at a huge desk. He looks like a badly treated plastic doll. See that ancient typewriter with the double keyboard. Look at that container full of mauve liquid frothing and bubbling. Do you know what that is? You don't. Neither do I. Oh well, never mind. You are restless, you look bored. Please don't go yet, not until I tell you my story. It is a very short story so much of it is missing.

I used to work in the tea importers on the third floor. Mr. A. Farr was a joke, a great big joke. He has never been seen to arrive in the morning, leave at night or go out for lunch.

On holiday eves a gang of us would often go up and wish him a happy holiday. We always went up in a group; no one ever went up alone. He would reciprocate our good wishes in his high, shrill voice. The girls were a little afraid of him.

One day we had a new typist. We were always having new typists but this one was dumber and prettier than any we had had before. Jennifer was her name. She had big baby blue eyes, soft blonde curls and ample curves in all the right places. Because she was so dumb and, perhaps, because she was so pretty, the girls took the mickey out of her a lot. Then, one afternoon, Cynthia Flint said it was the custom for all new girls to pay their respects to Mr. Farr. Jennifer demurred but the others, thinking it would be a good laugh, kept on about it all the afternoon. On and on. At half past five, as they were leaving, they turned on Jennifer and said she

must visit Mr. Farr as otherwise the old man would be offended. The poor girl looked very miserable. I should have intervened then but somehow I didn't. They promised to wait for her by the green door. As soon as she disappeared up the first flight of stairs they left laughing and chattering. One of them stayed though. A shy, quiet girl called Julie. I too waited.

A quarter of an hour elapsed and then we heard Jennifer's voice. She was calling to us. She sounded frightened, very frightened. Do you know what she was calling?

"I can't find the stairs. I can't find the stairs."

I still shiver when I recall that cry. Julie and I rushed upstairs. I flung open the door. Mr. A. Farr was sitting behind his desk, just as he is now. The container full of mauve liquid was also there frothing and bubbling. He looked up when I flung the door open. Jennifer was nowhere to be seen. Julie and I stood there like a couple of idiots. I managed to blurt out that we were looking for a colleague. I described Jennifer. No, he said, he had not seen a young lady answering that description. We thanked him and closed the door. There was no sign of Jennifer. Yet, if she had left, we would certainly have seen her. At last we walked into the street again. Julie fainted.

I hailed a taxi and took her to her hostel. She came round in the taxi but seemed too frightened and bewildered to speak. I saw the nurse at the hostel. I said she had witnessed a bad accident and was suffering from shock. The nurse promised to give her a sedative and ensure she got to bed early.

The next morning Julie was not at the office, neither was Jennifer. I asked if any of them had heard from Jennifer. A row of uncomprehending faces stared at me.

"Jennifer? Do you mean Julie?" said someone.

"No, Jennifer, the pretty blonde."

"We've never had anyone called Jennifer working here," said Cynthia.

"The trouble with you is you've got a blonde fixation."

She laughed. Her laughter was high, brittle and forced. I looked carefully at her. There was something very wrong with this woman. Then came realization, sickening and fantastic: she was not human. She walked, talked and worked but I swear she was not a member of the human race.

I said no more. I moved as if in a nightmare. At lunch time I rushed to Julie's hostel. The warden told me she had left that morning without leaving a forwarding address.

I never went back to the office on the third floor. But I am always near. Daily I fear this house more. I long to break away from it but cannot. All I do is watch, just watch this room. I can see you too think I am mad. Ah well, let us go.

You are not coming with me. What was that you said? Speak a little louder, please, I'm now on the fourth floor.

I beg your pardon, you say . . . you can't find the stairs?

I can't really hear you, you see, I've reached the second floor.

THE SLAVE DETECTIVE

THE CASE OF THE ROMAN BANQUET

WALLACE NICHOLS

IT WAS A BANQUET of the usual nine men, including the host, Flavius Fabullus, a banquet of exotic food, many wines and with an expectation later of lewd dances. But preliminarily the dancers, nine young and beautiful slave-girls, were acting as waitresses, each one serving a particular man and him alone. During the meal a flute-boy played gay melodies in the corner by the door leading to the kitchen, melodies, judging from his countenance and expression, the reverse of his feelings, if, as a slave, he permitted himself the luxury of feelings. It was, in fact, a Roman banquet of the worst description.

A small room, leading off from the dining-chamber, was in active use as a vomitorium, and from time to time host and guests would leave their couches and disappear into it to have their throats tickled by a feather for the purpose of lightening their interiors, so that they could return to the table to eat yet another rich course. The feathering was administered by a middle-aged slave appointed for the duty.

The banquet lasted for hours with innumerable courses and constant drinking until a time came when everyone was too drunk to take much notice of what was happening, even including the lewd dances, or if the flute-boy played well or ill, or took time off when he saw that no ears listened.

The lamps were already dimming against the dawn when Fabullus, staggering in from the vomitorium for the fourth or fifth time, bellowed for his particular slave-girl to pour him another cup of wine. She left the wreathing, impure dance and poured wine into his golden cup from the earthenware amphora at hand. She noticed that he was sweating, but thought it natural in the circumstances. He took a single gulp of the wine, half rose to his feet, gave a strangled cry, and crashed head-foremost across the table.

They tended him as well as their intoxicated state permitted, and then they were largely sobered by the fact that he was not to be revived. The dancing ceased in disorder, the girls ran out shrieking, the flute-boy fled with them. Meanwhile the featherer called his master's head slave, who summoned a physician, but he could only tell them that Fabullus was indeed already dead.

Gratianus, the City Prefect, arrested the slave-girl who had poured the dead man's last drink. Her name was Decia.

"She is the obvious suspect, O Sollius," he said to his friend the Slave Detective whom he had summoned

to the barracks of the City Cohorts on the next day. "But I am not happy over the arrest. I think I need your help. I smell a very clever crime, and she is not a clever girl."

"She protests her innocence?"

"Even under torture!"

"It was poison—not a sudden seizure?"

"Poison certainly."

"Was poison found in the cup or the amphora?"

"That is the puzzling thing: poison was found in neither. The amphora was still half-full; but the cup was completely dry, without even dregs. The physician said it might, for all he could tell, have contained poison. Hence the arrest."

"Tell me something about the dead man," pursued Sollius.

"He was a rich widower without children, and a notorious libertine, not a nice fellow at all."

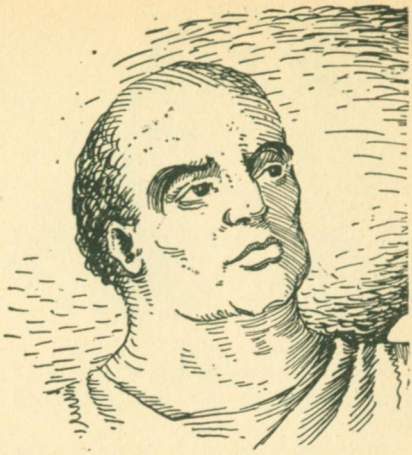
"Who inherits?"

"A nephew—serving on the Mauretanian frontier. He was not in Rome. You can smooth his name at least off the tablets!"

"Assemble them all, guests, dancing-girls, flute-boy and featherer, in the same banqueting chamber, and let me question them," said Sollius. "The culprit must be one who was present."

"The dancing-girls—except Decia—are surely out of it," Gratianus suggested. "They were dancing at the time."

"We need them all," replied Sollius firmly.



The authority of the Prefect was sufficient to assure such an assembling within little more than the hour. The guests—all of them pompous and rich but none of them important in Roman society—grumbled but were too frightened not to obey. The slaves of both sexes were in even more compulsory attendance. Decia was brought from prison by a soldier of the Urban Cohort.

At the Prefect's order—and to the Slave Detective's great satisfaction—nothing had been cleared up in the chamber after the feast. The withered garlands of the guests still lay where they had fallen when hastily discarded after the tragedy.

"Take the same places on your couches, gentlemen," directed Sollius, and they complied in irked silence. "Now let the dancing-girls stand behind the man to whom each had been assigned as server. Are the cooks in the kitchen?"

They were, and Sollius interrogated them first. Nothing had been cleaned or put away.

"I tasted every dish," asserted the white-faced head cook, "every single one. If poison had been in the food I should not be here now."

His three under-cooks confirmed it, and Sollius believed him. Besides, had the food been poisoned, the guests would have been taken ill. Then he noted the flute-boy, disconsolately holding a flute, seated on a stool near the doorway into the kitchen.

"What is your name?" he asked, noticing his brown skin.

"Juba."

"Of what race?"

"Numidian."

"A slave?"

"Enslaved when they captured my village in war."

"Bought by the lord Fabullus?"

"I was not the lord Fabullus's slave. I am a professional flute-boy."

"I understand," replied Sollius, and then went on sharply: "Were you sitting on that same stool and in that same place all through the feast?"

Juba nodded.

"Then the slave-girls bringing in the dishes passed you close by with each course?"

Again Juba nodded.

"Could you," asked Sollius more sharply still and fixing his eyes in the youth's, "have dropped a powder in one of the dishes as it was borne in?"

Sollius knew that he had an intimidating glance, and the other cowered before him, but his surprise at the question seemed genuine and his denial, though stammered, convincing. The question itself had been rather to touch the youth's nerves than to extract a confession, for Sollius did not suspect that the poison had been in the food.

"Did you alone, Decia," he asked, turning to that girl, "serve Fabullus with both food and wine?"

She nodded nervously.

"There is wine still in the amphora," said Sollius. "The golden cup from which Fabullus drank is on the table. Pour out a similar drink now as you did then for him."

She did so with trembling hands, set down the amphora, and stared in front of her. There fell a pause which Sollius deliberately prolonged. Then he cried: "Drink it, girl!"

There was a gasp from everyone as she shuddered away.

"No, oh, no!"

"Drink it, girl! If you are innocent, drink it!"

With a cry of desperation she took the cup. The guests on their three couches stirred uneasily, and one or two covered their eyes with their hands. The featherer came to the door

of the vomitorium and stared fearfully at the scene. The flute-boy sat tensely still.

"Drink it!" commanded Sollius.

Like a priestess at a sacrifice she lifted the cup in both hands and carried it slowly to her lips. The flute-boy gave a cry. The featherer took a step forward and raised his arm in protesting horror. But the girl had already drunk, and now suddenly gave a gasp and collapsed in a swoon.

"You have killed her, Slave Detective!" cried the featherer, his eyes blazing as he rushed forward and took the girl in his arms.

"So that ends the case," said one of the guests with a sigh of relief.

"By no means," answered Sollius. "See! She revives."

"That girl is not guilty," whispered the City Prefect. "I am glad I called you in, Sollius. What of the guests?"

Under interrogation they all confirmed one another in the same story. With the exception of one, who had fallen under the table, they were all in licentious and laughing pursuit of the dancing-girls when Fabullus fell and died. Shamefaced now, their haughtiness drained out of them, they bore mutual witness to their wild occupation at the important time. There remained the man who, on his own admittance, was too drunk even to take a further part in the allurement of the orgy. On the edge of age, he was a merchant named Ticinius. Obviously suffering from a dreadful hangover, he seemed also in a state of fear.

"He is rumoured," whispered Gratianus, "to be heavily in debt."

"You are a merchant?" Sollius began, and Ticinius bowed. "Your business is successful?"

"Reasonably so," came the nervous answer, "with such heavy taxes, and the trade with the East so affected by war."

"How much," asked Sollius, his question as swift as though sped from a catapult, "did you owe the dead man?"

"I did not kill him," stridently asserted the trembling Ticinius. "I should have paid him all his sesterces in the end, and he knew it."

"But he was pressing you?" acutely insisted Sollius.

"How could I kill him? I was drunk —unconscious. . . ."

"Or feigning it!" said Sollius mercilessly. Then he turned to the Prefect, and asked: "Was Fabullus examined for a prick-mark? Ticinius has a large ring that could have contained poison. Such dangerous rings are common—and Ticinius was lying on the same couch and next to Fabullus before he dropped out of the feast."

"The physician was careful and found none," Gratianus answered.

"Let me see your ring, lord," asked Sollius, turning again to the white Ticinius, who took it off and handed it over without a word.

"My subtle Sollius . . ." murmured Gratianus under his breath, but was disappointed when the Slave Detective handed it back with a smile after a careful scrutiny.

"Who, besides Decia, approached Fabullus just before he drank?" asked

Sollius. "Ah, you, featherer! What is your name?"

"Davus," was the growled answer.

"You gave him the feather just before his last drink?"

"I took from him, not gave him aught, if that is what you be thinking," guffawed Davus.

"Did you notice anything unusual about him?"

"He was all right the last time I feathered him," said Davus. "He was pale . . . and sweating. But, by that time, so were they all."

"He was alone with you?"

"Those wanting the feather usually came singly."

"Let me see this vomitorium," said Sollius, and followed the other into it.

It was a small chamber, and fetid still from its employment. A mass of used feathers lay in an earthenware bowl; a mass of fresh ones lay in another. There was a stool, and a sink with running water. Suddenly a frightened dancing-girl ran in.

"What is he making you tell him?" she flamed out.

"Go away, Licia!" snapped Davus.

"You are a slave as we are, O Sollius," the girl went swiftly on, "and know what rights some masters claim over their female slaves—but I love only Davus, and he knows it. Why should he kill for something that means nothing?"

"A veritable nest of motives!" muttered Sollius to himself, and then asked aloud: "Did any of the girls enter here at any time during the feast?"

"None," bluntly answered Davus.

"Let us go back," said Sollius, and led the way. "Can any of you," he demanded, addressing the whole company in a raised voice, "remember anything unusual or unexpected during the whole time of the feast?"

At first there was a deep, uneasy silence, and then one of the girls, of a more brazen sort than most of the others, lifted her voice:

"I know I was drunk, but the flute-boy gave me false notes for my steps in my strip-dance."

"One can falter in a rhythm after playing for so long through such a feast!" pouted the angered Juba.

"You spoilt my steps!" she jibed fiercely.

"You were beyond noticing—you were all of you beyond noticing anything! I and Davus were the only sober ones here."

"That be so," agreed Davus, staring with a slave's malice upon the free-born guests, arrogantly restless under the proceedings.

"Did anyone," pursued Sollius, "observe any suspicious movement near the person of the lord Fabullus at any time during the feast?"

The shaking of heads was as unanimous as the wavings of the crowns on summer trees. But suddenly one of the girls spoke.

"I did not see anything near Fabullus," she said, "but while I was doing a twirl-dance I saw a blurred shadow at the door there," and she pointed towards the vomitorium, "But I was dizzy from my twirl-dance as well as drunk," she added with a giggle. "It may have been nothing."

"Was this shadow," asked Sollius, "going in or coming out?"

"I cannot tell you: I was so dizzy."

"When did you see this?"

"Very near the death," she answered, frightened now.

"Did anyone else see this shadow?"

Nobody answered.

"Did you come out from the vomitorium, Davus?"

"Not till I heard the cries at the master's fall," asserted Davus.

"Did anyone see Davus come out?"

"I did," said Juba.

"Had you seen him come out before?"

"I was too intent on my playing."

"Why, then, did you play so badly for my strip-dance?" cried the girl.

"By that time," sighed Juba, "I think I was beyond weariness."

"Is this getting us anywhere?" rasped Gratianus.

"You say you were 'beyond weariness', Juba," continued Sollius without heeding the Prefect's interruption, "but did you not have rests during so long a time?"

"He had one at any rate," said another of the girls, "for I had no guide to my steps. I know that."

"I nearly fell asleep from weariness," interrupted Juba.

"What has a flute-boy's tiredness to do with the death of Fabullus?" growled Gratianus.

"Whom?" Sollius abruptly asked him, "have you put to the torture?"

"Decia."

"Poor Decia! You must now, Prefect, put another—" and he named a name.

"No, no! Not that! No torture!" cried the one who now grovelled at his feet. "Save me from torture, and I will tell everything."

"Perhaps," smiled Sollius, "I can tell you most of it myself!"

"You have seen through this tangle?" gasped Gratianus.

"I have seen!" replied the Slave Detective. "One more question. Can you play the flute, Davus?"

Davus started.

"Badly—now. But I was a flute-boy in my youth."

"Then all is clear," said Sollius, glancing complacently at the still incredulous Prefect. "The plot was neat and neatly executed, and a second motive reinforced the first—to lead investigation by the nose. You were less a tool, Davus, than a willing confederate: you hated Fabullus your master because of Licia, and any revenge was sweet, while the murderer had no apparent motive for himself. Were you both to be paid for it by the gift of your freedom? Shall I tell His Excellency the Prefect how it was done? You two exchanged places when, at his most drunk, Fabullus went in to be feathered. The shadow that was seen was either the exchange or the return; you expected—and rightly!—everyone to be too drunk to notice clearly. Exchange, too, is the only explanation of the faltering music. You had a special feather, had you not? One hollowed to contain poison? What was it? Some wizard's brew of your own race, Numidian, given to you by Fabullus's nephew? Take them both away, Prefect—but you'll need a long arm to reach the greedy inheritor of Fabullus's riches. . . ."

EVIDENCE IN CAMERA

PHILIP SPRING

ANG THE FELLOW," mumbled Oughtred. "What's *he* doing up here?" He stared vexedly through his field-glasses at the distant figure of a man coming over the moor.

"Nearly a mile away, though. And maybe he won't come this way," Oughtred assured himself. From the depths of his brushwood "hide" he turned his glasses again on the siskin's nest. The hen showed no agitation. Evidently she had not yet sensed the intruder's approach.

Without using his glasses Oughtred tried to guess the direction the man was taking across the naked brown moor. With the resentment of all solitaries towards those who broke their peace, and exasperated now by this disturbance of the birds at a critical time, he muttered to himself, "Go away, man. These are the bad lands. You won't like it out here. Get back to your chummy little car."

But his attention was taken by the cock bird, now wheeling about the thorns at the edge of the tarn. Rapidly Oughtred picked up his cine-camera. It whirred for a few moments in the muffled depths of the hide as the cock alighted on a bough near the nest. There was alarm in its note. Oughtred swore under his breath.

As the siskin darted away Oughtred laid his cine down and picked up his field-glasses. Yes . . . the hen knew there was danger now. Her body had contracted, her neck and head were drawn back, probing the silence.

"The lumbering idiot." Oughtred, through set teeth, breathed his vexation as he stared again through his glasses at the curiously hunched figure of the distant man. In such trackless waste he could take any direction. There were no finger-posts in this no-man's-land. The two thorns and the gloomy tarn were its only features. That is why the rare, shy siskin had chosen them. And the siskin was why Oughtred had been crouching silently, day after day, in his hide.

"There's something odd about the fellow, though. Seems to be labouring heavily . . . or gathering something . . . hunched over like that." He sharpened the focus of his glasses. "No. A rucksack. Looks heavy, too. Oh, damn, he's not going to *camp* here!"

A moment's reflection told him that only a fool would camp on High Snaith Moor. Its windswept heights were the extreme of desolation. Even the moorland sheep found no herbage here. Only neolithic man, the Romans in a straight march and the Conqueror in a fury had considered it worth a second thought. Its nearest communication was a rough cart track, running along its edge between

two hamlets eleven miles apart. On the Ordnance Survey map it was featureless, a whorl of dark brown contours. These echoed its own savage colouring and naked, rolling skyline.

Oughtred found that he was now dividing his attention between the rare siskin and the equally rare figure of a man in this high wilderness. Only faintly could he make out the man's appearance. He was hatless, thick set, in dark clothes, with an open-necked cricket shirt. His face was indistinct, yet his eyes were easily visible.

Again "sighting" the nesting bird, Oughtred suddenly asked himself, "How could I see his eyes at that distance? He must be wearing dark glasses. But why—at this time of the year? Odd . . . the whole thing's a bit odd. Dark glasses and a rucksack. At this time of the year . . . and up here."

Oughtred focused sharply on the man, holding the binoculars steady by pressing his elbows into the brushwood lining of the hide. Soon he could not only see that the man was wearing dark glasses but also that his upper brow was bald, and that the heavy rucksack was grey and of the capacious Bergen type.

The obvious weight of the rucksack puzzled Oughtred. The man was powerfully built, yet he seemed to labour under it, although the rough going through knee-deep dormant heather would partly account for that. And there was something more than careful—almost stealthy—in the man's long, questing surveys of the landscape.

At that moment the male siskin renewed its note of alarm overhead. Oughtred picked up his cine-camera again. With its tele-photo lens he was able to keep the bird in view as it flittered obliquely in short reconnaissance flights towards the intruder. With his curiosity now aroused, Oughtred panned across to include the man, then swung back to take in the siskin as it returned to the thorn trees. When Oughtred looked again, the man had disappeared.

Oughtred was not surprised. He knew that in the direction the man had taken there lay a gulley filled with bracken and limestone outcrops, and to descend to it would take him out of sight. Relieved that the man had finally gone, Oughtred relaxed and gave his whole attention to his photography.

But after some minutes, looking again in the direction the man had taken, Oughtred gave an involuntary cry of surprise. Again the thick-set figure was visible, on a different course, walking swiftly through the bents and dried heather. And the rucksack had vanished.

With the instinct of the action-photographer, Oughtred swung his cine towards the man and gave a short burst of about seven seconds before allowing himself the muttered expression, "What the devil's this fellow up to? What's he done with his rucksack?"

He picked up his field-glasses. Through them he could now see the man's features more plainly: bald upper brow, rufous hair and complexion, powerful shoulders—and still the dark glasses. Suddenly the man

stopped, looked about, then deliberately swung off on yet another course, but this time towards the distant cart track. With some stupefaction, Oughtred watched him till he was finally out of sight.

"H'm . . . he's been getting rid of something . . . heavy junk . . . or more likely something stolen. . . . But then," he reasoned to himself, "why leave the rucksack? Maybe he's *preparing* for something. I shall have to find out. I know that gulley. Things *could* be hidden there. . . . Yes, I've *got* to find out."

Carefully wriggling from his hide, crawling slowly for some distance so that he did not betray himself to the nesting bird, he finally rose and walked quickly through the rough herbage until he reached the gulley. The man's tracks could be seen faintly in the dense growth of bracken. They led Oughtred at length to a rift in the limestone outcrop.

Some loose pieces of this had been roughly piled over the rift. Oughtred pulled these away. In the cavity about three feet beneath he saw the rucksack. He hesitated a moment, fingering his chin doubtfully. "Now, *is* this my business? Of course. The fellow could be a fire-raiser . . . or getting ready for no good, anyway. But this is probably loot, and the fellow intends to come back after the hue-and-cry to pick it up. 'Course it's my business. Report it to the police."

With pounding heart he knelt down and dragged the heavy rucksack from its hiding-place. Whatever it contained it was neither metal nor coins. With suddenly dried mouth he unbuckled the flap and untied the cord running through the brass eyelets.

"Oh, God," he breathed, falling back. "Oh, my God." Shuddering he rose and stared wildly about the deserted landscape.

* * *

Detective-Inspector Inglis watched carefully as he handed the photograph across. "That's her, sir. Missing from her home since Wednesday. Ten-an-a-half. Only ten-and-a-half."

Oughtred took the photo shakily. "Poor little mite." He stared in anguish at the snapshot. "The usual terrible thing, I suppose?"

Inglis nodded heavily. "Then strangled." He fingered his notes without taking his eyes off Oughtred. He saw a middle-aged naturalist, still distraught, without strong physique, but with lean, sinewy hands which trembled slightly as they held the snapshot. "A strange thing, sir," he remarked drily, "that you should have *all* this evidence to offer. For our part, we've hardly a clue. I only wish you, too, could have had some corroboration."

"But, Inspector," protested Oughtred, "didn't our constable show you the marks of the car's tyres? I deliberately fenced them with stones and covered them up with bracken to keep all intact."

"Just so, sir," said Inglis, his voice dark with meaning. "Very neat. Very clever of you, sir."

"Well, then. Can't you trace the owner of a car with such tyres?" Oughtred turned in dismay from

Inglis to the constable standing at the back of the room.

"Dunyears, standard tread, sir. As used by about five million doll-danglers every week-end."

"Well, what about the photographs?" asked Oughtred, piqued. "Hasn't Cowburn here told you about the photographs?" He swung round to the moon-faced constable.

"What's this, Cowburn?" asked Inglis sharply. "Photographs?"

"Yessir. Mr. Oughtred takes photographs up on the moors, sir. Bird-watching photos, sir."

"Oh, for goodness' sake, Inspector. We have to tell Cowburn a thing three times. Didn't he tell you I've got cine shots *of this man*? Once with the rucksack on his back. Then again leaving the gulley without the rucksack?"

Inglis sat up sharply. "Have ye now?" he said, breaking into his native brogue and darting a look of doom at the blushing constable. "Here?"

"No. I'm getting them developed."

"I want to see them, sharp."

"I must warn you. The man was a good distance away. And I think I got him only quarter face."

Inglis snapped his fingers. "Let me see the reel. Jump to it. We'll have it blown up to *larger* than life, so help me."

* * *

Detective-Sergeant Baxter switched on the lights. Oughtred sat over the projector with flushed face, his eyes shining. "Not bad," he said. "But not good either. Can you get anything from it?"

Inglis was jotting notes busily. "Height, about five feet eight or nine," he said aloud. "Thick set. Broad shoulders. Reddish-brown hair, going bald at front. Complexion —fresh to ruddy. (Could be a drinker.) Slovenly walk. (Better be careful there—maybe it was the rough going.) Age—thirty-five to forty. (God knows what we lost under the dark glasses.) Probably goes hatless. Dark clothes, maybe a two-piece navy serge—you could see he had no waistcoat. White, open-necked shirt. A newish, grey Bergen rucksack *was* in his possession. Owns, or had borrowed, a small car, Dunyear tyres, standard zig-zag tread."

He flipped the note off his pad and gave it to Baxter. "Get that out. First to all stations round the kid's home. And this reel. Blow up every damn frame as high as it'll go. I'll see all the prints. The best of 'em can go out after the description. Away with ye, Baxter. And I want those prints quicker than knife."

He turned to Oughtred, his voice suddenly dreamy. "But for you, sir, and all invisible there, only the wind would have been the witness, and that crying alone. And in your hands this unlying accuser . . . like the eye of God hidden among the heather." He smiled grimly at Oughtred. "Evidence like this'll hang him. When we know *who* the fellow is."

Oughtred pondered. "An outsider, you think? I've an idea he only knew High Snaith Moor from the far distance. If he had known it only

slightly, he would have chosen the tarn. Obviously he didn't know it was there."

"Not so," said Inglis. "That tarn is only thirty miles or so from the child's home down in Barranport. He would avoid it deliberately, knowing we'd drag every pond and puddle while we had sap in our bones. I'm minded to guess he's a Barranport man."

"Well, most Barranport folk know of High Snaith Moor as the devil's own hiding-place."

"Right. And he knows the tarn is there, but likely to be dragged. And he also knows where to leave his car."

"And he guessed that a mile or two inside that waste he could bury the poor innocent for ever. Very cunning."

"We're looking for a man who knows his way round Barranport, at least. A town type, as we've seen. But cunning?" Inglis rose to go. "He removed all the evidence. Besides the hair slashing he cut the tabs from the kid's clothing with a razor. But he overlooked one thing. Maybe he wasn't so cunning after all."

Back at his office in Barranport, Inglis stared moodily at the one thing the murderer had overlooked. It was the sole of the child's left shoe. It bore a thin smearing of clay, and embedded in this clay near the arch was a small gilt label with red lettering. The oval label was intact, but the only words it bore were: "SARAMA: British Made."

Inquiries over the phone to New Scotland Yard had finally brought the information that this was the trade mark of a London brush manufacturer. But this vital clue seemed to lead no further. The brush manufacturers were quite unable to trace all the retail outlets through which their brushes might be sold. All hairdressers, stores, ladies' shops, gift and fancy goods sellers in Barranport had been questioned without result. Further afield, other police forces had to report the same negative result.

"This is no daisy in a bull's mouth, Baxter," growled Inglis, fretfully rubbing his chin. "We haven't even any certainty that this label has the remotest connection with the murder. The kid could have picked it up on her shoe anywhere. Are we staring at something we can't see?"

He turned over the forensic reports, the pathology tests, the analysis of the clay on the child's shoe. Baxter remained silent, thinking. Then he said, "Well, sir, we've just got the description out. This fellow must be known—or must have been seen—round the kid's home here. We know she must have been picked up in Barranport here, about an hour after tea-time. When he picked her up that label must have just that moment stuck to her shoe."

"Yes, yes," said Inglis testily. "Otherwise it would have got rubbed off in no time. But this label might have been lying about the street. Any street. Come unstuck from some brush. Any brush. Owned by anybody. Ah . . . but wait, now."

With a pair of tweezers he drew the label from a transparent envelope and re-examined it under a magnifier. "Yes. Glory be. This label looks as if

it might never have *been* stuck on any brush. The adhesive's gone, of course. Into the damp clay. But the lettering is embossed. And the embossing is still pretty high. Not flattened, as it would tend to become on a brush. And it was on the camber of the arch, where the sole doesn't take the full weight. Take a look." He passed the items over to his junior.

"You see the implications? This could be a new label. Not even issued by the brush manufacturers . . . not even got into their hands. And the further implications? That it could have been newly printed. Here."

Baxter got up quickly. "I see your drift, sir. Get round to all printers in the area?"

"That's my drift," said Inglis, snapping the papers back into his file. "From this out, we're moving."

Within half an hour Inglis was in the office of the manager of a Barranport printing works.

"Yes, Inspector, your sergeant reported quite correctly. We do make these labels for the Sarama people, of London. It's an order we have had for many years. The label is unmistakably ours."

"Have you produced any for them recently?"

"Why, yes. We have just run off fifty thousand—about a week ago."

"And who produced them? Who was in charge of the job?"

"Two girls produced them. The foreman was in charge."

Inglis paused. "And would any get trampled or blow about?"

"Only spoilage. There's always a certain amount of spoilage, or at least, test work, make-ready and so on, with every job. All such work is rejected, and baled as waste in the back yard."

"What surface has the back yard?"

"Well, it's trodden earth. Clay, I suppose."

"I'll be begging a mere spoon's-scrape of it. Now, this back yard. Who has access to it?"

"All the works people. Deliverers of goods. And the refuse collectors."

"Would any of your works people have access to it *after hours*?"

"Yes, the foreman."

"The foreman again? What sort of a chap is he?"

The manager looked startled. "Oh. A man who's been with us for some years. Quite competent. About thirty-eight. Stiffish built. Married. I rather think he drinks a bit hard. But I know little of his home life."

Inglis went softly to the door, opened it and looked out into the works. "Can you point him out."

The manager got up, slightly nettled. "Certainly—if you wish." He pointed to a thick-set man bending over a machine. The man had powerful shoulders. Inglis waited silently. In a few moments the man straightened himself, then turned. He had reddish-brown hair going thin on the brow, and a high-coloured complexion.

"Thank you," said Inglis. "And now I'll be asking you for his name, address, and as much detail as you can give me." He nodded a message to Baxter, who went quietly from the room and beckoned Oughtred from the waiting car.

OBJECT: SOMETHING EXCITING

WILLIAM STROUP

HARRY BOUGHT THE English language dailies on the way to his Tokyo apartment. Later, seated inside, he opened his wallet, fingered the thinning stack of yen notes and shook his head. "If I don't latch on to something pretty soon I'll be in real trouble," he thought. He picked up a newspaper and turned feverishly to the personals section of the classified ads. Then he grinned. The day's column contained more titbits than usual.

There was an ad. from an ex-captain of the Swedish Navy who desired to correspond with a handsome Japanese lady, object: Matrimony. Another ad. was from a Japanese gentleman, age forty, who wanted to meet a sincere American lady. Object: To learn about "Ladies first". Then he saw what he had been searching for.

"Young, attractive Japanese lady would like to meet handsome, blond, sincere, broadminded foreign gentleman. Write to Box CX-19, this newspaper, enclosing photograph. Object: Something Exciting!"

"Something exciting," he repeated to himself. "Boy, this one has nerve." He gazed at the mirror, admiring his own abundant blond hair. "And she must be a mindreader too," he said.

From inside his dresser, he brought out a pen, paper and one of several identical photographs of himself. "Dear Miss CX-19 . . ." he wrote.

Her answer was brief. Name, Noriko; address, a Tokyo post office box number, and she had included a photograph. If she turned out to be half as pretty as her photograph, Harry thought, everything would be quite pleasant . . . providing, of course, that she had money.

At the end of the week, their correspondence had already become quite intimate, and if Noriko was on the level, he had finally found a rich one. She spoke of a twelve-room house, and of her father, a retired big-game hunter, who spent most of his time in his large trophy room admiring his stuffed animals and large collection of Japanese *Samurai* swords. Harry thought that since few Japanese houses are large enough to sport trophy rooms, Noriko's father must be wealthy indeed.

Then he received the invitation and her address.

He had a hard time finding the house. The taxi driver finally located her father's name beside a small door, set into a high wooden fence, on a street so narrow that the tiny taxi could barely avoid scraping on both sides. There was a buzzer beside the door. Harry pushed and waited. He heard the swish of a sliding door and the sound of wooden clogs on stone.

Noriko opened the door. "Welcome, Harry. Please come in." She spoke almost perfect English and was

even more beautiful than her picture.

He followed her over a stone walk and through a garden which hid the house at first, imparting an illusion of depth, as if they were walking through a boundless wilderness of trees and flowers.

The big house, low and rambling, of unpainted wood, had the look and smell of age about it. She led him through a dark hallway and into a small Japanese-style room.

"You must be hungry," she said, pulling a cord beside the wall. A moment later a maid entered with food and hot Japanese *sake* wine served in tiny, one-swallow cups.

As they talked about casual things, Harry noticed that Noriko seemed fascinated with his blond hair. He remembered her newspaper ad. and how the request for a blond had amused him.

"You like blonds?"

"Oh, I like very much," she answered, blushing slightly. She reached over and touched his hair. "It's so soft and fine," she whispered. And Harry felt her tremble. He cuddled up closer. She responded, rubbing her body against him with an almost feline tenderness. He took her in his arms. She was softness and warmth, quickened heartbeats and desire. He kissed her. "Oh Harry!" she moaned. Then softly she pushed him away.

"Not now, Harry. My father is waiting to meet you."

They entered the dark hallway again. At the end of the hall a crack of light revealed the entrance to a room. Noriko opened the door.

Harry gasped. It was the largest room he had ever seen in a Japanese house. Along three sides were large glass cases filled with the mounted heads of every imaginable species of animal. On the fourth wall were more cases full of *katana* and *tachi*, the short and long swords of the ancient *Samurai* of Japan.

The rest of the room was bare except for a low, thick table surrounded by cushions. Noriko's father sat beside the table polishing a long sword. He wore a black kimono and his head was completely bald.

"Meet my father," Noriko said.

"Good evening," Harry said in Japanese.

"Welcome," the old man answered in English, bowing so low that his forehead touched the floor.

"My father speaks little English so I will interpret for you," Noriko said, sitting beside her father.

Harry sat down as the maid entered the room with *sake*. Harry drank and Noriko filled his cup again. "Your father sure has a collection. I never saw so many animals and swords in one place," he said, staring around the room. "Who stuffed all the animals?"

Noriko translated and her father smiled, revealing a row of solid gold teeth.

"My father is also a taxidermist. He wonders if you would like to help him sometime."

Harry laughed and took another drink of *sake*. "I'm afraid I'm a little too squeamish to cut up animals."

He tried to changed the subject and began to ask questions about Noriko's father, innocent-sounding questions,

but designed to find out how rich he was, if Noriko was his only heir, and other such titbits to guide his future actions.

The old man answered through Noriko, and almost as if he was aware of the reasons the questions were asked, he evaded the answers, keeping the conversation steered around his own interests . . . hunting and the Japanese swords. He had hunted in South America, in the Arctic, in Africa and the Himalayas. The unusual thing about his hunting, of which he was justly proud, was that he never hunted with a gun. He prefered the more sporting weapons—the spear, the bow and arrow and the Japanese sword.

"Do you still hunt?" Harry asked.

"Occasionally. I am old and can't get out much, but my collection still lacks a few species," he said through Noriko.

Harry peered at the glass cases, wondering what species of animal could possibly be lacking in such a collection.

Noriko poured Harry more *sake*. "But my father says he won't bore you any longer with his hobbies," and with that the old man went back to his sword polishing.

And now Harry could see that Noriko was really interested in him. She began to ask him questions about himself; about his home, parents and friends. And feeling at ease and tipsy from too much *sake*, he opened up and talked about himself. He told her how his parents had died when he was young, and that he had lived with his uncle, who now too was dead. He was alone, an unknown foreigner in Tokyo, with no family or friends to care if he lived or died. And as he unburdened himself, he began to see in Noriko more than her father's money. She was such a sweet, understanding girl.

Noriko poured him more *sake*.

The *sake* was making him sleepy. He told himself that here in front of Noriko and her father was no place to get drunk, to make a fool of himself on the first night. But, after all, it was Noriko who kept filling the *sake* cup. It was full now. He emptied it. He was so drowsy. He would rest his head on the table just for a moment. He felt Noriko's hand stroking the back of his neck. He was so sleepy.

In the background he could hear them talking. Through the haze of too much *sake*, he caught phrases of Japanese he could understand . . . blond hair . . . trophy case . . . no relatives . . . my turn, Father . . . razor sharp . . . new species. . . .

He was so sleepy. His head rested sideways on the thick table. His half-closed eyes focused disinterestedly on one of the trophy cases. In the glass of the case he could see the reflection of his own face. He imagined that he saw sweet, gentle Noriko standing above him, holding something long and shiny above his head. But he never was sure, because before he had time to think about it, he felt a sharp sting on the back of his neck, like the crack of a bull whip. Then darkness, and a silence so intense that he could no longer hear his own thoughts.

THE ADDICT

L. P. DAVIES

Illustrated by Woodward

HEN JASON Calvert heard how Rawley had been knocked down by a car and had been admitted to hospital he felt a pang of guilt. Never a sociable man, he had kept himself very much to himself since coming to live in the country. Although his long garden abutted that of the only other house in the district he had confined himself to the ordinary commonplaces whenever he had chanced to see his neighbours over the dividing hedge.

He knew Rawley for a pale, insignificant man with dark eyes made larger by the colourless fragility of their setting. His sister was small, with the smooth pink and white texture and gold-blonde hair of a porcelain figure.

It was the postman who told him about the accident. Calvert had his conscience qualm when he heard that the accident had taken place two days before. He put on his jacket and walked the hundred yards of curving lane to knock on the white-panelled front door.

He was very sorry indeed, he told a wan Miss Rawley. He hadn't known. Not until this morning. He was ashamed. If there was anything he could do?

She was grateful both for the offer and for his company.

"It's the shock more than anything," she sighed. "And then being left alone. Since Mother died George and I have never been parted before."

"How bad is it?" he asked politely.

She was openly pleased to have someone to talk to. The words flowed. George had been knocked down by a car. His thigh had been ripped rather badly. There was going to be a skin-graft. But it wasn't really serious. The doctor was very pleased with him. He'd lost a lot of blood and had had to have a transfusion—two, in fact. One upon admission, and the other last night. She bit her lip.

"Not unusual," he comforted. "Almost a routine, from what I hear."

"I was going to visit him this afternoon," she told him. "Only when I rang last night they said they'd given him this other blood and he was looking much better and they were going to operate today, and if I rang them tonight they'd tell me how he was. . . ."

"If there's anything I can do," he said again.

"I'll let you know," she promised.

A week later he was working in the garden when she came to part the over-grown branches of the privet hedge. She was excited, her eyes shining. The hospital had just been in touch. George was to be discharged

that same afternoon. She was expecting the coalman and she would be ever so grateful if Mr. Calvert would watch out for him. . . . She was going to take George's clothes to the hospital.

Calvert did a quick mental calculation.

"So soon?" he marvelled.

"Isn't it wonderful?" She invited him to share her pleasure. "The doctor's ever so pleased with him. He says George has made a remarkable recovery. And, of course, they need the bed."

They always did need the bed. But still, a week. . . .

He said he would be happy to watch out for the coalman. And if there was anything else?

There was nothing else. She took his hand. He had been so kind.

His conscience still pricking, Calvert decided that the least he could do would to be present upon Rawley's return. He should have made friends with the two of them before. Been neighbourly; chats over the hedge; the usual sort of thing. Now he had to make up for the past. He told himself that Miss Rawley's pink and blonde charms had nothing to do with his decision.

He made a point of working in his front garden all afternoon. He had expected an ambulance to disgorge a white-faced limping man. He wasn't prepared for the sight of brother and sister walking briskly down the lane from the bus stop.

His surprise ill-concealed he stammered a welcome. Rawley, his shoulders back, his cheeks flushed and healthy, his eyes shining, acknowledged the gesture with a condescending smile.

"They did a fine job," he said. "I feel a new man."

He was ready to go into details but Miss Rawley took his arm. "Don't you think you ought to rest?" she wondered timidly. "Dr. Lomas said you had to take things easy for a while."

"I've never felt better in my life, Alice," Rawley said stoutly, but suffered himself to be led away.

Forgetful of the fact that he had paid for a delivery of coal, Calvert took his surprise indoors. He had had no experience of hospital treatments, but seven days for recovery after an accident, two blood transfusions and an operation, struck him as being miraculous. And Rawley's robust appearance, so different from his normal lifelessness, added to his astonishment.

An hour later Miss Rawley, purse in hand, was tapping on his door. Her face was filled with conflicting emotions.

"The coal," she said. "It was very kind of you." Her fingers made ineffectual dabbing motions.

"I was just making myself a cup of tea," Calvert said. "Mrs. Tape, my daily, has her day off. I wonder . . .?" He stepped invitingly aside. She sat on the edge of a straight-backed chair and played with the purse on her lap.

She spoke suddenly when he was bringing in the tray.

"He's changed. He's—I don't know—different." She sought for a word. "Confident. I don't know what to

think. I've never seen him like this before. I suppose I should be grateful. But it seems unnatural."

He sought reasons that would ease her mind. "It's amazing the things they can do nowadays. New drugs. New treatments. . . ."

"Yes." Her face cleared a little. "I suppose that's it. He's resting now; I made him go to bed."

Then they talked for a while, neighbours who had never really met before, discussing their gardens, the inadequacy of the rural bus service, the trouble over getting the correct morning papers delivered.

"I'd better go and see how he is," she said finally, coming to her feet. "I have enjoyed this." She had a very pleasant smile.

Calvert spoke without thinking, a continuation of a thought that had been nagging for some time.

"I don't know much about this sort of thing, Alice, but I can't help feeling they sent him home very quickly. I wonder if there is a possibility of a delayed reaction—shock, you know?" He floundered, immediately sorry that he had spoken. "But there, I'm talking nonsense. I don't know a thing about medicine."

"You may be right," she replied, her forehead creased.

Three days later, when he was working in the garden, she came to the hedge.

"It's George," she said without preamble. "I'm worried." Her face was tear-streaked. "I remembered what you said about delayed reactions. I don't know whether or not to 'phone a doctor."

"I shouldn't hesitate," he said.

She fluttered helplessly. "We—neither of us has been ill since we've been here. We're not even on a doctor's list."

He was ready to help all he could. "Doctor Grey is a personal friend of mine. You'll find him very good. If you like, I'll give him a ring."

Relief flooded her face. "You're so kind."

He looked at his watch. "He'll be at surgery now. I wonder—I mean, how urgent do you think it is?"

"Come and see for yourself," she said simply.

Mr. Rawley lay on his back on the bed, his eyes closed. The skin of his narrow face had tightened, drawing harsh lines over the bones. The red flush of health had been replaced by a wax-yellow bloom. His chest rose and fell with the effort of breathing. Calvert took one look and asked where the phone was kept.

While they waited for the doctor they sat together in the small kitchen. Alice threaded a handkerchief through her fingers.

"He wouldn't eat," she said generally and tearfully. "I tried tempting him with the things he used to like. George was always such a"—she hesitated over a word—"a healthy eater. Mother said he was greedy. Anything that was put in front of him. But he never put on any weight. Some people are like that, I suppose."

Calvert listened in silence, knowing that she was talking only to pass the time and that no reply was needed.

"Salt," she said suddenly. "Yesterday I found him in the cupboard,

dipping his fingers in the salt canister and then putting them in his mouth. And this morning . . ." She put the handkerchief to her mouth.

"Yes?" he prompted gently.

"The butcher had just been. There was a plate of liver. George was licking it. He'd picked it up and he was . . ."

She started to cry.

Calvert watched in acute discomfort, not knowing what to do. He was thankful when he heard the sound of a car drawing up outside. When he had introduced her to Dr. Grey he walked thoughtfully back to his house.

He was waiting in the front garden when the doctor's car came back down the lane. He put up his hand and Grey stopped, leaning out of the window.

Calvert went over to him. "I'm sorry about that. I know you have enough on your plate. But they hadn't a doctor of their own. You were the only one I knew."

The other was smiling and magnaminous. "Two more on my list is neither here nor there. How's the golf these days?"

Because they had known each other for many years Calvert felt he could ask his question.

"I haven't been to the club for some time. What do you make of Rawley?" Then he became diffident. "Or shouldn't I ask?"

Grey rested his elbows on the window. "Between ourselves, Calvert, he's a bit of a mystery. I'm going to get in touch with Lomas at the hospital. That will give me a better idea of the background." He shook his head. "There are puzzling features. Especially if the sister is to be believed. I understand that he was discharged only a week after a skin-graft?"

"To the day." Calvert nodded.

"And that when he came out he looked a damned sight better than he did before the accident?"

"No comparison," Calvert said with feeling.

"And yet look at him now. Blood pressure down, pulse weak, breathing laboured. All the symptoms of dehydration and malnutrition. I've left some tablets." He turned back to the wheel. "Six more calls to make before evening surgery. I've told Miss Rawley I'll look in tomorrow."

The next day an ambulance whisked Rawley back to hospital.

"For investigation and tests," Alice said tearfully when Calvert went round to inquire. "Dr. Grey was on the phone as soon as he arrived. He said that George was in a coma. He said I wasn't to worry. Oh, Jason . . ."

Then she broke into a flood of tears and he found himself holding her trembling body against his breast while he made futile efforts to soothe her.

"That was stupid of me," she said after a while.

He was gallant. "You've been very brave."

That same evening Dr. Grey came again, this time first to call on Calvert. He eased his long body into the best easy chair and accepted a whisky.

"Finished for the day," he offered in explanation. "I'm on my way to see Miss Rawley to tell her her

brother is much better. Nothing like the personal touch. And I want to see how she's standing up to things.

"I've been to the hospital," he said over the rim of his glass. "Lomas is a friend of mine. He had to give Rawley two more pints. When I saw him he was sitting up in bed without a care in the world. He didn't look like the same man. Lomas said that all appearances pointed to his having lost a large quantity of blood since being discharged. And yet that seems impossible. Anyway, they've had him X-rayed and they're doing tests. We might know something more definite when we get the results."

When he had gone Calvert sat and thought. A pattern seemed to be emerging, a series of peaks and troughs. He wondered if Grey had noticed the significance of the sudden recovery after each transfusion. Obviously he must have done. And equally obviously he had found nothing to warrant comment. But that didn't mean that everything was normal. Medical men could be very cagey. Especially if there was something they didn't understand.

Then he found his thoughts turning back through the years to the time when he had been associated with an oil company and his work had taken him through Central Europe to the oil-fields of Roumania.

He wondered absently what had sparked off this new train of thought. What connection could there possibly be between the happenings in a house set in the green English countryside and the bleak, isolated villages of the mountains of Transylvania?

His mind groped with the past and found an answer. And finding it. he first frowned, then shrugged his annoyance at the impossibility. He did his best to put the notion aside, but now nagging doubts and uncertainties picked at his mind.

Three days later an ambulance brought Rawley back home again. He sat with the driver at the front, and Calvert, watching from the window, waved a welcome and marvelled at how the colour was back in his cheeks.

After a decent interval he went over to see if there was anything he could do.

"He's lying down," Alice said cheerfully enough. "They said he should be all right now, that it was just a form of delayed shock. Just like you said." Her eyes admired his cleverness. "They said that if there were signs of the same thing happening again I was to contact Dr. Grey straight away."

Grey 'phoned that evening. "Calvert? About our Mr. Rawley. The hospital has passed the buck to me. I'd like your help."

"Anything," Calvert said.

"The sister is one of those people who don't like causing trouble. A mixed blessing. If anything goes wrong with my patient she might leave it too late before contacting me. I gather you've become quite a friend of the family. I wonder if you could keep a fatherly eye on things?"

"Of course," Calvert told him. "Look, Grey, I'm sorry about all this. I mean, foisting him on you."

The other was breezily cheerful. "Nonsense. That's what I'm here for. I'll look in fairly regularly, of course."

The next day Calvert asked Alice if she had any objections to his making an opening through the dividing hedge. She dimpled prettily, saying that it was an excellent idea. She added that George was lying down again, that although he looked well enough he had complained of the light hurting his eyes.

In the afternoon she came running through the newly-made opening to rap on his back door.

"It's George!" she cried. "I don't know what's the matter with him."

When they reached the house they found him on a chair, breathing heavily, his forehead beaded with sweat. The blinds were drawn. In the semi-darkness Calvert fancied that his eyes shone as if illuminated from behind transparent lids.

"What happened?" he asked when they had helped him upstairs.

Alice fluttered helplessly, still trembling. "I was in the kitchen. He hasn't touched a scrap of food since he came home. He said he wasn't hungry. But I remembered how fond he used to be of an omelette so I went in the kitchen to make one, to try and tempt him. Then he came in and he started to retch. It was horrible . . ." She shuddered. "I didn't know what to do."

"An omelette," he marvelled.

She nodded. "I hadn't even broken the eggs. So that wasn't it. I was just wiping the inside of the pan, like I always do, with—"

In a flash of knowledge he spoke the word first. "Garlic?"

She nodded again, wide-eyed. "The smell, do you think?"

He reassured her as best he could, then walked back through the gardens, numbly, unable to think logically.

There was the recovery after each transfusion; the way Rawley had become afraid of the daylight; his repugnance to garlic; the way his eyes had shone in the dark; the fetid smell of his breath. . . .

They added up, but the explanation couldn't lie in the folk-lore of the dim past. Each country had its wealth of such things. Were-wolves, tiger-men, witches. Perhaps they had some basis in long-forgotten truths, but they were still only old wives' tales.

There had to be another explanation. One that was understandable and acceptable. Perhaps Rawley had become an addict to blood. It happened with other things. Morphia, heroin, Pethidine. Any drug, perhaps any form of treatment, could cause an addiction unless controlled.

Medical science would find one explanation for the change in Rawley. The dark, unknown past would find another.

When he reached the house he rang Grey's surgery. "I thought I'd better let you know. Rawley's had a spell of sickness."

"I'll look in as soon as I can," Grey said.

Calvert found it difficult to keep his voice steady. "There was something I want to ask you. You'll probably think it a stupid question. When a transfusion is given it goes into a vein. But is there any way by which it could go into the digestive system? A sort of permeation, if that is the word, from one system to another?"

Grey laughed. "Good Lord, no! At least, I've never heard of such a thing." He was still laughing when he rang off.

Early next morning he met Alice at the break in the hedge. She said she was on her way to see him. She had been crying, her eyes reddened.

"George was out all last night," she said. "He came in about dawn and went straight to bed. He's asleep now, but—" She made her fluttery gestures.

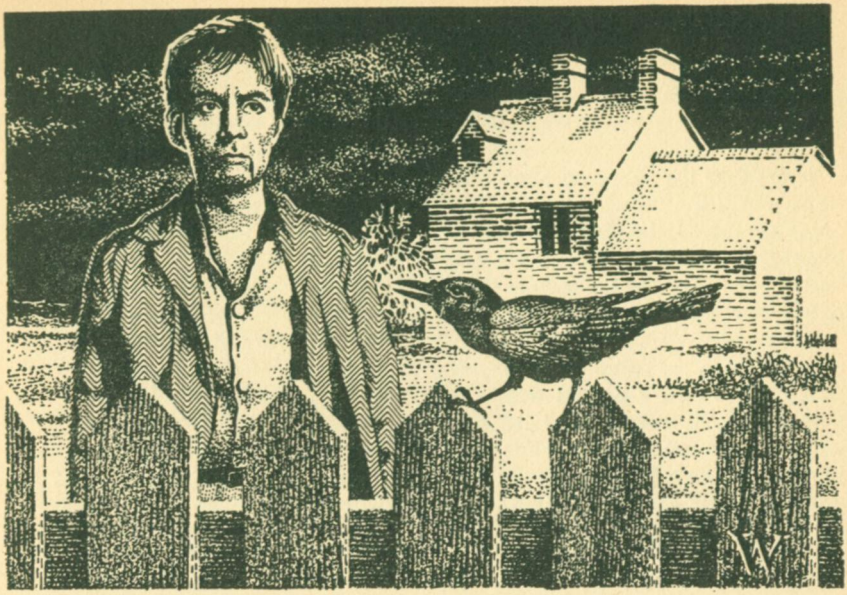
The bedroom was in semi-darkness. Rawley, fully-dressed, lay on his back on top if the bed. His arms were straight at his sides in an unnatural position for one who was asleep. His lips were brilliant scarlet, matching the sunset glow of his full cheeks. In contrast, his forehead was marble white. Two of his upper teeth were exposed, resting, pin points of ivory on the full lower lip. A sickly, sweetish smell clung to his clothes.

Calvert took Alice's arm and lead her back downstairs. "I'll ring Grey," he said, and tried to smile. But his features were cardboard-stiff.

"He's changing," she said fearfully. "Somehow, I can't bear to be near him. There's something horrible . . ."

"We'll see what the doctor has to say," he said.

When he had made the call he hesitated. He wanted to ask her to come back with him, away from the man lying upstairs. But that would require explanations that he couldn't possibly give. But he did make her promise to stay downstairs until Grey



arrived. There was one thing. If Rawley had become one of Them, then he was harmless during the daylight hours.

He stayed with her in the lounge until the doctor's black saloon nosed into the lane. Then he went down the drive to meet him. He didn't know what he was going to say, but the time had come when he had to voice his suspicions.

But Grey was in a hurry, giving him no time to speak.

"I would have been here earlier but I called in at the hospital to have a chat with Lomas about our mystery patient and they were in a bit of a flap. Breaking and entering. A senseless affair. Some silly devil smashed a window in the annexe, the blood bank, and swiped four bottles of the best. The police found the empty containers in a field. God knows what happened to their contents." He grinned briefly. "Perhaps he was thirsty. I'll have a word with you when I've seen my patient."

Calvert went back to his house.

He felt sure he knew who had stolen the blood. He wondered what Rawley would do the next time he wanted . . . food. He wouldn't risk the same thing twice. Cunning came with the change in appearance. He might try another hospital. Or he might seek the logical alternative supply.

Alice mustn't be allowed to stay in that house. Grey must be made to understand what had happened to his

patient. He would know that such creatures had been written about. He would have to be persuaded that Rawley had become—or was becoming—one of Them. And the answer? A silver bullet? Or a sharpened stake?

He looked at his watch. Grey had been there for nearly an hour. But nothing could have gone wrong. They slept by day.

Then the car came and stopped by his gate, and Grey climbed out, then turned to help Alice, a handkerchief held to her face, putting his arm about her waist and urging along the drive. He looked at Calvert.

"I didn't want her to stay there." He motioned to the house. Then he shook his head in warning at Calvert's mute inquiry.

When Mrs. Tape, her face a mixture of curiosity and compassion had led Alice upstairs, the two men sat in the lounge.

"He's dead," Grey said briefly. "Stroke," he added.

Calvert felt the relief surge through him. Now there would be no need to falter his suspicions, fearing ridicule. Now Alice would be safe. She would be alone, but there might be an answer to that.

He leaned forward. "Had you expected it?"

"You can never tell with that sort of thing. But Rawley had all the symptoms. High blood pressure, erratic pulse."

Then he sighed and stretched. "All part of the day's work. I feel sorry for the sister. Can you make arrangements for her to stay here until things are sorted out?"

Calvert nodded. "I'll get Mrs. Tape to stay the night."

Alice stayed in her room all day, Mrs. Tape making a great thing of trotting up and down the stairs with trays of food. "She has to eat," she explained. "To keep up her strength, poor soul."

In the afternoon she went home to collect her things and to tell her husband what had happened. On her return, just as dusk was falling, she said: "Miss Rawley will need her things now. I'd better slip across and see what I can sort out. . . ."

Village propriety reared its head.

"It would be better if you were to come with me, Mr. Calvert. It isn't nice for me to go rummaging in other people's private belongings. Not unless there's someone with me."

"I understand," Calvert said gravely.

Then she went upstairs to obtain detailed information as to where the necessary clothes might be found. When she came down again it was dark.

They went together down the garden and through the opening in the hedge. The sky was heavy with cloud, the moon hidden. The world was still and silent, not a leaf or a branch moving.

Mrs. Tape clucked her disapproval at the unlocked back door. Upstairs, Calvert waited on the landing while she went into Alice's room to open drawers and pile clothes on the bed.

The closed door of Rawley's room stared at him.

She came out with her arms laden. "That's the lot from up here, Mr.

Calvert. There's some things on a clothes-maid downstairs. I could do with a suitcase." She motioned backwards with her head. "There wasn't one in there."

He looked at the door of the only other bedroom. "I'll see if I can find one."

She grimaced. "Sooner you than me." Then she went hurriedly down the stairs. Calvert took a deep breath and opened the door.

The curtains were drawn as they had been when Rawley was still alive. The only light was the narrow wedge of pale gold thrown through the partly open door from the landing.

He peered into the twilight, groping for the switch. When he found it and pressed it, nothing happened. Darkness still lay in a velvet pall. He peered, trying to get his bearings. Dark shadows became a wardrobe and a dressing table; an oblong of wavering lightness, the bed. The empty bed.

Fear clutched at his throat.

Surely they would have left him—it—here? There was no reason why it should have been moved.

He took a step forward, narrowing his eyes, telling himself that he was mistaken, that a dark shape lay on the white cover.

Then the pale light dimmed and faded as the door behind was softly closed.

But Mrs. Tape was downstairs. There was nobody in the house save the two of them.

And then he knew. Quite suddenly he knew what had closed the door and must now be standing close behind, watching, waiting.

Death hadn't been the end, but the beginning. They were sometimes called the "un-dead", these things that walked by night and returned to their graves by day.

Now it was too late. There was no time to warn—

Emotion drained away. Now there was nothing left save emptiness.

Behind him, a voice laughed softly. A voice, low, resonant, Rawley's voice and yet not his voice, said, "You knew. But you didn't speak. Now it is too late. . . ."

Then there was only the silence and the darkness and the horror.

THE VISITOR

FRED KILROY

HE OLD MAN smoked his dudeen as his father before him. And his father's father. But with a difference. Tonight, instead of smoking in bed, he smoked sitting on the sugan chair beside his bed.

On his head at a jaunty angle was his hat, green with age, and about his shoulders his coachman's cloak, just as decrepit-looking. Heavy nailed boots completed the picture of a man dressed for a journey, and emphasizing the fact was his old army haversack resting on the faded quilt of his bed.

It was bulking full of what the old man considered necessaries. In it were three clay pipes, two ounces of hard tobacco, a biteen of bread and butter, a towel, open razor, soap, two boxes of matches, polish and brushes, and, of course, a large lemonade bottle of poteen.

The wind howled outside the thatched cottage causing the wicks of the storm lantern on the table to dance to its banshee tune, and to cast fitful spectres on the whitewashed walls. Unceasingly the Atlantic breakers thundered into the nearby ocean inlet.

The old man pulled out his large pocket-watch from his tattered waistcoat, and looked at it for the sixth time since ten o'clock that night. It was a quarter to twelve. He had just fifteen minutes before the coming of the visitor.

As he replaced his watch the old man's thoughts drifted back to the first coming of the visitor.

His grandfather, and grandmother, God rest their souls, had suffered the first visit many years ago. They had just gone to bed when a dreadful clattering sound brought them both sitting bolt upright. It came from the attic over their bedroom, and as they watched in terror a big, black coffin bumped down the ladder, on to their bedroom floor.

The coffin had barely stopped moving when the lid spilled off, and a black, hairy man stepped out of it. He leered at the two terrified old people in the bed, and indicating the coffin invitingly, uttered one menace-laden word:

"Tonight?"

Hardly knowing what to reply, the old man had croaked:

"No! Not tonight!"

With a look of intense disappointment on his face, and grimacing horribly, the creature had banged the lid back on the coffin, lifted it on to his shoulders, and rushed up the ladder.

Another loud clattering sound, and then silence as of the grave, for the storm stopped as suddenly as it had started. That had been the first coming of the visitor, and ever since he had come all too frequently.

Grandfather and grandmother had got used to the visitor in time and

had made plans so that they would not have to leave their beloved cottage. They continued to occupy their bedroom, and in this way ensured that the visitor would only come to them. The children were told about the black hairy man as soon as they reached the age of understanding, and the potency of the words, "No, not tonight," were clearly explained to them.

Strangely enough, grandfather had found that the visitor had a certain nuisance value. For instance, there was the time Red Mick the Tinker had arrived, and demanded the best bed in the house for the night.

The old man smiled in spite of his tension as he remembered his grandfather telling this. His grandfather had arranged everything so cunningly. He offered Red Mick his own bedroom, and kept him up talking so that the tinker was fully dressed a couple of minutes to midnight.

Then his grandfather had withdrawn hurriedly to the kitchen, and opened wide the door leading outside the house. He had barely opened the door when the familiar clattering sound announced the coming of the visitor to Red Mick, who was out of the bedroom, into the kitchen and out of the house before the lid of the coffin fell off. Nor did the red-headed tinker ever return to ask for an explanation.

Grandfather, of course, had slipped in unobtrusively after the tinker's flying exit, and satisfied the visitor with the usual reply.

Yes, the old man thought, his grandfather had been clever in his own way, but he himself, ex-Gallipoli veteran, would go one better. He had had his fling of life, and was devoured with an insatiable curiosity to know what would happen if the visitor was not answered in the way started by his grandfather.

Would it mean a hectic journey in the coffin with the black, hairy man to the dreadful place he came from? If so, the old man was prepared for the journey.

He wasn't married, and no one would be sorry if he never came back. Yesterday he had walked into Castlemanny, made his will with the local solicitor and paid the few shillings he owed to the publican, the Gowger Murray.

He had told the solicitor what he was going to do. The solicitor, a firm believer in the visitor, had begged him not to cross the black, hairy man, but he was wasting his time. The old man had taken years to make up his mind, and he was as firm in his decision as the rock foundation underneath his thatched home.

No visitor was going to best him.

The old man looked at his watch again. Three minutes to twelve. The lamp sputtered fitfully. The spectre-like shadows on the whitewashed walls seemed to grow larger.

He took the last drag from his dudeen and, regretfully, put it in his pocket. Then he took two sips from his lemonade bottle of poteen. Then, he sat . . . waiting.

The two hands of his watch were on twelve o'clock when he heard the familiar clattering sound. For a moment panic assaulted him, but he

thrust it aside firmly as he had done at Gallipoli when ordered to advance.

He watched grimly as the black coffin bumped down the attic ladder on to the floor. His throat and lips were dry as the lid was thrust off, and the black, hairy man jumped out.

Just as so many times before the creature indicated the coffin invitingly, and asked:

"Tonight?"

With his heart thumping, and stars dancing in front of his vision, the old man growled:

"Yes! Tonight!"

The effect was as instantaneous as it was amazing. A look of ludicrous incredulity came over the bestial features of the black, hairy man. He seemed completely at a loss to know what to do. Finally, with a snarl of baffled rage he banged the lid back on to the coffin, put it on his shoulder and went up the attic ladder like one possessed.

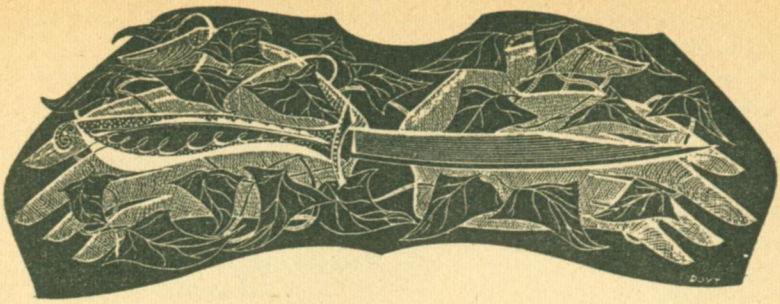
A loud clattering noise and then silence as of the grave, because as usual the storm stopped as suddenly as it had started.

The old man remained seated. When his heart quietened, and the stars stopped dancing in front of his eyes, he lit his pipe.

He sat and smoked for the best part of an hour to see if the visitor would return when he had reported to whatever headquarters he had.

Satisfied that the visitor was gone forever, the old man took three extra large sips from his lemonade bottle of poteen in celebration, and went to bed.

The only regret he had was that never again would he be able to make poteen, for now that the black, hairy man was gone forever people would come around again.



CROOKS IN BOOKS

A review of some recent crime, mystery and detective books

STEVE AUSTEN

"SEVEN LIVES SOUTH", by William McGivern (*Collins*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

Mr. McGivern is, I think, my favourite among contemporary American thriller writers. He writes well, powerfully and effectively. He tells a good story. He is a master at revealing the nastiness in the upright suburban householder's woodshed, the brutal, vicious animal that lies a layer or two down under the young executive Brooks Brothers suit and the buttoned-down white collar. But after *Savage Streets*, McGivern has moved away from the commuter's paradises and gone foreign. This book is about American, British and German expats living in Spain, a semi-monied flotsam and jetsam, some criminal, some careless, some just plain hedonistic or lazy. There's plenty of sun and brandy's cheap. Mike Beecher is one of the longer-established inhabitants, better than most, an American who can't face up to returning after two wars—W.W. II and Korea—to stateside security, the advertisers' standard family, house and job. Instead, he suns himself, he drinks a little and slowly—Spain, after all, is cheap—he runs through his small accumulation of capital. He is also a man endowed with a sense of sin and an awareness of failure and with a sympathy which approaches a responsibility for others' failings—W. McGivern, like G. Greene, has at bottom a moral attitude sharpened by a Catholic apprehension of sin which gives an extra dimension to his characters and an extra significance to their development at times of crisis and danger. Beecher, prodded, by two stimuli—need for money and attraction to a long-legged transatlantic girl—undertakes to do a job in Rabat. But the job is not what it seems. It means trouble in the

largest and most criminal sense and Beecher with his self-analysis and indecision is inevitably at the centre of it. The plot shifts to North Africa, to the Sahara, to Morocco, to Tangier and returns to Spain for resolution. The scenes are always good, well-observed, accurate; the characters are interesting, sharply drawn, credible; the plot is exciting enough to make compulsive reading. My only complaint is that in effect on the reader the sum total is slightly less than some of McGivern's other books and that there seemed to be a loose end or two. However, this is alpha quality stuff: McGivern's near-misses score more than most other writers' golds.

"ONE AWAY", by Allan Prior (*Eyre & Spottiswoode*, 15*s*.).

This good, original and enlivening thriller has as its focus the Moor (Dart, not Ex, Bodmin or Ilkley) and the heavy, brooding presence of the countryside, the moor's hostile, almost intelligent and animate, atmosphere dominates the book, the characters and the plot. *One Away* is one away from that most famous and dreadful of English prisons, Princetown. But this novel is more than the narrative of a well-planned escape, with all the obvious suspense and atmospheric excitement that surrounds it. It is, in addition, a fascinating—and certainly to my ignorant gorgio mind a highly credible—picture of the contemporary gipsies under all the stresses not just of what we are told is the higher technological civilization but also of the sub-welfare state, of

forms, planning and green belt amenities. And these are real, if now schizophrenic, romani, fearing, and at the same time despising, the gorgios in whose world they are more and more compelled to live. A thoroughly rewarding book and full marks to Mr. Prior. Also a good, striking cover.

"TWENTY PLUS TWO", by Frank Gruber (*Boardman*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

After a few pages I jotted down, "American. Competent. Run-of-the-mill." And I very nearly added "dull". By the time I had finished the book, I had scratched out every word except American. It's a very odd book indeed and rather disturbing. It's not competent: at times it's untidy, and once downright naïve, in its plot development and revelation. The story is improbable to a rare degree, relying on almost extreme coincidences. But perhaps because of this, it exerts a kind of compulsive incredulity that's as good as belief, or at least as good as W. Wordsworth's willing suspension of disbelief. It's about an investigator—not a licensed P.I.—who only searches after missing heirs. He has money (enough), looks, intelligence, toughness and a legal training. He also (see above) has a special contract with the long arm of coincidence.

To cut it short, after some sex, some bloodshed, some hunches and a devil of a lot of inter-state and inter-city travel, he solves a twenty-two-year-old mystery and gets his girl. I still don't know: in an off-beat, rather grudging way, I think I en-

joyed it. But not, I think, to be recommended for some of the more old-fashioned maiden aunts.

"FULL TERM", by Philip Spencer (*Faber & Faber*, 15*s*.).

This is the sort of Oxford novel which even Tabs and Redbrickers should be able to accommodate although since its strains my credibility —and I'm an Oxford College man meself and devoted to eccentric tutors —it may destroy theirs. But no matter. It's a literate, highly readable and witty romp into thrillerdom at worst and, at best, a clever, complex welding of crime and life in the SCR, resting though on the unlikely premiss of eminent dons trading in Cannabis Indica (ganja or Indian Hemp to the hoi-polloi). It's also graced with an engaging narrator suffering from partial amnesia, a condition in crime fiction which I always find stimulating and slightly terrifying. It could so easily happen to any one of us. On the other hand, even if tutors climb under rugs to hear undergraduate essays and howl like hungry prairie dogs, they don't surely organize narcotic rings or go in for mayhem. Or perhaps they do and the University Grants Committee should investigate. From all of which you gather, I trust, that Mr. Spencer's book is well worth the reading.

"THE PIT IN THE GARDEN", by Laurence Meynell (*Collins*, 12*s*. 6*d*.).

A comfortable book, a good cosy read, etcetera. And once you've overcome your initial anger (disgust?)

at the I-narrator alternating from chapter to chapter—but this, to be fair, is decently explained in a forewarning author's note and is signposted throughout—a pleasantly, readable, well-contrived crime story, sited half-way in atmosphere between well-written romance (but *he's* got a past) and a Midshire village murder whodunit. It begins with chap, good at figures, who checks the pools wins, going on holiday and working as an odd-job man for mature gentlewoman who has just won a handsome second dividend. Later he digs a preparatory grave—but not for her. Good characters, sympathetically drawn. Also gardens, cricket, darts and, within its agreeably comfortable confines, suspense. Good for aunts. Also for uncles and nephews.

"THE LAST COMMANDMENT", by George Harman Coxe (*Hammond, Hammond*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

Kent Murdock is a somewhat privileged picture editor cum star photographer working on a newspaper in an American city and he is a man to whom murders happen. When they do, he calls in the police, very properly, and then proceeds, like almost every private eye in the fiction biz, to do his own investigating. This time it's the head of one of those distinguished families that run to a few million dollars, a few children, a couple of wives, nothing vulgar and excessive. Of course, they all hate him and/or each other. The cast list includes newspapermen, pix and words, police, a tape-recorder, some photo-

graphic plates and a woman whose mature, fully-rounded beauty and personality we get to hear about, whenever she appears. Not one of Mr. Coxe's most distinguished efforts. But certainly competent and fast-moving even if it lacks the expected excitement and originality.

"PENNIES FROM HELL", by David Alexander (*Boardman*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

This is one of those books where it becomes virtually irrelevant to discuss the style: it is all, and very powerfully so, plot. To be truthful, I suppose one should call this a terrible tale: it is. A man just released from prison after serving eight years for stealing some 100.000 dollars from a corrupt and ruthless political boss finds himself caught, at once, in the toils of this same boss and his police nominees. Escape always seems possible and it never is. Murder, guilt and fear breaking down further the anti-hero's spirit, violence, even brief spurts of erotic and parental love, all lead to the ultimate disaster, reminiscent but sea-changed of Jephthah. In its way, and of its kind, this is very good and depressingly effective. Don't start it if you want a cosy evening when the telly doesn't suit. This is sterner, more cathartic fare. And I don't think the Discharged Prisoners' Aid Society could have helped much either.

"UNCERTAIN DEATH", by Anthony Gilbert (*Crime Club*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

The hyper-manic, carrot-headed, non-u solicitor Arthur Crook on the war-path, clearing the obvious and already arrested suspect (an unhappily married and therefore other-directed husband) and finding the murderer. Competent plot, good characterization, pace, suspense; it all adds up to satisfaction, and Crook himself continues to be a thorough enjoyment, endearing, enlivening and amusing.

"I'M NO HERO", by Hartley Howard (*Collins*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

Glenn Bowman, another but long-established and somehow rather mid-Atlantic P.I., is not at his best in this latest New York adventure; nor is Mr. Howard, his creator. I must confess to a prejudice: I don't like his style (e.g. P. 96, "Meantime one of the others—maybe both—would be treading on my heels as I made like a gazelle down the stairs. The faster I ran, the sooner the pay-off. I'd be the meat in the sandwich—cold meat." P 97, "I made like a cat down the fire exit . . ."). But even if you find this acceptable, the plot is undeservedly complicated, and it seems to lack the suspense which Hartley Howard has produced in other books. None-the-less, the situation—an apparent suicide in a locked room and a widow who won't believe the evidence and the police report—is a promising one. Unfortunately the promise is never fully realized, but Bowman fans will doubtless enjoy it all the same.

"DEATH IN VIEW", by Travis Macrae (*Hammond, Hammond*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

A competent, domestic-type thriller

set in American monied suburbia. Pace slowish, but the characterization is reasonably good: and the central plot twist is one of the neatest for years.

"CONFESSION", by Harry Carmichael (*Crime Club*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

An excellently entertaining detective story written round three people whose emotions and motives are unusually realistic and credible. Mr. Carmichael has taken the trouble to convince us that his narrator is actually *involved* with the other two main characters—something rare enough in crime fiction for us to be grateful. The suspense is good, the trial well-handled: only the denouement is somewhat unsatisfying. Perhaps this is a back-handed compliment: Mr. Carmichael has succeeded so well in making his heroine appear guilty that the necessary revelation of her innocence and someone else's guilt was bound to seem contrived.

"THE GOLDEN FLEECE", by John Boland (*Boardman*, 13*s.* 6*d.*).

This is a splendid romp by the author of *The League of Gentlemen*. A bank manager and his staff convert a day-dream of playing the stock market into glorious reality—by borrowing from the bank. "Borrow" is a more suitable word than "steal" because Mr. Boland's characters are very lighthearted and agreeable criminals, from the bank manager himself to James Turner, who makes fortunes on paper, and Roger Groom, the bank teller whose unproduced plays all deal with ingenious, and highly successful, criminal activities. None of his plots, however, are as intricate and exciting as the venture into high finance and stock exchange manipulation planned by the innocent-seeming staff of the Kensington Branch of the London County Bank. Your sympathies are with them from the first page; in *The Golden Fleece* the crooks are the heroes and the only villain is on the side of the law. [*Sic*] transit our glorious Bobbies: they've all turned into bogeys. Excellent value, particularly for the mid-winter 'flu.

"THE WORM OF DEATH", by Nicholas Blake (*Crime Club*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

Superior detective novel in the good old English tradition: well-written, witty, with a large cast of amiable, eccentric characters, most of them, naturally, with a motive for murder. The book is set in Greenwich and the background of the river, the blanketing fogs, the pleasant, crumbling Georgian houses, is excellently done.

"SHE MODELLED HER COFFIN", by Droo Launay (*Boardman*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

The publishers claim that this book is witty and cynically observant. It is written in the first person in pseudo-tough, laconic style that I found extremely irritating and the plot does nothing to redeem the book. There are one or two good descriptions of models, modelling.

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