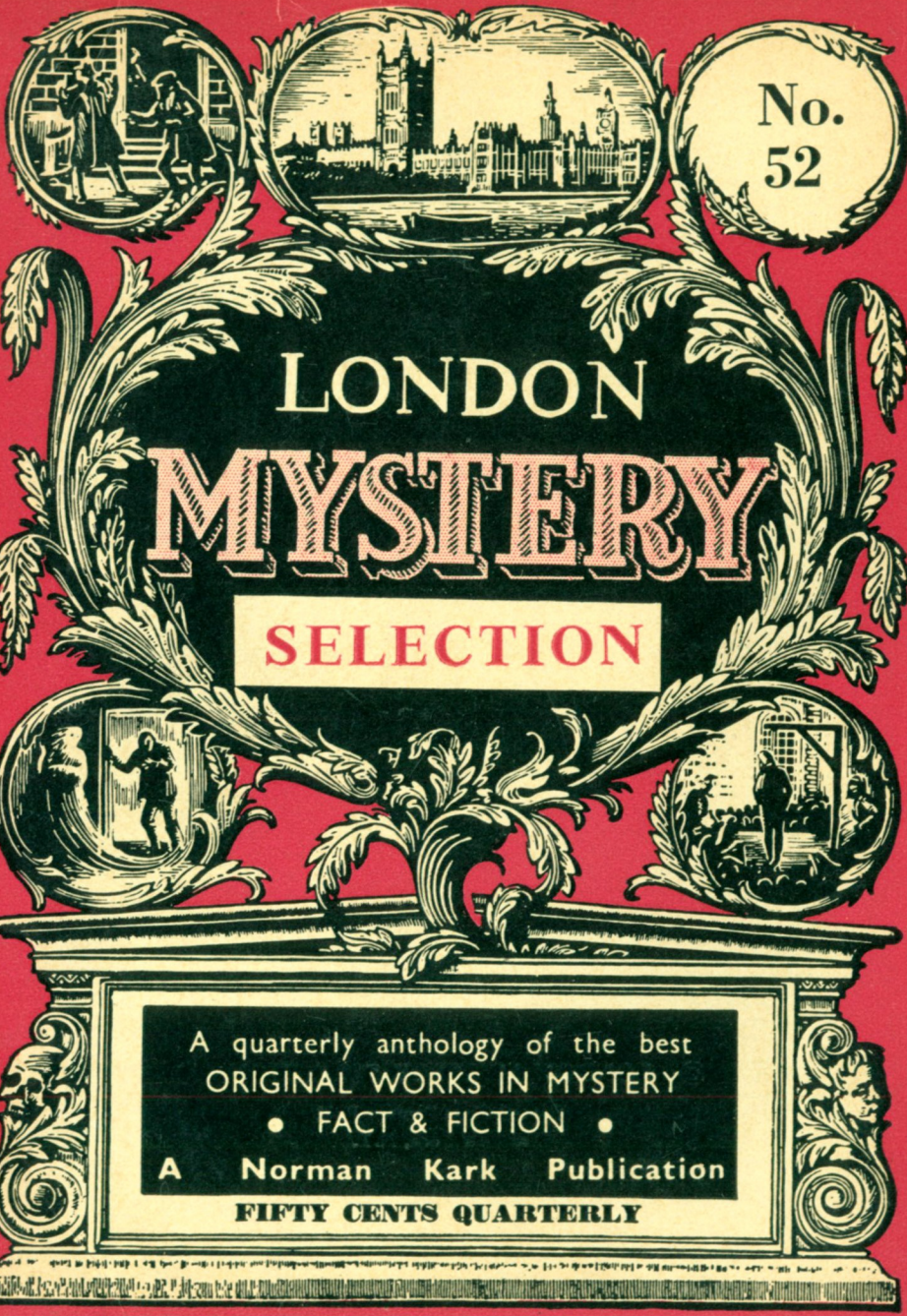
No.
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LONDON
MYSTERY
SELECTION
A quarterly anthology of the best
ORIGINAL WORKS IN MYSTERY
• FACT & FICTION •
A Norman Kark Publication
FIFTY CENTS QUARTERLY

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THE LONDON MYSTERY SELECTION

Few of us these days are as overtly or profoundly superstitious as were our forebears, to whom almost every natural, and certainly every unnatural, phenomenon was an omen predicting some good or evil. A brief glance at a recently published *Dictionary of Superstitions* will perhaps provoke a smile and a raised eyebrow at the credulity of the human race; we may wonder, indeed, how the everyday business of life has been carried on in the face of all the warnings of misfortune and promises of happiness inherent in seemingly innocent objects and occurrences.

However, despite our dismissal of these superstitions as mere foolishness or fetishism, there are still many of us who cannot claim to be completely immune from superstition—whether it be finger-crossing, avoiding ladders or some personal and unadmitted belief of our own. We have not yet reached a stage in our civilization where the unreasoned belief and superstition have completely lost their power.

Nor, indeed, can we entirely rid ourselves of those fears of the supernatural which also exerted their influence over the imaginations of our ancestors. The haunted house has now become a subject for farce, but the unexpected noise in the night, the door which opens suddenly and without cause can yet cause an involuntary shudder.

Only recently we heard of a house in which no family can live for more than a few months, a house in which a tragedy took place some years ago; all efforts to exorcise the ghost have, according to reports, so far proved unsuccessful. One is entitled to believe or disbelieve these accounts of hauntings, to laugh at them, perhaps; but could that laughter not be our defence against fears we no longer care to admit? There are more things in heaven and earth. . . .

Whatever your, our readers', opinions and beliefs may be in these matters, we know, from the very fact that you are our readers, that the strange and supernatural does interest you. We hope that in the following pages you will find plenty to intrigue and entertain you and that some of the stories will provoke a pleasurable shiver or two.

EDITOR.

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

THE LONDON MYSTERY SELECTION

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GOYAS GALORE

ROBERT STANDISH

Illustrated by Roy Jackson

DR. COLIN MCKENZIE, a conscientious, overworked man in late middle age, looked up from his desk with a warm smile as his next patient entered the consulting room. The latter was an elderly woman, shabbily dressed with all the outward signs of genteel poverty. She had a beautiful oval face, finely chiselled features and a pair of candid blue eyes which shone with good humour and conveyed an impression of inextinguishable courage. In the small world of Hockley, a village some thirty miles south of London, she was both liked and feared for her sharp tongue and fearless independence of spirit. She and the doctor had been friends for many years, their friendship dating from the time when she and her late husband, Colonel Eustace Clutterbuck, had bought the tiny house in which she now lived alone.

"Well, well, well, Emily!" said the doctor. "So at last you've got around to consulting me professionally. I'm both glad and sorry . . . sorry that you feel the need. What can I do for you?"

"I want you to examine me," replied Emily Clutterbuck.

"What's wrong with you, Emily? Tell me the details briefly."

"How should I know, Colin? You're the doctor and it's for you to find out. That's why I want you to examine me."

"But you know," said he with a puzzled look, "it will be much easier for both of us if you will help me by . . . well, describing your symptoms."

"I haven't any symptoms as far as I know. . . ."

"Then a sensible woman like you shouldn't be taking up the time of a busy doctor. What's it all about, Emily?" he asked more kindly.

"I want to know how much longer I have to live. That's all."

"Then you'd better consult an astrologer . . . not a doctor. What you ask is absurd, Emily. Tell me, frankly, what's in your mind and I will try to help. . . ."

"The unpleasant truth is that some shares Eustace left me are not going to pay any dividend this year and . . . well, until they do pay a dividend, I can't live. . . . I can't even exist on the income I possess. . . ."

"But, Emily, surely that is something you should discuss with your lawyer, or your banker. But as an old friend, let me say right now that if a hundred or two will be of any help, you have only to say so."

"I wish you wouldn't interrupt me, Colin," snapped Emily. "What's more, don't be so free with your money. You can't afford it and you know it. My problem, if you will

only listen, is a very simple one. I can, if I decide to do so, realize all my small capital and, while it lasts, live comparatively decently. If, after examining me, you tell me that I shan't make old bones, that is precisely what I shall do. It will, on the whole, be the best solution for me because . . . well, it will save me from doing something of which I disapprove. But on the other hand, if you tell me that I am likely to linger on for years, it would be insane to spend my capital. I don't expect you to give me a certificate in writing. All I want from you is your honest opinion about my expectation of life. Now do you understand?"

"Very well, Emily," said the doctor reluctantly, "I'll examine you. How old are you?"

"I shall be sixty-nine next birthday."

At the end of half an hour the doctor looked into the other's eyes and said: "My advice to you is to buy an annuity. Your heart is sound, you have the blood pressure of a young woman and I can find nothing wrong with you that a few juicy red steaks won't put right. I dare say that a complete overhaul would reveal minor troubles, although I can find no trace of them. My frank opinion is that, unless you are run over by a bus, you have many years to live. But"—he paused for emphasis—"you are undernourished. . . ."

"You don't have to tell me that," said Emily soberly. "I'll admit to you that when I passed the butcher's shop on my way here, I dribbled . . . positively dribbled like a spaniel. On the way home, I intend to fill your prescription and buy myself a large, juicy steak. Thank you, Colin, you've told me what I need to know. For the next few days I shall stuff myself like a Christmas goose . . . to gather strength for what lies ahead. I have tried hard to live uncomplainingly and to carry my burdens cheerfully, but"—she gave him a brittle smile—"I'm tired . . . too utterly weary of pinching and scraping, doing without so many things that I always took for granted and . . . I'll admit it to you, Colin, and to nobody else, my moral fibre, my integrity are not equal to the strain put upon them when I contemplate the bleak vista of the years which lie ahead. I'm shocked, profoundly shocked, at my own baseness, so I intend to do what has to be done quickly . . . before I change my mind. Thank you, old friend and God bless you!"

Before the doctor could say anything, she was gone. He watched out of the window as, with a fierce determination, she disappeared down the village street, thrusting her umbella before her against the driving rain. Then he turned to greet his next patient, a lady who habitually ate and drank three times as much as she should, thankful that hers was an ill he could cure if she could be persuaded to act on his advice.

* * *

Mr. James B. Hawkins, Fine Art Dealer, sitting at his desk in the rear premises of the Hawkins Galleries, at 512 Regent Street, London, W.1, looked up as his secretary entered the room. "There's an old lady who would like to see you, Mr. Hawkins," said the latter. "Her name is Mrs. Emily Clutterbuck."

"What does she want?"

"She won't tell me. She says that her business is important and that she must talk to you. I have a fancy you should see her, Mr. Hawkins. I'll break it up if she stays too long. . . ."

"All right," said the other gloomily, "send her in."

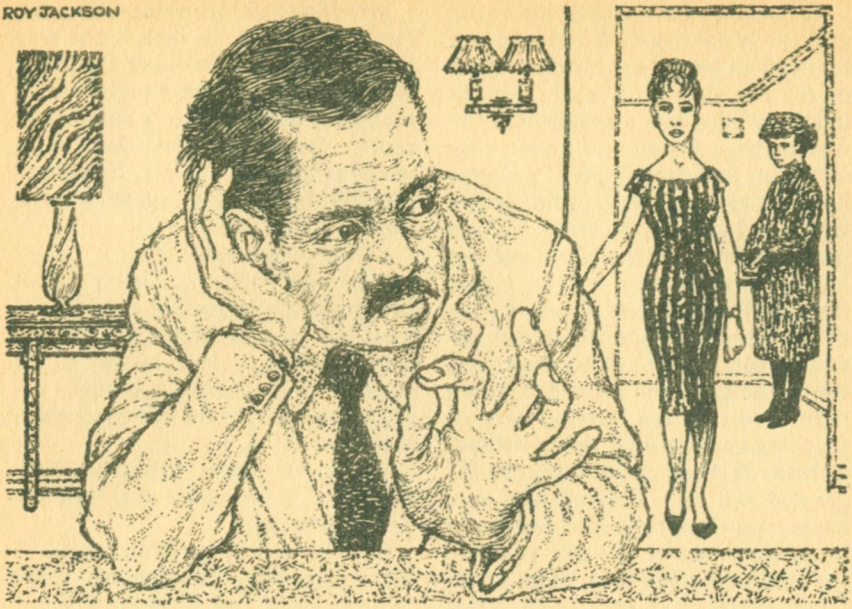
One never knew. Profitable business often came from the least expected sources.

"What can I do for you, madam?" asked Hawkins, handing his caller into her chair and turning upon her his benevolent crocodile smile.

"You can spare me a few minutes of your time, Mr. Hawkins," replied Emily Clutterbuck, who wore an air of fragility and fluttering helplessness which, had he been there to see it, would have amused Dr. Colin McKenzie. "I want to tell you a story."

Hawkins, who prided himself on his way with old ladies and knew how hopeless it was to hurry them, settled down to listen.

"My great - great - grandfather," Emily began, "was Colonel Sir Humphrey Girdlestone, who was on the staff of the Duke of Wellington during the Napoleonic Wars. He must have been a competent staff officer, or the Duke, who was most intolerant of any inefficiency, would have got



rid of him. Nevertheless, I don't consider that he was a particularly great man, although there is always the temptation, don't you agree, Mr. Hawkins, to glorify one's ancestors?"

"That I wouldn't know, Mrs. Clutterbuck, not having any worth mentioning," said Hawkins, wondering where this was going to lead. "But tell me more about yours."

"Being in constant attendance on the Duke," continued Emily, "my great-great-grandfather—that's such a mouthful, so for the future I shall call him the Colonel—had the interesting experience, among many others, of reading despatches to him while he —the Duke, that is—was sitting for the famous portrait by Goya. . . ."

At mention of this name Mr. Hawkins's eyes lost their faraway lacklustre look. From his slumped position in the swivel chair, he began to sit bolt upright.

"In one of his letters, the Colonel describes Goya's swift, unfaltering brush strokes and his deep, scarcely human powers of concentration. He was most impressed. . . ."

"As well he may have been, Mrs. Clutterbuck," interposed Hawkins. "A rare privilege, if I may say so."

"Now the Colonel had two daughters, Mr. Hawkins," continued Emily unhurriedly. "They were twins, one named Isabel . . . such a pretty name, don't you think? . . . and the other named Henrietta. Isabel was my

great-grandmother. I don't believe in giving half-confidences, Mr. Hawkins, so I must ask you to be most discreet regarding what I am about to tell you. Isabel"—her voice dropped a tone with embarrassment—"married beneath her. Her husband, who was my great-grandfather, was *in trade*! I have no doubt he was a most worthy man, but the sad fact remains that he was a *wine merchant*! The Colonel felt the disgrace keenly. Indeed, it was on account of this that he resigned his commission as soon as the Duke would release him. It blighted what might have been a vastly more distinguished career. . . ."

"Very sad, Mrs. Clutterbuck, very sad," clucked Hawkins. "I am flattered by your confidence in me and you may be sure I will respect it."

"Today, of course," Emily went on, "people don't feel so strongly about things like that. All kinds of most peculiar people are accepted in quite . . . exalted circles."

"We live in a democratic age, Mrs. Clutterbuck, and we must take these things as we find them. But," added Hawkins, trying to control the excitement engendered by mention of the great Spanish painter, "you were speaking about Goya. Goya! Why, Mrs. Clutterbuck, the mere mention of that name makes me feel humble."

"Ah! Yes, I remember," said Emily. "Goya! Then I began to tell you about my ancestors. But I wasn't straying from Goya as much as you may think, Mr. Hawkins. I was coming to him . . . only you must be patient with me, for at my age one tends to digress. Yes, Goya!"

"Yes, Mrs. Clutterbuck, you were about to say . . .?"

Just then the secretary came into the room and said: "I hope you haven't forgotten your appointment with Lord Mumbleside, Mr. Hawkins. . . ."

"Go away, Miss Potter, go away!" said Hawkins unfairly. "Lord Mumbleside can wait. Mrs. Clutterbuck and I were having a most interesting talk about Goya."

This was said in such a way that, if there had been anyone called Lord Mumbleside, he must have felt impelled to feel as humble as Mr. Hawkins professed himself to feel at mention of Goya.

"I will be as brief as I can, Mr. Hawkins," continued Emily, "but I can easily come back another day. I shall be coming to London some time next month."

"Don't give it another thought, Mrs. Clutterbuck," said the dealer hastily. "There's no shortage of lords, but there's only one Goya."

"Very well, Mr. Hawkins. It shall be as you please. Now my great-grandmother, Isabel Girdlestone, and her twin sister, Henrietta, were raving beauties . . ."

"Ah! So that's where you get it from," said Hawkins coyly. "Now I understand."

". . . and one day while Goya was painting the Duke of Wellington, the two girls peeped into the room," continued Emily as though she had not heard the interruption. "Now Goya, as you doubtless know, was a great ladies' man. Indeed, unkind people called him a great *roué*. But then, all

great men have had their detractors, have they not? It seems to be the penalty of greatness."

"Ah!" exclaimed Hawkins soulfully. "If only the world was as charitable as you are, Mrs. Clutterbuck, it would be a better place to live in."

"Now Goya," Emily continued, "made inquiries about these two lovely girls and, learning that they were the daughters of a member of the Duke's staff, managed to contrive a meeting. The precise circumstances do not matter. It is enough that he did meet them and that, so impressed was he by their beauty, he asked their father if he might paint them. . . .

"The colonel, being a blunt soldier and, probably, knowing something of Goya's reputation as a lady-killer, would not hear of it. But their mother, realizing what an honour this was, overcame his objections. . . ."

The dealer's sigh of relief at this, left no doubt about his feelings in the matter.

"Well, a time was arranged and, in order to became *en rapport* with his subjects, Goya spent an hour or so with them in the garden—to his great annoyance, chaperoned by their mother—declaring at length that so uncannily closely did the twins resemble each other, either one of them could sit for the other's portrait. It hardly seemed worth while painting two portraits.

"Goya at that time was at the height of his fame and, I suppose, it must have been difficult for him to spare the time to paint the daughters of a relatively obscure British colonel. This was a man, don't forget, who had painted the portraits of four kings of Spain and their families!

"So a compromise was reached, Goya's quick eye having noted that Isabel had a tiny mole on the side of her chin, by which alone their parents were able to distinguish them. He painted them together, although it appears from the painting that he only painted one of them. Isabel is portrayed standing in front of, but slightly to the side of a mirror. You can tell that it is Isabel by the tiny mole. What seems to be a reflection of Isabel is really Henrietta, who had no mole. . . ."

"Remarkable, Mrs. Clutterbuck, quite remarkable!"

"It is a truly beautiful painting, Mr. Hawkins. I do a little painting myself and often, as I gaze at it, I marvel at the amazing problems of perspective he overcame. . . ."

"You - often - gaze - at - it?" asked Hawkins, his eyes popping out of his head. "About—er—how often, Mrs. Clutterbuck?"

"Every day, Mr. Hawkins, and many times daily. It is the most beautiful thing I possess. . . ."

There was a dreadful sucking noise as the dealer's bridgework came adrift under stress of emotion engendered by the awesome thought that he was sitting talking to someone who, unless she was indulging in pipedreams, owned a Goya. Owners of great paintings did not beat a path to the Hawkins Galleries.

"I don't doubt it, Mrs. Clutterbuck," said the dealer. "But tell me what I can have the pleasure of doing for you?"

"I need advice, Mr. Hawkins. I'm not very . . . experienced in matters such as this. . . ."

"Then you shall have the best I've got," the other said heartily. "Do I understand that you wish to sell the portrait?"

"I don't wish to, Mr. Hawkins," replied Emily, her eyes filling with tears. "I must."

"Be brave, Mrs. Clutterbuck. I understand how you feel, but tears won't help. Now tell me, before we go any further, is this most interesting story you've told me . . . a, well, a kind of family legend, or is it properly documented? That could make a great difference to its value. There's some very dirty work goes on in the world of art. . . ."

"He should know!" muttered Miss Potter, who was listening fascinated on the intercom.

"I don't know quite what you mean by that, Mr. Hawkins," replied Emily flutteringly. "For example, I haven't a receipt for whatever the Colonel paid Goya . . . if he paid anything. But I have his . . . the Colonel's diary, which gives the exact date it was painted. I have a letter from the Duke of Wellington to the Colonel in which he says that the Goya portrait of the twins is, if such a thing were possible, even more beautiful than they were in the flesh. Those are not his precise words, but that is the sense of them. Then, when Isabel disgraced the family by marrying the impossible wine merchant, the Goya portrait is listed among the wedding gifts as the gift of the bride's father, although I believe—but this *is* legend—that the bridegroom *bought* it from the colonel, who had suffered serious financial losses. Will that be enough, Mr. Hawkins?"

"More than enough, Mrs. Clutterbuck," said the dealer, hoping that the beads of sweat on his brow were not visible, "and you may think yourself very fortunate indeed that you came to me and not to some others whom I could name but won't . . . which reminds me, why did you come to me?"

"You once negotiated the sale of some pictures belonging to my late brother, Major-General Sir Henry Whiteway-Mulliner, and he wrote me a letter afterwards which I kept. I have it here, Mr. Hawkins. Would you like to hear what he said about you?"

"Indeed I would, Mrs. Clutterbuck. He was a very distinguished gentleman and it was a pleasure to be of some small service to him. . . ."

"I'll read it to you," said Emily, fumbling in her reticule for her spectacles. "Here it is: ' . . . I sold the pictures through a man named Hawkins, who has a gallery somewhere in Regent Street. They sold for £475 in all. At least, that's what he said he got for them. All picture dealers are robbers, but I doubt whether Hawkins is any worse than the others.' "

"A very candid gentleman, your brother," said Hawkins, swallowing hard.

"Well, you know, Mr. Hawkins, he was not a man addicted to extravagant praise."

"Evidently not, Mrs. Clutterbuck," said the dealer, fighting to recover his

composure, which was not made any easier by a titter he heard from the outer office, "but I am most grateful to him for sending you to me."

Thus, in a manner which was masterly in its simplicity, the dealer was made aware that his caller, though frail and unworldly, had her eyes wide open.

Miss Potter, who after twelve years at the Hawkins Galleries, had few illusions left, was compelled to stuff her handkerchief in her mouth to control her laughter.

* * *

"That looks a very expensive motor-car, Mr. Hawkins," said Emily on the following afternoon when the hired, chauffeur-driven limousine pulled up outside her small house.

"You won't think that soon," he replied genially, "not when we've found a buyer for your Goya . . . if it is a Goya. You'll be able to afford a couple like that."

Then, drawing a deep breath, he allowed himself to be led into the tiny drawing-room of the house where, standing on an easel in bright light was the portrait of the twins.

"Mrs. Clutterbuck," he said, after an examination lasting nearly half an hour, "it's my considered opinion that this portrait was painted by Goya. I could be wrong, of course, but I don't think so, and we shall have to have a better opinion than mine . . . several opinions I dare say, but you can leave all that to me. It's your undisputed property, I take it?"

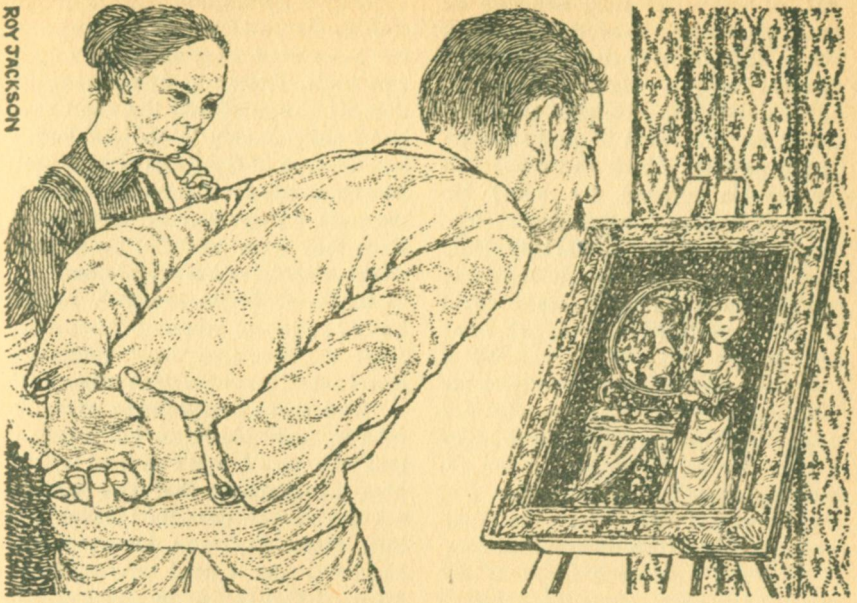
"Certainly it is. If my word is not enough, ask my lawyer, who will confirm what I say. I, and a sister who lives in New York, are the only living descendants of Isabel Girdlestone. My sister is Mrs. Eldreth Hubble . . . the Philadelphia Hubbles, you know. Let me read from a recent letter of hers. She says: 'In the present state of my finances, I cannot afford to buy your Goya. But in your present straitened circumstances, I think you would be wise to sell it. I wish you luck.' The rest of the letter is personal."

"Excellent, Mrs. Clutterbuck, excellent! Now is there anything else we should discuss? Any questions?"

"No-o-o, Mr. Hawkins, but there is just one little thing I haven't told you and which I feel you are entitled to know. I wonder would you mind coming into the next room, which used to be my husband's study . . . his den, he called it. . . ."

The dealer was in the clutches of a vague premonition of impending disappointment as he followed his hostess into the other room where, standing on an easel in the full light of the window was an apparently identical painting. "Gawd blister my liver!" he exclaimed, momentarily forgetting his manners. "You don't happen to have a drop of brandy in the house, do you?" he asked, looking as if he needed it. "One was more than I expected, but two Goyas on one day . . . is just too much." He plumped back into a deep chair where he sat wiping sweat from ashen face.

"Sip it, don't gulp it!" said Emily, "and while you are recovering I will tell you the story. Do you feel strong enough to listen now?"



"I'd feel strong enough to listen to a story about two Goyas if I was on my deathbed," said the dealer. "Have you any more brandy? If not, I'll send the chauffeur for a bottle . . . ah! that's better."

"Well, to continue," said Emily calmly, "this painting caused bad feeling between the two sisters. Isabel had it . . . that's Isabel with the mole on her chin. Henrietta, and I'm not sure she wasn't entitled to feel aggrieved, was badly miffed. The portrait, she argued, was of them both and, as she saw things, it was their joint property. In short, there was a bitter quarrel.

"Then, when the wars were over, Isabel and her husband . . . the wine merchant, went to live in Bordeaux for some years. He founded the well-known firm of Cockcroft's, which still prospers although it has passed to other hands. However, that is unimportant. What is important is that Henry Cockcroft . . . despite being in trade he seems to have had some decent instincts . . . was distressed by the breech between the two sisters and did his best to heal it. In Bordeaux at that time was a considerable colony of Spanish refugees who had stayed on. Goya himself, but that was later, spent some time there.

"Among these refugees was a group of artists, one of whom, a man named Sandoval, had been an intimate of Goya's and, lacking any great originality of style, had modelled him-

self on Goya. He was, although he probably would have repudiated it hotly, little more than an extremely talented copyist. Henry Cockcroft, hearing of him, sought him out. Could he . . . would he make a copy of the painting which had caused all the trouble between the twins? He not only would, but did. It took him several months to do, working while there was light, and when it was done, neither Isabel nor her husband could tell the copy from the original. They are, as you will see for yourself if you stop drinking that brandy, quite indistinguishable. No, that is not quite true. There are, examined under a lens, minute differences. After all, the man wasn't a photographer. But the important thing . . . the thing which concerns us is that each of them is as much a genuine Goya as the other. Doubtless, when the paint of the copy was fresh, they could have been separated. But, it seems, they were not, and when Isabel next went to England she took one of them with her, and whether she gave Henrietta the original, or the copy, nobody knows."

"This is indeed a pretty kettle of fish!" said Hawkins, hauling himself out of the chair. "Let's see them side by side."

Carrying the easel into the drawing-room, he spent the best part of an hour examining the two paintings.

"For my money," he said at length, "they're both Goyas. There isn't a thing to choose between them. Tell me, Mrs. Clutterbuck," he asked thoughtfully, "how many people beside me and you know about this?"

"Only my sister and myself. But, of course, plenty of people have known for more than a century that a copy was made. There was no secret about that. The original and the copy have hung quite openly in various family houses. One of them has always been known as the Goya and the other as the copy. I very much doubt whether, since they were muddled up in Bordeaux, they have ever until now been in the same house together, so nobody . . . except you and me and my sister . . . realizes how amazingly closely they resemble each other. . . ."

"Well, that's something to be thankful for," said Hawkins. Let's keep it that way, see? I won't pretend to you, Mrs. Clutterbuck, that I've worked out a plan yet, because I haven't. It isn't every day, you know, that I handle Goyas. I need time to think. Most of the Goyas in existence, as you may know, are still in Spain and, in my opinion, that's where they'll stay and, I dare say, it will be a Spanish collector who will buy one of these. . . ."

"But which one, Mr. Hawkins?"

"Ah! There you have me. Which one?"

"But I thought that American millionaires were buying all the pictures these days, Mr. Hawkins. . . ."

"I'll tell you, Mrs. Clutterbuck," said the dealer sadly, "American millionaires aren't what they used to be. Something's happened to them. In the 1920's, when most of them only had two or three million dollars, you could sell 'em anything. Put a picture in the window . . . one with a nice signature on it, of course . . . and bless

my soul! they'd fight for it. But today there's a different class of millionaire in circulation. Most deplorable! They've got hundreds of millions, some of them. They're not art experts now. They don't have to be. They hire experts, and some of them, you may believe me, have got very nasty, suspicious minds . . . not like the good old days."

"I see," said Emily Clutterbuck almost as sadly as Hawkins. "Well, I am sure you will do your best for me, dear Mr. Hawkins, so let us wrap these paintings in something and put them in your magnificent car."

"One will be enough," said Hawkins, "for they're like as peas in a pod. A man in my position can't afford to be seen riding into London with *two* Goyas. It wouldn't look well."

"No, Mr. Hawkins, I think it best that you take both. It shows what complete faith I have in you. I always found my dear brother's judgment of men quite infallible. . . ."

"Quite!" said Hawkins, swallowing hard. He thereupon wrote out at Emily's dictation a receipt which read: "Received from Mrs. Emily Clutterbuck one portrait believed to be by Goya of the Misses Isabel and Henrietta Girdlestone and one admitted copy of the same, either or both to be sold on her behalf on terms to be arranged and agreed."

"I can see," said the dealer when he had written and signed the receipt, "that you have a very good head for business, Mrs. Clutterbuck."

"Away with you, flatterer!" she smiled.

When Hawkins and the car had disappeared in the distance, Emily wrote two letters. One was to her bank, enclosing in a sealed envelope the receipt for safe-keeping. The other was to her sister, Mrs. Eldreth Hubble in New York. The letter read:

> Dearest Jane: I have always regarded the Goyas as morally our joint property and am most disappointed to learn that you evidently do not share that view. Since you intend to study your own interests without thought for mine, you must not blame me if I act as I think best for myself. But it is a pity.
>
> Affectionately,
>
> EMILY.

A week passed without word from Hawkins. Then he arrived at Emily's house, driving his own small car. He wore a harassed air. "Dear lady," he began sadly, "I am no nearer a solution of the problem than I was when I saw you last, except that Sir Henry Bainbridge, the best authority on Goya outside Spain itself, to whom I have shown one of the paintings, says that it is in his considered judgment an authentic Goya. . . ."

"That, surely, is a step in the right direction, is it not?" said Emily.

"In a way, yes," replied Hawkins, "but what about the other one? He doesn't know it, of course, but he's examined both of them. If there was only one, I'd know what to do, but day and night I'm haunted by the fact that there are two."

"Surely, Mr. Hawkins," said Emily sweetly, "you're making a mountain

out of a molehill? When you find a buyer for one of them, all you need do is destroy the other."

"Mrs. Clutterbuck," wailed Hawkins, "I'm an art dealer. Pictures have been my life for more than forty years. Supposing the other one . . . the one you want me to destroy . . . was really the Goya. I couldn't . . . just couldn't bring myself to destroy it."

"Your feelings do you great credit, Mr. Hawkins, but you are allowing them to obscure the main issue. Give me back one of them. When the time comes, I shall know what to do with it."

"Indeed I hope you will," said Hawkins. "I have it in the car. I will bring it in."

"And now," said Emily with a smile, "in order to protect you, I must give *you* a receipt." Thereupon she wrote: "Received from Mr. James Hawkins the return of one of the pictures mentioned in his receipt to me dated one week ago and which I hold."

There was a dazed look on the dealer's face as he pocketed this. "You see," said Emily, "I had to word it like that because neither of us knows which of us has the genuine Goya."

"I realize that," said Hawkins, "but all the same, I wish there was only one."

"But please, dear Mr. Hawkins, hurry. I am growing older by the hour. I need the money and I need it now. I want to enjoy the years which are left to me . . . travel, some nice clothes, a new umbrella, a car maybe. I want to get rid of these shabby, worn-out carpets and curtains and I want to do it now, not next year, or the year after that. . . ."

Hawkins was thinking furiously. People who wanted money in a hurry were the kind of people he liked to deal with. He was on firm ground again, for he understood these situations and knew how to exploit them to his own advantage. "Then I'll tell you what we'll do, Mrs. Clutterbuck," he said at length. "You need money and I need time . . . if I am going to get the absolute top price for the Goya." There was only one Goya now. "Properly handled, it will fetch a fantastic sum . . . positively fantastic. But it will take time . . . maybe months of negotiation. . . ."

"How much *could* it fetch, Mr. Hawkins?"

"It *could* fetch £100,000 . . . even double that, but say £100,000 to be conservative. Goya is Goya! So what I'm prepared to do is this, Mrs. Clutterbuck. Instead of being your agent, I will become your partner. . . ."

"That's very sweet of you, Mr. Hawkins."

"No, I'm not being sweet. I'm being businesslike and trying to study your interests as well as my own. Here's what I'll do. I'll give you now . . . today, my cheque for £10,000 and we'll sign an agreement, in the presence of your lawyer, if you like, to the effect that the first £10,000 realized on the sale belongs to me and that any sum received in excess of that we divide fifty-fifty. How's that?"

"I call that fair and generous, Mr. Hawkins. I accept."

The dealer wrote his cheque for the sum agreed. They drafted and signed the agreement and, his heart thumping with excitement, Hawkins drove off to London, conscious of having made the best deal of his life.

Emily, who was equally happy about the arrangement, went to London on the following day, where she paid the cheque into her bank, leaving instructions with the manager to buy her an annuity with half the sum and to leave the remainder liquid to her credit. "I am going on a spree," she told the bewildered manager. "First I'm going to buy clothes . . lots of them, everything new from top to toe. Then I'm going to give every garment I possess now to the Salvation Army. After that, I'm going to Monte Carlo for the winter . . . please don't look so disapproving, or you will destroy half my pleasure. . . ."

A trifle cast down by the other's lack of enthusiasm, Emily went out to the shops.

Before catching the Blue Train a few days later, Emily called on Hawkins and gave him an address in Monte Carlo which would find her in case of need.

On a brilliant day some weeks later, the concierge of her hotel told Emily that a caller was waiting for her in the lounge. The caller was Mr. Hawkins, who began to shout across the room as soon as he saw her. "You've double-crossed me!" he roared, producing for her inspection a newspaper cutting which stated briefly under a New York dateline that Goya's portrait of the Girdlestone twins had been sold by Mrs. Eldreth Hubble of the Philadelphia Hubbles to Mr. Oliver McCandless, the oil millionaire, for an unstated sum, believed to be a record for this painter's work. "You took my money," bellowed Hawkins to the scandal of those in earshot, "and then you sneaked your copy across to your sister and had her sell it behind my back."

"I did nothing of the kind," snapped Emily. "My copy is still at home where I left it."

"Then how, will you kindly explain, did your sister sell it? I need an explanation now, Mrs. Clutterbuck, and let me warn you that if you don't refund me the £10,000, I shall report the entire circumstances to Scotland Yard and have you put inside for fraud.

"That Goya of mine . . . ours, if you like, was almost sold when this bombshell arrived from New York. I could have retired on my cut. But now the deal is off and the buyer thinks I'm a crook."

"Well," said Emily primly, "you can hardly blame him for that! If you ask me, you can think yourself extremely fortunate that Scotland Yard—you introduced that name, Mr. Hawkins—doesn't know that a receipt which my bank holds contains your written admission that to your knowledge there are two Goyas. Don't try my patience too far."

"You're in this, too, right up to the neck!" blustered Hawkins.

"All I ever signed," replied Emily coolly, "was our little agreement and a receipt for one of the Goyas which you returned. You have my permission to take either, or both, to Scot-

land Yard whenever you please. And now," she went on when the other had collapsed like a pricked balloon, "if you will use your brains and give your vocal chords a much-needed rest, I will explain the situation. It was, of course, unfortunate that my sister sold hers first, but you may believe me that all is not lost. Don't interrupt me!"

"Everything I have told you, Mr. Hawkins, has been strictly true but," she added, "in both our interests, as you will learn, I did not tell you everything. What I omitted to tell you was that my great-grandfather . . . the one who was in trade and, presumably, aware that wholesalers can buy more advantageously than retailers, commissioned this young painter Sandoval to make *two* copies of the Goya. . . ."

"O my God!" exclaimed Hawkins. "I can't stand any more . . . three Goyas. Waiter! Bring me some brandy."

"His intention, it seems," continued Emily, "was to give the copy to my great-great-grandfather, who had commissioned the original Goya. A very nice gesture, don't you think? Well, between the time the copies were completed and my great-grandfather's next visit to England, my great-great-grandfather died. So the extra copy stayed in Bordeaux. Goya himself, then an old man approaching eighty, came to Bordeaux. My great-grandfather approached him, asking him to settle all doubt by identifying the original portrait so that the copies could be marked as copies. Goya, confronted with the three, either could not, or would not, resolve the doubt. Sandoval, the copyist, who had in the meantime returned to Spain, was given the money to come to Bordeaux specially to separate the original from the copies. He, too, failed. The three paintings, each marked on the back with a separate private mark, were shuffled, and each in turn was identified by him as the original.

"Now, Mr. Hawkins, although I pretend to no knowledge of art, I assert most positively that if neither Goya nor Sandoval was able to identify the original, any modern so-called expert who professes to be able to do so, proclaims himself a windbag and an ignoramus. Do you agree?"

"You have something there," said Hawkins, "but where does that get us?"

"There is another little matter I did not mention to you," continued Emily. "It is that . . ."

"No, Mrs. Clutterbuck, not four Goyas! I couldn't stand it!"

"It is that my sister and I quarrelled many years ago. The cause does not matter. We have never seen eye-to-eye about most things. When it became necessary for the Goya . . . or one of the Goyas to be sold, I tried to make her realize that it was vastly to our mutual advantage to act in complete unison and understanding. But when I learned not long ago that she was going to act selfishly and independently, I had to act, too. Then it was, Mr. Hawkins, that I came to you."

"But why . . . why didn't you come clean with me?" he wailed.

"For the excellent reason, Mr. Hawkins, that if I had 'come clean' as you put it . . . and I very much dislike these Americanisms . . . you would have been so frightened you wouldn't have touched the transaction with a ten-foot bargepole. The reason I came to you in the first place—and in being quite frank, please acquit me of a desire to be offensive—was that only a tricky picture coper, which is how you were described to me, would have touched the transaction with two Goyas involved. Three, I am sure, would have been too many for you.

"Now," she went on, "since you are evidently lost in the jungle of which you are a sharp-clawed denizen, I will guide you and lead us both to fortune. Will you undertake to obey me implicitly?"

"O.K.," said Hawkins slowly, "it's against my principles, but I'll agree."

"Bosh! You haven't any principles!" snapped Emily. "Listen. Tomorrow you will fly to America, taking your Goya with you. To the U.S. Customs you will declare it vaguely as either a Goya, or a copy, being brought to America for purposes of comparison with that recently purchased by this Mr. Oliver McCandless, the oil millionaire. If necessary, put up a cash bond with the Customs. You will then seek out Mr. McCandless and you will say—say, mark you, not write, because you are far too prone to make damaging admissions on paper—that you challenge him privately to produce any body of experts he pleases to establish that either one of them is the original and the other a copy. . . ."

"What good will that do?" asked Hawkins.

"If he won't accept the challenge privately, make it publicly."

"Suppose he starts talking to your sister?"

"Let him talk to my sister, my dear man. We have nothing to hide. Intelligent self-interest will ensure that she won't admit knowing of the other Goya . . . or Goyas. This Mr. McCandless, when his tame experts tell him that the two portraits are indistinguishable from each other, will listen to what I have to say. . . ."

"You mean . . .?"

"Yes, I'm coming with you. I don't consider you capable of conducting really delicate negotiations. Your besetting sin is greed, Mr. Hawkins, and greedy people are seldom in my experience intelligent. Besides, you drink too much."

"What are you going to say to this McCandless?"

"I intend to tell him, once he has got over his shock, that his interests and mine are really identical. My Goya, by casting doubt on the authenticity of his, makes his worthless, or anyway worth infinitely less. By acquiring mine, he will not only insure the value of his, but . . . almost as important to a millionaire . . . he will be protected against ridicule. In effect, as I shall point out, he and I are partners because no body of experts can prove that one is more genuine than the other. They stand or fall together."

"Mrs. Clutterbuuck," said Hawkins reverently, "I salute you. I wish I'd met you a long time ago. You're

absolutely right. This McCandless *must* buy yours. What's more, the price he'll pay will make us both rich. I shall sell the Hawkins Galleries and retire."

"You'll do nothing of the kind!" snapped Emily, "because I'm not going to America twice. . . ."

"Why should you?"

"You disappoint me, Mr. Hawkins. I can't think how you earned the reputation for being a clever crook. A child could outwit you. Surely you can see that we shall be under a great moral obligation to Mr. McCandless?"

"What moral obligation?" asked Hawkins, his jaw dropping with perplexity.

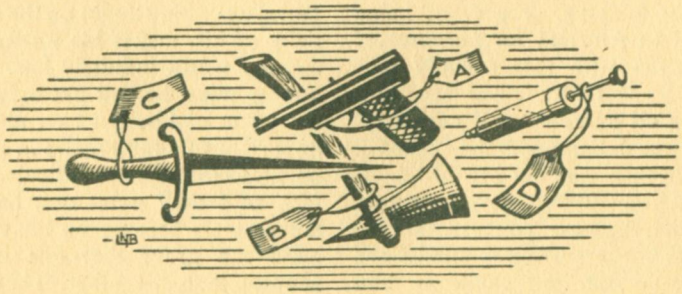
"Dear me," said Emily, "was there ever a man so obtuse? The moral obligation to offer him the third Goya, of course! Have you no conscience at all? When the poor man has bought two of them, it's only right that he should be given the opportunity of bidding for the third."

"Waiter!" called Hawkins weakly. "Brandy . . . quickly!"

"No," said Emily firmly, snatching the glass from the tray and draining it herself, "I need this more than you do."

"Just as you say, partner," said the dealer meekly.

"Partner indeed! What have you done to deserve fifty per cent? That agreement will need some revising. We'll go into that after lunch." Hawkins turned a nasty unhealthy colour. "Maybe you'd better give the gentleman some brandy," she told the waiter. "He has just had some very bad news."



THE NEW LIFE

G. K. THOMAS

Illustrated by S. J. Bullimore

CRAWLEY LAID HIS PEN aside and rested his face in his hands. After a while he straightened, took a deep breath and picked up the phone.

"Senior Doctor Crawley," he said. "Hospital 12, Sector 26."

He propped his elbow on the desk and cradled his chin while he read from the paper in front of him. "Report for April 8th, 2193. Sixteen births. Two normal."

He repeated the last figure. "Yes, sir. Only two."

Behind him the door opened and closed. He ignored the soft hiss of sound.

"Twelve gross malformations. Two border-lines."

Another piece of paper was placed at his elbow. He moved the receiver so that he could read its message.

"Dr. Firmston has just returned from Sector 23. He has brought in eleven for destruction." He ran his finger down the report. "Eleven certainties. There are——" He glanced up and Firmston stared blandly back. "There are no normals."

He listened, staring at the paper. Firmston went to the window and rapped automatically on the Geiger dial.

"They'll be disposed of this morning," Crawley said heavily and rang off.

"Cheer up," Firmston said without turning. He tapped the dial again. "Intensity 32. It seems to have settled down." He had said the same thing each morning for the past year. Crawley grunted.

"Anything troubling you?" the other asked, turning and smiling. Younger than the rest of his colleagues, his face was round and smooth, his eyes carefully assessing. In a State Hospital, promotion came only when a superior died or was removed.

"For the record," Crawley said bleakly, "I had my check-up last week. I'm still in the best of health. Physically and mentally. My emotions are still under control. In the eyes of the State I'm still capable of carrying on the profession of licensed murderer."

"Euthanasic Specialist," Firmston corrected ironically.

They were on the brink of another argument. A pointless, one-sided argument, for Firmston always impressed the vital necessity of their work, ignoring the question of human emotion and the fact that the mutant births were not only the results of radiation but were nature's way of fighting for survival.

He would call it self-protection, mankind guarding itself against a contaminated future. And in one way he would be right. He would say that

Crawley knew what he was coming in to when he decided to become a doctor. But then he wouldn't be right. Forty years ago the accumulated fall-out of the twentieth century was only just beginning to have an effect. Forty years ago the mutant birth average had been very low. Isolated cases. Something that a man could take in his stride. Not like the senseless, mass-murder of today.

What Firmston refused to admit was the fact that the mutants fell into two distinct groups. The first—and by far the larger—freaks and monsters for whom the prick of the needle was both a blessing and a necessity. But the second, those they called the border-lines, that was very different. They were only destroyed because man was afraid of them. Afraid of new powers and senses. Afraid of nature's answer to the poisoned atmosphere.

Crawley looked up into the smooth, bland face.

"Call it what you will," he said. "When you've been here as long as I have——" He broke off, realizing the futility of argument.

"It's a lovely morning," Firmston said deliberately, turning back to the window.

Crawley looked at his watch, rose and went over to the Geiger dial. He noted the pointer and entered a figure on the wall chart. From somewhere beyond the white-tiled walls a child started to cry.

Firmston nodded his head towards the sound. "Have you been on your rounds this morning?"

Crawley nodded at the unnecessary question. "Sixteen births since midday yesterday. Only two normal." He pressed his palms against his eyes. "Two were border-lines. I hoped—I did the tests twice. They were both Espers."

They had been normal in appearance. Perfect specimens. It had taken all his will-power to use the syringe on them. But he had had no alternative. The guards had been there, watchful, noting every move, making sure that he showed no sign of weakness or wavering.

Two perfectly formed human beings in miniature. If they had been allowed to live they would one day have helped bolster dwindling humanity. Twelve people died and one normal child was born. That was how it went. A question of simple mathematics. But the State didn't see it that way. It refused to acknowledge that mankind's only hope of survival was to allow the border-lines to live and breed. They would be strong and virile, thriving on the poisoned air, using it to further their own peculiar powers.

"Espers," Firmston said significantly, "are the most potentially dangerous of all."

Crawley sighed. Ignorance was fear. Man had always been afraid of the things he couldn't understand. Extra sensory perception, the result of stimulation of little-used parts of the brain, was something beyond his ken. He refused to accept the fact that such developments were the logical step forward in the course of evolution; that good might come out of the evil ignorance of the past.

Evolution had to go on. Crawley felt sure of that. The certainty was the only thing that made life tolerable. Nature, baulked, would try and try again until one day she produced perfection. A child capable of defying man's tests and growing to maturity with its new power kept secret.

He straightened his shoulders, becoming the official Senior Euthanasist. "The eleven that you brought in?"

"In the Euth Ward, Sir." The title was an afterthought.

"Brinton?"

Firmston shook his head, smiling a little. "He hasn't got back yet."

Crawley looked at his watch again. "He should have been in over an hour ago." He buttoned his white coat. "We'd better get to work."

He took a syringe and eleven capsules from the glass-fronted cupboard in the corner.

* * *

When it was all over he sat at his desk and entered names and figures in a ledger. Eleven more. One hundred and fifty already for the week. He leaned back in his chair and stared through the window at fields that were greener than grass was ever meant to be and trees that were monstrous in size and shape.

The radiation content had reached a peak. Soon it should start to fall. But the evil it had brought would persist for centuries to come. And so the killings would continue. That was the law. Doctors had become judges and executioners; the green-uniformed guards the watchful juries.

Breeding was enforced. Bear children, the people were ordered, or lose privileges. Your doctor will be God and decide which of your off-spring shall live. And if you refuse to allow the doctor's decision then the guards are there to enforce the law of the State.

After a while a man's mind became warped. Perhaps he inclined to sadism. Like Firmston, taking an ill-concealed pleasure in the very act of killing. Or else a man weakened, becoming open to temptation. Leave this one. It is harmless. It has failed the tests but it can do no harm.

He had weakened. But then, he had never been strong. Brinton, he felt sure, was the same.

The guards were there all the time; each time he went round the wards. A clever man might fool their watchful eyes. Even the over-seeing psychiatrists could be fooled. Once a month each doctor lay on a couch and felt the prick of the needle. And while he slept his mind was probed for the first signs of weakness and inefficiency.

Crawley smiled mirthlessly. So far he had escaped detection. Brinton, too. Grey-haired, shambling Brinton who was the oldest of all the doctors. He had been passed as efficient. Until the next check, or the one after. Then he would lose his status as a doctor and all the accompanying privileges. But there would be no release from the hospital. Once a man had entered the Euthanasic Service he was there for life. He would be relegated to the company of ghosts who did the sordid menial tasks. Working in the cellars in a dimly-lit world of furnaces and boilers.

And there would be a vacancy to be filled and someone would move up. Someone young and keen and unsmirched by weakness. Someone like Firmston.

Brinton was late reporting in. That in itself was sufficient cause for suspicion. He might have run into trouble. On the other hand he had the most distant rural sector. Sector 24. Small villages, isolated cottages, farming communities. Ten square miles of fields and trees and hills.

Crawley leaned forward to press a button at the side of his desk. When a green-overalled orderly came to stand in front of him he asked: "Has Dr. Brinton reported in at reception?"

The orderly was deferential. "No, sir. Not yet."

Crawley swivelled to face the glazed map that filled the wall behind him. Sector 24 was in the foothills. There was no central village where a call could be made to discover the reason for his absence. He was already three hours overdue. Unhurried, stolid, never rattled. There had to be some good reason why he was so late.

He swung back to the orderly, issuing an unnecessary order in place of an outright dismissal.

"Tell him to report to me the minute he arrives."

When he was alone he reached for the phone. He spoke to the Psychiatric Centre, tersely, tonelessly, consoling himself with the thought that they would already have received word of Brinton's absence.

He replaced the receiver, rose and went over to the window, pressing the side so that the glass moved away. The poison-filled air was deceptively sweet with the richness of grass. A window-box was filled with long-trumpeted blue flowers. He fingered the rubbery petals, wondering absently if a name had been put to them yet. Each passing season produced new types of plants.

Beyond the branches of the twisted trees were the low grey roofs of the Veterinary Establishment. They had their problems; but it was easier to dispose of a deformed beast than a human being.

A car, with two ambulances following, swept through the hospital gates with more than necessary speed. He wondered where the rest of Brinton's convoy was. One ambulance and three lorries must still be out at Sector 24. Brinton must have come across something that was beyond the capabilities of thirty guards. And that was unthinkable. Unless——

Crawley felt a stir of elation. There had to be a reason. It might be the thing he had been hoping for.

Brinton, his face expressionless, came in a few minutes later. Firmston followed, his eyes eager. Brinton had no papers to lay on the desk. He offered none of the formal words of report. Instead:

"We've met something new. Something we can't cope with. A woman in one of those damned shacks, miles from anywhere." It had always been one of his mock complaints that part of his tour could only be made on foot.

Firmston smiled. "Well now; Brinton stumped at last. This is one for the book."

Crawley spoke more sharply than he intended.

"What do you mean—can't cope? Trouble with the parents?"

"The parents?" Brinton shook his massive head. "Oh no. They had already notified me of the impending births." He corrected himself. "Birth."

"Birth—or births?" Crawley asked.

The other chose his words carefully. "When I arrived there were two. When I left—four." He ran his fingers through his hair. "Something new. Very new. The guards have cordoned the area off. I left one of the ambulances. Not that it will be any good."

"Quads," Firmston said with the suspicion of a sneer. "Not unusual."

Brinton seemed to note his presence for the first time. He grimaced. "No. Not quads. At least, not as we know them."

Crawley reached for the phone.

"Emergency. Priority. A car, immediately." He looked over the receiver at Brinton. "Portable gas chamber? Gas projectiles?"

"We can try," the other said.

"Appearance?" Crawley snapped. "Size? Texture?"

Brinton shrugged. "Nothing that conforms."

"We'll pick up a gas gun on our way out," Crawley said. He could hear the car in the yard below before he had replaced the receiver.

He said: "You know what this means? So far as you're concerned?"

"I do." Brinton nodded. "Admission of failure. Weakness."

Firmston smiled. "I take it you have no objections if I come with you? You may need help."

Brinton said: "I've brought eight in with me. All certainties. No borderlines."

"That's something," Firmston said, and opened the door with studied politeness.

Crawley sat at the back of the car with Brinton. The heavy gas gun was propped in one corner. Firmston lounged at the front, one elbow resting on the open window.

Brinton spoke only once, and then as if thinking aloud.

"The first life on this planet was the amoeba. The simplest form of existence. Then it grew and in time found a new element, a new dimension. It crawled out on to the land. Then it became man. Other forms were discarded on the way, becoming extinct. Now the new element has become untenable. Perhaps——" He paused, fingering his jaw. "Perhaps mankind has decided to take another step up the ladder of evolution. Into a new dimension. Forwards . . ." He puzzled. "Or is it backwards?"

His question went unanswered. The car raced through the countryside. Women standing in front of their homes crossed themselves at its passing.

It stopped at a place where the road divided and where a path led across ploughed fields to a group of cottages. The guards were green insects against the rich browns of the soil. Crawley filled a syringe and placed it carefully in his pocket, aware of Brinton's scrutiny. Brinton tapped the gun.

"Even this——" He shook his head.

The guards saluted, their eyes curious, as they left the car to follow the faintly marked path. Brinton carried the gun in ond hand and the bulky cartridge in the other. Firmston smiled and whistled through his teeth. The sun was warm on their shoulders.

As they neared the cottages Brinton took the lead. A dull-eyed countryman watched their approach from his post at an open cottage door. A woman in a grey dress half-leaned against his shoulder.

Brinton spoke back without turning. "That's the mother."

"A quick recovery," Firmston said lightly.

The parents stood aside at their approach. Crawley took out the syringe, keeping it hidden in his palm.

Brinton asked briefly. "Still four?"

The man shook his head. "We don't know." He added, "Sir." Then: "We haven't been in there since you went."

Brinton led the way into the semi-darkness of a passage. He stopped at a door.

"In here," he said, and slipped the cartridge into the gun with a decisive click of sound.

Crawley threw the door open and went in with needle poised.

After the glare of the fields the soft light that filtered through the curtained, narrow window was insufficient for him to see anything beyond indistinct shapes. Then a shadow beneath the window became a bed, the sheets thrown back. More shadows became chairs against a dark-papered wall.

But he saw nothing that moved.

Not at first. Not until his eyes, gradually becoming accustomed to the light, caught the glow that wavered and danced in one corner. And after a while he could see the things that had been born to the dull-faced people who waited outside.

He watched them while they writhed and shifted and entwined. They were shapeless and transparent; faceless, bodiless and soundless. They were repulsive and alien and yet he knew that he had seen such things before. But not this size. Not—

Then Brinton was by his side and Firmston thrusting his way between them.

"Unicellular," Brinton said steadily. "Propagating by nucleus division. Protoplasmic. Amoeba. But intelligent."

Crawley emptied the contents of the syringe on the floor. Then he stepped back involuntarily as a wisp of something that was little more than smoke came to hover over the small pool of liquid.

"The logical answer," Brinton said. "Nature has tried everything else. We killed them all. Now she has gone right back to the beginning again."

He held up the gun. "I can't use this. I knew from the start that an end had to come sometime. Even if I thought it would be effective. . . . Something has to live."

"Well?" Firmston said to Crawley. "You're the senior. Make him use it." And when nobody moved. "Somebody has to destroy them." There was almost pleasure in his voice. "Give me the gun."

Crawley felt an echo of the shock that killed Firmston. It ripped through his mind and exploded in his thoughts. He saw Brinton reeling back, his hands in front of his face. He saw Firmston lying still on the floor.

After a long time he found his voice.

"I knew that one day this would happen. That something would be born that would defy destruction. But I didn't think it would be like this—back to the beginning. I wanted perfection. . . ."

"In their way," Brinton said gently, "they are perfection. They are alive and indestructible." He laid his hand on Crawley's shoulder. "We can't do anything more here. We may as well get back. There is a report to be made. Two admissions of failure. One doctor killed in the execution of his duty. I wonder how they'll sort this lot out?"

Outside, the sun was dazzling. Crawley looked at the ring of guards. Their green shapes wavered and blurred. The weapons they carried had suddenly become as useless as the men who bore them.

He felt a certain satisfaction in the knowledge that life, of a sort, was to continue. One day, he felt sure, evolution would complete the circle and a new race of men would arise, born of the amoeba that crouched in the dark corner of the cottage.

But that day was centuries away.

Now was today and man was no longer the dominant species. He had destroyed himself. He had become extinct. As extinct, already as all the other, long-forgotten forms of life.

THE BANQUETING HALL

ERIC WALMSLEY

Illustrated by Del

IT WAS A TEARFUL day. The rain swept across the flat Norfolk landscape in sudden sharp gusts, thrashing against the solitary walker's face with icy freshness. Across the marsh to the left of the road came the cry of a grey goose. Disturbed in its scavenging a great white-winged gull flew bleakly upwards, to settle with a flutter of wings some fifty yards away in the black fen soil. Already the light was beginning to fade and soon it would be dark. When the sun rose the next morning the Gatney villagers would be preparing to make their Christmas communion in the gaunt church that loomed through the mist ahead.

The traveller adjusted his rucksack and glanced at his watch. It was four o'clock. Another hour should see him at the inn, with hot buttered toast and steaming tea and a blazing fire for comfort.

Well, it would certainly be welcome. "You're mad, John Mellors," he told himself, not for the first time that day. "As mad as a hatter." But then reason reminded him once more: "You don't want to spend Christmas in your London lodgings, and the last thing your landlady's family want is to have you hanging around just then. You don't get much time off from the bank. You've no friends or relatives. Bird-watching's your hobby. You might as well do it now as at any other time. And you're walking to Gatney because the branch line was closed three years ago, because it wasn't raining when you arrived at the main line station and there was an hour to wait for the bus, because it still wasn't raining when the bus passed you on the road —and because you happen to like walking, anyway. Mad as it may look to anyone else, it all makes sense to *you*."

Lengthening his stride, he stepped purposefully out towards the distant village.

The "Grocers Arms" was as incongruous in such as setting as its name. Situated next to the church and hemmed in on that side by graves, it was a long, three-storey Victorian building that loured like a fortress above the street lamp's spluttering light and domineered the grey flint cottages clustered anxiously nearby. In such sombre surroundings it seemed to throw down a challenge. Take it or leave it, there it was. Those who rejected it would not be regretted. It had it own business to attend to.

Interested in spite of the attractions of food and shelter, Mellors carried on past the front door in order to look at the inn from the churchyard side. Leaning over the low stone wall, he saw from the reflection of the

lights within the building that it was shaped like a capital T, except that half-way down the upright a large modern extension, like a war-time hut, had been added. The latter was so large and so monstrously, so grotesquely disproportionate that it looked in that eerie light like an obscene shadow of the church tower beyond. There seemed to be no reason for it, no sense in it. Like the stump of a forefinger whose two top joints have been amputated, it pointed crudely towards the darkened church, the tombstones and the dead souls beneath them. To Mellors it all seemed oddly blasphemous and he found himself shivering.

At that moment the lights in the extension were switched on and at once the whole atmosphere changed. No longer was there a sense of evil, of something dark and satanic. Instead there was revealed a large and cheerful dining-room in which rows of tables had already been set and decorated for what was obviously going to be a Christmas Eve party. A second later the lights went out again, but not before Mellors had taken in an impression of clean white linen and gleaming silver, of shining glasses, of crackers waiting to be pulled and of coloured candles waiting to be lit. Someone had switched on the lights to see that all was well. Now, satisfied with what they had seen, they had gone away again. Nothing in the world could have been more natural, nothing less sinister.

Smiling to himself at the way his imagination had run away with him, Mellors walked slowly back to the hotel's entrance. And then an odd thought struck him. There must have been places set for at least one hundred and fifty guests. How could so small a village of farmers and fishermen support a function that size? It was out of the question. Either some wealthy person from one of the inland towns was giving a party—in which case he had chosen a strange place to do it—or visitors must be coming from miles around to make up the numbers. But people from that district of Norfolk were not by nature party-goers. . . . It was all very singular.

Reflecting that the standards at the "Grocers Arms" must be a good deal higher than he had expected, Mellors pushed open the front door and went in.

The entrance hall was empty and there was no one at the reception office. As he looked around, Mellors at once experienced an acute sense of disappointment. For far from living up to the cheerful promise of the dining-room, his present surroundings were more depressing than his worst fears had ever anticipated. Peeling wallpaper, worn linoleum, a cracked ceiling, a few wicker chairs huddled round half a dozen glass-topped tables, three or four low-watt bulbs glimmering feebly under white plastic shades, gaudy advertisements hanging crookedly on the walls, a single-bar electric fire on the far side. All these were bad enough; but it was the silence of the place above all that dispirited him; that and the stench of damp and decay. It was like a graveyard.

Forcing away the thoughts that were thrusting upwards into his conscious mind, Mellors pressed a bell-button by the reception office and wandered across to the electric fire. Bending right over it to warm his freezing hands, he wondered if there were another lounge upstairs for the residents . . . if there were any other residents . . . what they were like . . . what they were doing there . . . whether they would be going to the Christmas Eve party . . . whether by some miracle one of them might think of asking him to join them . . .

"Yes?"

The man's voice was so sudden and so unexpected that for several agonizing seconds Mellor's subconscious thoughts seized control, leaving him literally paralysed with fear. Crouched there over the pathetic little fire, he felt unable to move, unable to compel his body to turn and face the person who had come so quietly behind him. Finally, after an intense inward struggle that left him white-faced and breathless, he swung round.

Standing there was the thinnest man he had ever seen. Tall and stooping, with deep-set eyes, hollow cheeks, long bloodless fingers and clothes that hung from his shoulders like a shroud, he seemed like some gaunt skeleton that had been miraculously covered with pale, brittle flesh —flesh so brittle that it might crumble away at a tap or a touch. . . .

"You rang?"

It was all that Mellors could do to nod his head. The other stood there motionless, saying nothing. The silence dragged on. Then, with an almost savage effort, Mellors made himself speak.

"You—you are the landlord?" He paused, searching his mind. "Mr.—Mr. Lorimer?"

"I am the owner."

"I have a room reserved. My name is Mellors."

Without a word the other turned and walked over to the office. Mellors followed. A light was switched on and a register passed across for signature. He wrote in the details and then looked up in surprise.

"So you have no other visitors?" he asked.

"No."

"But the tables in the dining-room . . . the party. . . ." He nodded in the direction of the extension. "You'll be expecting company later, I take it? And perhaps some of them will be spending the night here?"

For a moment there was no answer. Then Lorimer said very slowly:

"We call it the banqueting hall. And it's private. The visitor's dining-room is in another part of the building."

He then slammed the book shut, put out the light and silently stood at the foot of the stairs waiting for Mellors to follow.

Sitting on the edge of his bed an hour later Mellors looked gloomily around him. Yes, undoubtedly the room was as depressing as the rest of the building—bleak, chilly and uncomfortable. And, like the rest of the building, it smelt of damp and decay. The mattress was hard, too, and the sheets felt as if they had not been

aired. It was lucky, he thought, that his hobby had so toughened him that he never worried very much about such matters.

He put a shilling in the meter and sat down in front of the electric fire. He felt hungry and there was a forty-five minutes wait before dinner. With a rueful smile he recalled the blazing fire and the hot buttered toast that he had once so eagerly looked forward to. In fact, the tea that Lorimer had brought him was not only weak but tepid, and the only food offered had been four half-slices of stale bread and margarine. However awful the dinner might be, it surely couldn't be worse than that.

..The tea that Lorimer had brought him. . . . Suddenly he sat up in his chair. Lorimer had shown him to his room, too. Lorimer, so far, had done everything for him—and ten to one he had made the tea as well. There were no other guests. Were there no other staff? Was he—was he, in fact, *alone* in the building with Lorimer.

For an instant the fear, the rigid, paralysing, inexplicable fear that he had known downstairs in the main lounge returned to him. Then suddenly his body relaxed as the thought crossed his mind: *the tables in the banqueting hall.* Lorimer could hardly have set and decorated them so elaborately without help. There must be some additional staff somewhere. Perhaps they were off-duty at the time of his arrival and would be coming back later in the evening. It was half-past six now: maybe they had already returned. And later there would be extra waiters coming in and extra kitchen staff—and, of course, the guests themselves. Already the inn should be waking up. There should be life and movement and company. The locals, too, should be gathering in the bars, drinking their evening pints. There must be others in the building by now. There *must.* . . .

He sat still and listened. Not a sound came to him except the whistling of the wind outside and the dripping of the rain against the window. Switching off the fire, he moved swiftly acros to the door and opened it. The passage outside was in darkness. He turned off the bedroom light, shut his eyes and concentrated with all his willpower on picking up some new sound, however slight. But there was no new sound.

He ran down the stairs and out into the village street. Wherever the bars were, their entrances must be on this side. He was in the middle of the T and the lounge was on the left-hand side as he faced the building, next to the graveyard and the church. The most likely place for them would be on the other side. Yes, there they were—away at the far end, a public and a saloon, and the lights were on in each. Somebody must be in one or the other, if only a barman. . . .

But he was wrong. Both bars were completely deserted. And although he rang a bell and hammered on the saloon's counter for a full ten minutes, no one came.

Dinner was almost as unattractive a meal as tea. It was served in a bleak, uncurtained room behind the two bars, facing the sea and the sand-

dunes. Lorimer waited on him without speaking, moving around the room in utter silence. There was something uncanny about the quietness of his movements, as uncany as the glazed, almost transparent appearance of his hands as he collected the plates and dishes from the table and replaced them with others. It was a relief when it was all over and Mellors could return to the tiny fire in the main lounge and sip a cup of lukewarm coffee.

Or was it? For still no one came into the hotel, there was still no sign of any other human being in the building except Lorimer—if Lorimer were a human being. . . .

At a quarter past eight the coffee cup was collected and Mellors went upstairs to fetch a book from his rucksack. Common sense told him to stay in his bedroom and read in front of his own fire. Bleak as the place was, it was no worse than downstairs and at least it was more private. But some instinct which he could not explain—curiosity, perhaps— made him go back.

As soon as he had settled in his chair for the second time he knew that Lorimer was watching him. He got up and walked around, glancing into the reception office as he passed. But no one was there. As casually as he could he continued round the room until he had examined every possible hiding-place, but there was no sign of Lorimer. Yet he was there somewhere . . . watching. Mellors knew it: knew it more certainly than he had ever known anything before in his life.

Returning to his chair, he picked up his book and tried to read. For three hours he sat there, hardly conscious of the printed words, instinctively turning the pages when he felt he had stared at the one in front of him for long enough, aware the whole time of the unseen eyes that never left him, that took in every movement he made and noted every single thing he did. And during the whole of those three hours no car pulled up at the main entrance, no other person came into the room and there was no sound from any other part of the building. The silence was unbroken, absolute and complete.

Finally, at a quarter past ten, he went to bed. It was significant, he thought, that the minute he turned the first corner on the staircase the downstairs lights were switched off.

At two in the morning he was awakened by the chiming of the church clock. Heavy with sleep, he turned over, rearranged his pillow and prepared to settle down again. As he closed his eyes the deep, booming note of the hour-bell echoed in his memory. It was like a toll for a funeral. The mourners were standing in the churchyard in their black clothes . . . a woman was weeping . . . a man put his arm round her shoulders and tried to comfort her . . . flowers were placed on a tiny grave . . . a child of two had died. . . .

Suddenly he sat bolt upright. *That was the first time he had ever heard the church clock chime.* He could swear to it. Not once in the nine hours since his arrival had it sounded—not

at five when he was outside leaning against the churchyard wall, nor later when he was deliberately listening for anything that would break the surrounding silence. If it had chimed, he would have heard it—and welcomed it too. But it had not. That was definite. Yet now that deep, echoing boom had come to him at two o'clock on Christmas morning . . . Why . . . ? *Why . . . ?*

All he knew was that he had to find out, and quickly. In an instant he was out of bed and pulling on his clothes. The small torch he always brought with him was slipped into his jacket pocket. A moment later he had closed the bedroom door behind him and was easing his way soundlessly along the landing towards the stairs.

His hand on the top banister, he paused to listen. Not a sound broke the stillness. He lifted his head as if sniffing the air, as though trying to sense rather than see the presence of some watcher. But no, he was entirely alone: of that he was sure. Wherever Lorimer might be, he was no longer in that part of the building. He was either in bed or . . .

"We call it the banqueting hall," Lorimer had said. Who were "we"? In a completely deserted hotel, with apparently neither staff nor other visitors, he had used the first person plural as though it were the most natural thing in the world. He could not have meant his business partners, because he had none. And "banqueting hall" was the last sort of expression the Gatney villagers would use. If they referred to the room at all, they would probably have called it "the annexe", or perhaps "the big hut". No, clearly he must have meant "my friends and I". In which case, who were his friends? And where were they now? Was it for them that the tables in the banqueting hall had been set with such care and checked early the previous evening *as though they were going to be used that very night*? And again, why, why, *why* was the place so utterly silent . . . ?

Stepping softly down the stairs, Mellors darted across the lounge and gently unlocked the front door.

Outside in the cold night air he was relieved to find that it was no longer raining. The clouds had cleared and a full moon over the sea lit up the houses opposite with a soft yellow glow. For a moment he stood there relishing the freshness of the atmosphere, luxuriating in the contrast with the damp building he had just left. A second later he was moving quietly along the hotel's shadow to the corner of the churchyard.

On the edge of the darkness he paused. Yes, this was undoubtedly the right place to come to, he decided. From here he could cover both the church and the banqueting hall. To have approached the latter from the inside would have increased the risk of discovery and lessened the likelihood of solving the mystery of the chiming clock. Not that there was any direct evidence that the two were connected . . . no *direct* evidence. But they could be connected—his instinct told him that they were; and so far his instinct had not let him down. He would trust it a little longer.

Cautiously emerging into the moonlight, he took a quick glance at the banqueting hall. The side that faced him was in shadow and his immediate impressions were of silence and complete darkness. Then suddenly he stiffened. The banqueting hall was *not* in complete darkness. He had been wrong. There was a thin vertical strip of light coming from a window near the centre through what was obviously a chink in a pair of very thick curtains. There was somebody there . . . somebody utterly silent . . . Lorimer. . . .

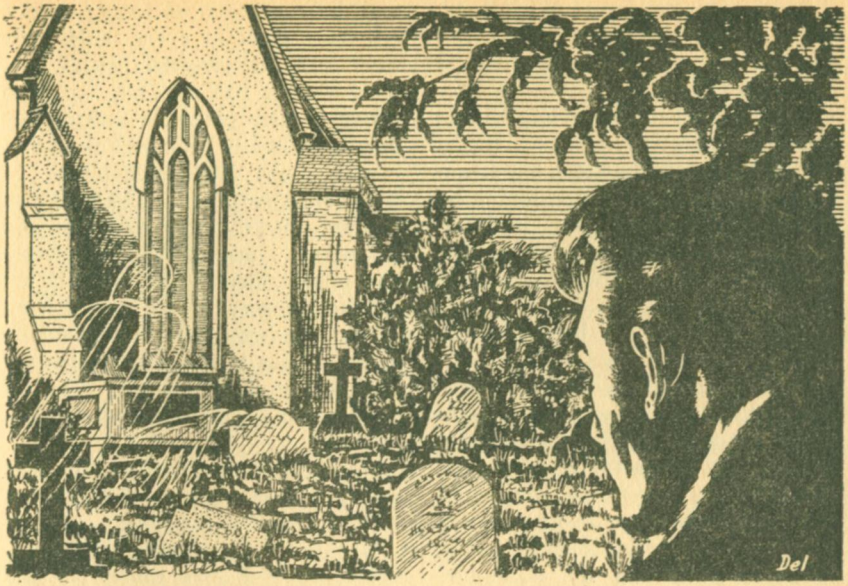
In an instant he had climbed over the low stone wall and was feeling his way carefully along the side of the building. He turned right on reaching the corner of the T, following the line until it joined the centre section, where he paused for a moment before continuing. But he heard nothing. The strip of light was still there ahead of him, but now it was only some fifteen yards away. So far all seemed to be well.

He moved on, keeping close to the building's protection. He moved as fast as he could without making any noise, but the ground beneath him was curiously uneven and he had to step warily. Once an unexpected ridge hidden under a patch of long grass nearly caused him to stumble, but he saved himself by catching hold of a nearby windowsill. A moment later his foot all but twisted under him as he stepped into an unseen hollow. But by now the fifteen yards had been reduced to ten and still the light beckoned him forward. It seemed almost friendly just then, as if it were waiting to show him what went on behind the curtain: a little slit of brightness, of man-made brightness, that had no more to do with the supernatural than . . .

Suddenly he stopped dead. Something was happening in the graveyard to his left. It was a shadowy figure moving . . . moving swiftly . . . from the direction of the church towards the banqueting hall. In utter silence it sped towards him . . . came nearer . . . veered to its left . . . and disappeared behind the extension on the seaward side. It was a creature of human shape, its body bent forward in its haste, its clothes some loose flowing garment that seemed to swirl about it as it ran. But its movements were never those of any human, for no human could have moved so smoothly or so silently. It glided over the ground like a phantom: and whoever or whatever it was, it was not Lorimer.

And now it was behind the banqueting hall . . . or was it? Was it perhaps *in* the banqueting hall, having entered through some unseen door on the far side? Mellors stood for a moment wondering, determined to discover the truth, yet uneasy in his mind whether the truth would bear discovery. And as he stood there another half-thought—an awareness almost—gradually forced itself upon him and took on conscious reality. *The soil beneath his feet was moving. . . .*

For a second he waited, scarcely trusting the evidence of his senses. Then in a sudden freezing rush of utter panic he sank to the ground and crouched there shivering. And now he



could feel the movement with the greater part of his body, with his knees, his forearms and above all his hands: a stirring of life, as if a child were struggling in the soil below for release from its mother's womb. But this was a silent struggle, intense, violent and grotesque; and a moment later it had ended. It had ended and he felt the ground go flat beneath him, its labour over; and at the same instant he saw a second shadowy figure emerge like a wraith from immediately behind him and skim away across the long grass to the far side of the banqueting hall.

And then he knew the truth, finally and absolutely. Now there was a rational explanation for the hotel's musty atmosphere, for the stench of decay, for the silence. The place was like a graveyard, he had once thought. . . . But it *was* a graveyard, built upon the bones of the ancient dead: and the ancient dead, denied peace in their last resting-place, had had their revenge. No wonder the Gatney villagers, who also knew the truth, wanted no part in such things.

But Lorimer . . . Lorimer . . . *Lorimer* . . . ?

All caution abandoned, Mellors staggered to his feet and stumbled towards the banqueting hall. There was no question now of his peering through the gap in the curtains. He had to know quickly and beyond all doubt, to know everything at whatever the cost, to be utterly sure. And time would not wait.

Making for the corner of the building, he kept straight on for a few yards and then turned down its far side—the side he had never yet seen.

It turned out to be much as he had expected. There was the door in the far corner nearest to the hotel, and it was shut. The rest of the extension, lit by the light of the moon, was no different from the other side: black, ugly and utilitarian, its windows darkened by curtains, its walls still glistening damply with the rain that had swept into them from the sea.

For a brief moment he stood listening. Then, suddenly cautious, he crept carefully over the last few yards, scarcely disturbing the long grass in his noiseless progress. He came up to the door, touched the handle, paused . . . then gripped and slowly turned it. A slight push and the door had opened wide enough for him to be able to peer into the room. Gently releasing the handle, he put his eye to the gap, blinked for an instant in the sudden bright light—and then gradually brought the scene into focus. There was the clean white table linen and the gleaming silver that he had seen in that brief earlier glimpse . . . and the glasses . . . and the coloured candles. . . .

But now the candles were alight and the room was no longer empty. At every place at every table there were lean, hollow-eyed figures . . . men, women and children . . . with hands of pale porcelain and clothes that hung loosely from their shoulders like shrouds . . . living skeletons . . . Lorimer's kinsfolk . . . and all of them looking towards the doorway and laughing . . . laughing wildly, horribly and utterly silently . . . while at the far end Lorimer himself rocked from side to side in a fit of noiseless merriment, his hands spread helplessly on the table in front of him, his eyes deep-burning yet strangely expressionless. . . . .

For a full minute the laughter went on. Then suddenly it stopped. And as it stopped, Lorimer spoke.

"Come in, Mr. Mellors," he said. "The hour-bell has tolled for the feast of the dead and you have answered its summons. Open the door, come in and join us." He rose to his feet. "You are welcome, Mr. Mellors. At last you are welcome. At last . . . at last. . . ."

His voice died away to a whisper and he moved slowly towards the doorway, his arms spread wide in a gesture of admission. And Mellors knew that there could be no rejecting it now.

POSSESSED

Every stone a devil, and humanity stripped to the bone

PHILIP SPRING

DAY AND A NIGHT I had crawled on my belly across the rocks, looking for water, and had crawled no further than an ox can plough in a single turn. The bone in my right leg was sticking through my flesh. The sun had no pity.

An old olive, like an ugly shape from a nightmare, mocked me with its little splash of shadow I could never reach. My lips were thickened like ropes and I pressed them in my sweaty palms to ease the pain. "Peppino," I told myself, "your hour has come."

I rolled half over, staring at the wound in my leg. The bone was now white as a peeled sapling and the blood had clotted to the colour of wine lees. I rolled back. The sea and the sky swung drunkenly. I grasped a stone in each hand to give me strength to die.

"Stone. All my life has been stone," said an echoing voice inside me. "Stony earth from which I came . . . comfort me now."

The voice seemed to expand. It was torn away in a black wind. Dark purple waves rolled at me. Then from far away, then nearer, another voice was saying, "Here. Drink this." A round, cool something was put between my lips. And I drank.

I have only two other memories of that time. One was of being carried, and knowing I lay on a wooden plank. The other was of my head between a woman's breasts, and her hand tight over my mouth to stop me screaming as the bone was forced back into my leg.

It was Mario who found me, Lucrezia who nursed me back to health. They lived on the slopes of Etna, lower down than I had wandered that day. It was only by chance Mario had found me. One of his goats had strayed. He had seen me face down on the rocks, and from the very spot where I had slipped.

"But what were you *doing* up there?" Mario had already asked me a dozen times, his voice sullen and suspicious. "Only fools go up there where the evil things are." And a dozen times I had answered him, "I don't know. I'm a wanderer, maybe." And the last time, when I had noticed Lucrezia's eyes on my mouth, I had added, "Maybe it was fate."

He had a narrow face, with sunken eyes and high cheekbones, and these gave him a dead look, like a skull speaking, except that his eyes were bright.

"Fate?" he repeated angrily. "Il Diavolo, call it. Up there are things, shapes. Nameless things. Up there they will come without your beckoning."

I laughed. "These evil things you talk about, my friend. They aren't up there. They're here." I tapped my breast, then my head. "Inside a man. You. Me. Lucrezia here."

He shoved back his chair angrily on the stone floor. "Time we got on with some work," he said roughly.

He thrust the hoe into my hands and came out behind me, grumbling. He always had a job for me now. I smiled grimly. I didn't do the work because it helped me get back the strength and use of my leg. I did it because Mario refused to leave me alone with Lucrezia.

Besides his goats he had a little patch of barley, and a few vines. The soil went down no further than a man could thrust his hand up to the wrist. But his holding, no bigger than the piazza I had once seen in Catania, yielded the two of them wine and cheese and bread.

Mario was not the beast of burden. One evening, for two minutes when he had gone out behind the wall, Lucrezia had put her elbows on the wooden table and whispered savagely, "That—*pig*! Always it is me that does the work. Always it is me he drives out into the sun while he dreams here of the money he will never get. Always it is *me*, Lucrezia, that slaves yoked to the plough. It is my sweat that grows his vines." Her eyes flicked like scorpions. "Some day, Peppino, I will kill him." I laughed. I had heard women talk like this before. Who is to do the work if they refuse?

But this time, as I hoed and the pale yellow dust thickened about my feet, I began to think. Stitched with waxed thread in my hip pocket were two thousand lire. It was all I had. But it would some time buy me a shirt, a pair of boots and a drink or two. Always I kept fingering the tight patch this made on my hip.

Neither Mario nor Lucrezia had found it while I raved with my broken leg. I would rather hoe for Mario than part with any of this to him. But . . . maybe Lucrezia was worth the price. Or better still, let Mario do his own hoeing, in some other place. Lucrezia . . . she and I . . . this place. . . .

I liked her best in the candlelight. Her flesh was creamy, like the oleander, and her breasts were luscious, weighty like oleander blossoms which bend the branches. I looked up at Mario who was pretending to mend a gap in the stone wall by the goat shed. I looked hard at his neck, and then at my hands. Then I went on hoeing.

I had got near to the stone wall when I heard Lucrezia behind me. I turned round. There was a devil in her face. She had night-black hair, with eyes the colour of gentians. She grasped a jagged lump of red stone in her hand. "Kill him," she whispered, offering me the stone and nodding towards Mario, whose back was turned.

I went on hoeing.

"Peppino mio," she whispered savagely. "Now. Now. Kill him. Then the two of us . . ."

I laughed, looking sidelong at her. Her moist red lips were twisted and cruel. "And how are we going to

explain a man with his head knocked in?" I said softly. "No, no. Maybe I've got a better thought than that." Just then Mario came shuffling up suspiciously, and I laughed again and went on hoeing.

But as I worked I was thinking. I traced Mario's figure in the soil with my hoe. With its point I gouged two deep pits for his eyes. Then slowly I chopped off the head.

For two days and nights I wondered how to get Mario up the mountain path with me. Finally it was the man's own greed that maddened me.

He had been grumbling all day. Then suddenly he swung round on me with an oath. "And tomorrow out you go! How long have I fed you already? Whispering to my woman, eating my bread . . . am I such a fool as to stand more? Maledetto, not a lire have you paid me. No money, you say. But what is that I have seen in your hip pocket?"

I smiled easily, but I was terrified that he had guessed about the money. "That is a patch of cloth, my friend. The lining is torn. I am not so rich that I can afford new breeches." His eyes glittered, and I knew he didn't believe me.

That night he came stealthy as the lightest air in the olives, into the loft where I slept above the goats. Moonlight came through the cracks of the roof. With one eye open, I saw his head like a dim swaying skull, bloodless, and then by a gleam through a lower crack, something like a rope in his hand. I sprang upright in the straw. "What is it, my friend?" Mario swore beneath his breath. "Basta! Nothing. Nothing. One of the goats loose, maybe."

I jumped at him. "And what are the goats doing up here, you fool?" Now I saw he had a rope in his hand. I grabbed it, looking at him. "Give me that money," he snarled. A bar of light fell across his mean, twisted mouth, and above it in the gloom I saw the death's-head sockets of his eyes with two points of light flaming at me. I flung the rope in his face. "Get out," I said. Stumbling, muttering, he went.

I lay there thinking. The goats!

Before sun-up I was out. I drove one of the goats out, thrashed it down the mountain side, herded it into a patch of maize. When I got back Mario was out looking for me.

"You were right, my friend," I called out, getting nearer. "One of the goats is loose. I've seen it up the mountain side." I pointed high up. "Get your pipe. We'll find it."

He looked at me suspiciously, then turned back into the shed to count the goats. He came out, and spat with vexation. "Is it far up?" he asked nervously.

"We'll have to see," I laughed. In two minutes he was stumbling upwards behind me. I could feel his eyes on my hip pocket.

We went up past the last eucalyptus trees, then the last two pines. Now and again Mario stopped to sound a few notes on his pipe. Its thin fluting seemed no more than a grasshopper's in that wide silence and the early dawn. There was a mist among the prickly pear higher up. It was im-

possible to see any goat. The mist seemed to heave like a mass of thin grey flesh. Mario's terror increased.

"Diavolo," he muttered. "I'm cold." The sweat was thick on his upper lip. "There are voices. We'll be possessed."

"Ah, the voices," I smiled. "What are they saying?"

"Evil. In every stone, a devil."

We had come to the ledge from which I had slipped. Down below I could see the gaunt olive, split into three trunks, with a ghostly head of crooks and clutching fingers.

"Evil? What is evil?" I laughed, edging behind him. With my knee in his back and one hand at his mean, shrunken neck, I pushed.

Lucrezia came up to meet me. I watched her hips swaying, the easy welcome of her breasts. Already at a distance she knew.

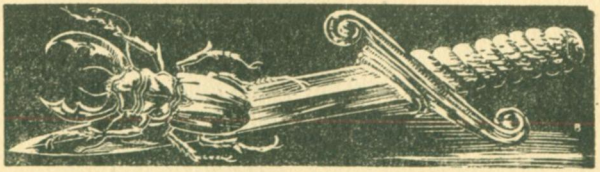
We never said a word. With linked hands we went slowly back. Only after she had lifted a stone behind the door, taken out from under it a bottle of wine and offered the bottle to me, did she speak. "You will not yoke me to the plough, Peppino mio?" she asked.

I looked at the red-gold wine in the sun. "We shall see," I said.

It was good to sleep in Mario's bed. It had goatskins laid over the brushwood and Lucrezia's breasts for a headrest. Her fingers played in my hair and her lips were like ripe medlars.

It was the sound of mule bells, or maybe a market cart lower down in the valley, which woke me up. I laid my hand where last night it had fallen dreamily on Lucrezia's thigh. But Lucrezia wasn't there.

The first thing I saw was a knife on the bed, and the hip of my breeches all slashed and cut. Then I saw she had taken her porcelain fish, her lucky charm, from the window ledge. And I knew she would never come back.



OLD SOLDIERS NEVER LIE

YOUNGMAN CARTER

Illustrated by Vera Jarman

FTER THE MYSTERY of the *Marie Celeste* and the identity of Jack the Ripper the world holds no more remarkable minor problem than that of Dr. Robert Gabbitas who walked unseen out of the condemned cell of Islington Gaol ("The Felons' Hole") on a Sunday evening in December 1899 and was never seen again.

The Police, the Home Office and the Prison Commissioners have always maintained a bland and complete silence on the subject. The Governor of Islington, the late Colonel Sir James Cox-Codrington, V.C., never even mentions the incident in his memoirs. It is true that he also omits the battle of Rorkes Drift: perhaps he disapproved of both events.

Nor do the newspapers of the day shed much light, for their attention was elsewhere. The old Queen was dying; there was war in South Africa; Mafeking was beseiged by the Boers. The new century was about to be born. *The Times*, however, was in proper form. It produced the story with masterly brevity:

"Condemned Man Escapes"
(London, Tuesday)

"A condemned man escaped from Islington Prison on Sunday last at about 6 p.m. He is described as Robert Gabbitas, a Doctor of Medicine. The Police are making enquiries."

(From a Correspondent)

The *Morning Post* reported the following day, adding that Gabbitas had been convicted at the Central Criminal Court by a jury before Mr. Justice Entwhistle for the murder by poison* of two women, his wife and his housekeeper. He had been in practice in Hendon, then a village outside London. Interested readers were invited to refer to back numbers for reports of the trial.

This, fantastic as it may seem, is virtually all there is in the way of contemporary material. Yet there is no parallel for it since the days of Jack Shepherd.

After the closing of Newgate Gaol before its demolition in 1903, Islington had a brief spell of gloomy notoriety. It was old, hideous, dangerously unhygienic and miserably cold. Its surrounding wall was five feet thick and between the condemned cell and the outer world were four locked doors that would have defied a siege. Dr. Gabbitas walked, it seems, through all of them, into a

* The poison was antimony. This is one of the last examples of its use for criminal purposes, since it is easier to detect than arsenic, which was then becoming widely known.

vacuum which has surrounded him ever since.

The *Piccadilly Magazine* of 1901 was the first to realize the possibilities of the story. It published what purported to be a full account of the affair by a retired warder who claimed to have been one of the two officials on duty in the cell at the time. The writer bore the unfortunate name of George Watchit and it is a matter of history that he was not using a pseudonym.

According to Mr. Watchit the Doctor was not only a man of enormous physical strength but a mesmerist into the bargain. In his presence victims passed into a coma and iron bars bent like putty in his hands. If this were even in part true it makes one wonder how the Doctor ever came to be arrested. Mr. Watchit also endowed his charge with a third attribute: he could, he said, leap and scale a twenty-foot wall with all the facility of the mythical Spring Heeled Jack himself. Reduced to plain terms it would appear that Mr. Watchit and his colleague were overcome by supernatural forces whilst their prisoner gathered up his strength and leapt into space.

It is probably because of this implausible and highly coloured nonsense that there was no great revival of interest in the story.

A more authentic contribution comes a year later from an American author, Carl Vandenberg, in his *Remarkable Escapes and Deliverances from Peril.* It is full of beautiful verbosity for connoisseurs only, but says quite a lot about the Doctor and makes one vital point. Gabbitas was a little man, balding and pop-eyed, with a formidable black moustache. The book includes the only known photograph. It shows him, part of a formal group, surrounded by the fading shoulders, knees and elbows of members of a fraternal society, the Ancient Order of Flintcrackers, perhaps. His face is completely expressionless and he wears a wide sash to which insignia are pinned.

Vandenberg adds that he was born in Hounslow in 1860, the son of a grocer, educated in Twickenham after his parents moved, qualified in medicine in Edinburgh, followed his profession for some years overseas, notably in the China station and on Tea Trade ships, and married, briefly, an English lady in Calcutta, a well-to-do widow. She survived only eighteen months, dying "of a fever" and leaving him £15,000.

His second wife, née Millicent Dawson, was also fairly wealthy for she was the daughter of a speculative builder. She brought him £10,000 in bonds and in securities and some unspecified property "overseas".

If we may leave Mr. Vandenberg for a moment, it was this property which later provided an important clue.

The author's theory of the escape itself is less rewarding. He inclines to a good part of Warden Watchit's account, but adds, as a deduction, an accomplice.

"The iron bars of the cell itself were undoubtedly smashed apart by what superhuman force no man can

guess, and the two guards were overpowered. Perhaps the dread terror of the noose, due so soon to end a life of unrepentant sin, endowed this wretched man with strength beyond our ken. The occult powers of the East may have been known to him. Suffice it to say . . ."

He continues: "Certain it is that the final wall was scaled by the aid of a rope and grappling irons, for its vast and forbidding height offered no foothold. Who can doubt that some unknown accomplice, in response to a prearranged signal, flung the fugitive the very object which should have ended his days—a rope?"

Who indeed? Vandenberg's speculations only underline the mystery. They ignore, for example, every other warder on duty, and at least three locked doors.

The next factual reference to the affair occurs in the autumn of that year and is one of those legal oddities which the law occasionally looks straight in the face and ignores.

A Doctor Frederick Amber, once the junior partner of Gabbitas and his only heir—for the will was clear and concise—applied for leave in the Courts to presume Gabbitas dead and to be granted probate. After some deliberation Lord Mulligan himself, a forensic giant of his day, held that if Gabbitas were not physically dead then he certainly was morally and should be legally. Dr. Amber was granted probate, though precisely upon what grounds was not made clear. Perhaps taking all the circumstances into consideration the learned judge thought it unlikely that he was creating a precedent.

The young doctor, thirty-one at the time, therefore removed himself from English gossip and opened a practice at Davos in Switzerland, establishing a very successful clinic in the hotel he had so curiously inherited from his senior partner.

No journalist seems to have asked him for his story or perhaps they did and were rebuffed for their trouble.

What remains? It is true there is no reference in the Governor's memoirs to the escape itself but there is this odd paragraph for those who care to read between the lines of *Shikari: A Soldier's Life and Adventures*, published in 1904.

"At this time (1898) I was offered the curious and interesting appointment of Governor of Islington Gaol, one of two or three very old prisons still in use after the abolition of Newgate.

"I took with me on to the prison staff several old members of my regiment. These included the faithful Sgt. Percival, my batman and later my butler; Colour Sgt. Thomasson and Corporal Watchit, the last two becoming senior wardens despite some local protestations which I had not the slightest hesitation in suppressing. My house was cold and insanitary and made very uncomfortable quartering. . . .

"Watchit was in poor shape at the time and attributed his decline very largely to the conditions. He did not, alas, survive long. He was soon pensioned and the African sun took its toll some two years later . . . a faith-

ful and honest servant to Her Majesty and the Empire. Would that there were more like him, for he had been at my side in many a danger."

Here for the first time we find the name Thomasson: he is of interest since he was the second of the two warders in the condemned cell. A picture of him survives, showing a faded, shrunken old warrior much bemedalled, dressed in pathetic finery for a wedding or a burial, boasting a shaggy walrus fringe which clearly had once been stiff and pointed with wax.

The *Piccadilly Magazine* revived the story in an aside, in its issue for January 1906. *Our Vanishing Prisons* was the title for a pictorial feature. It dealt in some detail with Islington Gaol, then in the process of demolition. It had several old prints of its more famous inhabitants, and the buildings themselves were recorded for the last time, already in the hands of the housebreakers. The condemned cell, of course, is among them, and there are two photographs of it. The first shows the outside of the block, a solitary one-storey affair of stone standing isolated in a grim yard, a morgue or a slaughterhouse without doubt. Executions, it was explained, were carried out in the room adjoining the cell itself, built above a cellar, part of an even more ancient dungeon.

The second photograph, remarkably clear for its time, is of greater interest. It shows a small window high up in a stone wall, from which several thick bars have been smashed or removed. The remains of them are still embedded in the sides and the air space is boarded over from the outside. A caption runs: "The condemned cell, or 'Felons' Hole', showing the bars broken by Dr. Gabbitas in his astounding escape in 1899. No further executions ever took place here, since it was felt to be unsafe."

It is hard to see how anyone could have reached this tiny aperture, let alone scramble through it. It stands over seven feet from the ground and would appear to be at best eighteen inches wide even if the remains of the bars are discounted. Dr. Gabbitas was a short man, about five foot six. There is no easy explanation here. Yet somebody broke those bars.

So the student must try elsewhere if he is to solve this problem.

He should look perhaps into the mood of the time, into the history and psychology of the four men most closely involved.

First there is the Doctor himself. We know that he was cunning and resourceful: the reports of the trial show that he was as able in his defence as his own counsel. But the evidence was against him: there were too many damning facts capable of proof once suspicion was afoot. Of the four he was easily the most intelligent. It is not reasonable to look for collusion since all the officials were total strangers to him.

Sgt. Thomasson and Cpl. Watchit may be considered together. They were new men on the job, having been introduced by the Governor himself, which probably made them unpopular with their fellows. The "death watch" was at that time an extra duty in prisons and carried

some small additional pay and certain privileges in food and leave.

Both men were elderly for the task and due for retirement within a few years. Both had expectations of a small pension if they completed their term.

Watchit was suffering from the after effects of campaigns in Central Africa, possibly malaria. The poor heating of the prison provided the worst possible conditions for him.

Sir James, the Governor, was an entirely different character. He was tall, big boned, arrogant, dictatorial and utterly without fear. His V.C. was gained in unarmed combat and his memoirs reveal him as a loyal friend, if a remarkably dull one. He was clearly a typical specimen of his period, comic in this day and age, but magnificent beyond caricature.

The only other detail to emerge on research is that the night of December 12th, 1899, was bitterly cold and there was a heavy fog, a "London Particular", which had lasted for forty-eight hours.

Armed with these curiously assorted scraps, a mixture of fact and colour, it is possible to evolve three theories:

(1) The guards were drugged or mesmerized according to Foster Williams writing in 1912, and robbed of their keys. This does not explain the broken bars, nor indeed the necessity for breaking them, nor the opening of outer doors: it is unlikely that any one warder had a complete set of keys. In any case whence came the drugs? None of the doctor's patients suggested that he had any mesmeric gifts.

(2) The warders were bribed or connived at the escape. This is the view of several criminologists, notably Dr. Frink of Illinois. It may be discounted since there is every evidence that both men had an old soldier's loyalty to their commanding officer. Each died in respectably modest circumstances and there is no suggestion of any outside source of income. The Doctor was a total stranger to all three.

(3) Watchit's account is in some measure true. This is the least likely. Some instrument must surely have been used to break those bars. Dr. Gabbitas was a small man of sociable disposition, never at any time an athlete. After the verdict of guilty he received no visitors. There is no one who could conceivably have passed him a crowbar, drugs or money.

Until very recently no explanation covered all the facts and the mystery would remain for ever unsolved were it not for a document which was recently discovered among the effects of the late Dean of Gurney Magnus in Suffolk. It was the property of his father, Canon Woods. The item concerned, modestly titled *The Olympian*, is one of those amateur literary journals, fashionable in the '90s and even later. This particular issue is for March 1908. It was never printed, but either typed or handwritten and circulated in folio form among members of a local literary society, each of whom contributed from his own personal stock of talent a drawing, a verse, or as in this case, a short

story. It is clearly one of a series.

The Professor's Escape is No. 4 in *Tales of a Prison Chaplain.*

"One Sunday evening late in the last century a man awoke from a light slumber in one of the big London prisons. Ah, now he remembered it all, the whole terrible story! He was John Robinson, a professor of science who had fallen low. He was a murderer, justly condemned by the world for his wickedness, a wretch with but two days to live before the dread penalty would be exacted.

"Rising from his truckle bed he glanced idly at the two warders who were with him both day and night. They were sitting by the table in the cell and one of them was apparently asleep.

"'By jove!' exclaimed the professor. 'I believe your friend is ill! It is bitterly cold. Perhaps he has been overcome by the chill?"

"'More likely he has had a fit,' rejoined the other in some surprise. 'For he is an old soldier and has had these seizures before. It is due to long campaigns in Africa and the fevers he contracted there. Here, give me a hand with him.'

"The professor was about to spring to his aid, but a sudden wild thought had forced itself upon him and instead of rendering assistance he leapt upon his second guardian from behind.

"Within the flash of an eye the warder had been rendered unconscious, for the professor had learned secret tricks of self-defence and attack whilst studying in distant corners of the world. Soon the poor man lay senseless, almost at death's door.

"It was a cold and foggy night. The strains of evensong from the prison chapel drowned any sound that might have come from the two helpless men, now at the mercy of a desperate criminal.

"It was the work of but a few moments for the Professor to change clothes with one of the warders. He selected Sgt. Smith, the one he had personally attacked, and dragged him roughly upon the bed, covering his face with blankets.

"Once attired as Smith, he cut off his moustache with scissors from his victim's pocket, and donned the heavy uniform topcoat and peaked cap of the warder. His face was muffled in a woollen scarf, called in the Army a Balaclava. Then he rang the warning bell which sounded in the corridor beyond the cell.

"'Help! Help!', he called. 'Warder Brown has had a severe attack and needs immediate aid.'

"Two other warders now rushed in and perceived the plight of their comrade. Of this there could be no doubt for the unhappy man was perspiring freely, trembling and groaning piteously.

"'Merciful powers!' exclaimed one of the newcomers. 'He is utterly distraught. But surely our prisoner is a man of science and will come to the aid of a fellow man?'

"'Alas, no,' replied the disguised felon, adding a foul oath. 'He cares nothing for his captors. Quickly, now, give me a hand and we will take poor Brown to some place where he may receive aid.'

"Between them they carried him in a half-dead condition to an adjoining room.

"In the confusion of the moment the Professor managed to obtain access to the outer yard, for he now had keys, and slipped away on the pretext of fetching the Doctor and the Governor, both of whom were at Divine Service.

"Fortune and the density of the fog, together with the confusion of the moment favoured the miserable fugitive. At the outer postern the

guards mistook him for an officer going off duty and he vanished unnoticed into the dark streets of London.

"Inside the gaol the Governor and Doctor were soon upon the scene, shortly to be joined by the Chaplain (for Warder Brown was thought to be dying); it was then that the discovery was made. A search was ordered, but it was to no avail. . . .

"The Governor, Colonel Johnson, then performed an action which many readers will find curious. He summoned the Chaplain and the Doctor to the condemned cell, which was now deserted, and spoke to them in quiet soldierly tones.

" 'My poor warders have been duped by a treacherous foe,' he said. 'It would go ill with them if those in high authority learned of this trickery. For myself I care naught since my accommodation here does not befit an officer and gentleman and I am retiring to private life very shortly.

" 'But these men are of my own regiment and as brave as lions, even if they have been outwitted by a cunning devil. Their livelihood, their pensions and their wives and children may suffer from this miscreant's scheming act.

" 'I have therefore decided that their behaviour and their courage must not be called into question. We three are all old soldiers (though of different regiments) so you will both know that there are times when true loyalty must go to the men under your command rather than to Headquarters.

" 'If you will be good enough to leave me here in this dreadful place I shall make it clear to all investigators that this man did not escape by a mere trick, but by exercising superhuman force and overcoming my men, who were faithful to the best traditions of the British Army.'

"So saying, the Governor bade his colleagues a courteous farewell, and they retired for the night.

"Thus began a great mystery, the true solution of which has never been made public. Now that the good men concerned have entered into rest the truth may be revealed.

"But, the reader will ask, what befell the chief figure in this strange tale?

"As far as the present writer can tell (though it is by no means certain) he took refuge abroad, where, having undergone a change of heart and perhaps mindful of his deliverance, he devoted himself to good works and the healing of the sick.

"The purposes of Almighty God are inscrutable and it may well be that this man's later life atoned in some measure for a sinful past. Judge not, it is written, that ye be not judged."

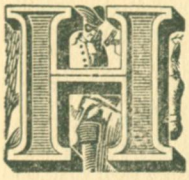
Part of the interest in this illuminating little tale lies in the fact that it is written on headed notepaper. The address is: "The Excelsior Clinic, Davos, Switzerland. Under the personal supervision of Dr. F. W. Amber and Dr. Robert Gray".

Canon Woods, it should be noted, died at Davos on March 12th, 1909.

THE HANDS

ROSEMARY TIMPERLEY

Illustrated by D. Mitchell



E NOTICED THEM most clearly when the piano had just been polished. Then he saw them reflected in the panel above the keyboard. He watched them proudly: his hands—so skilful and professional—hitting the notes with precision, however intricate the piece. It was almost like watching someone else's hands.

When the panel needed polishing, the reflected hands became dimmer, like ghost hands. And that, too, was fascinating—a blur of pale fingers dashing up and down the keyboard.

For hours he would play and watch the reflection of his hands.

He could never pinpoint the actual moment when things began to go wrong. It happened so gradually that at first he thought it was an optical illusion. But it got worse. And at last he had to face the fact that sometimes the reflected hands weren't exactly where they should be. Once, when his right hand crossed his left to play a few notes in the bass, the right hand in the reflection stayed in the treble. He moved his right hand quickly back. It fitted into the reflection again. An hallucination? But that sort of thing was happening so often!

An obvious solution was to stick paper or a piece of cardboard over the polished panel, or cover it with dull paint. But each time he thought of doing this, he decided to play one more piece, have one more try, leave it one more day. He was fascinated by the phenomenon.

Less fascinating, but more disturbing, was the fact that the music room was growing colder. However big and burning the fire, the temperature stayed low.

So he began to ask questions about the piano. He went to the shop where he had bought it, second-hand. The salesman couldn't tell him much, only that it had belonged to a widow who lived nearby. He asked for her name and address and called at the house—a big, shabby house, and very quiet.

A white-haired woman opened the door.

"Mrs. Barbara Selby?"

"Yes."

"I wonder if I might speak to you about the piano you sold a few weeks ago. I bought it, you see, and . . ."

"Come in."

Her face and voice were impassive. She led him into the living-room, and he was surprised to find that it was smart and gay, very different from the outside of the house. The furniture and carpets looked new.

"You're a pianist?" she asked.

"I am. Amateur but enthusiastic."

"So was my husband. It was his

piano. When he died, he told me that if ever I sold it I would suffer for it. But that's nonsense. It was no use to me, and with the money I got I've refurnished this room. It's nice, isn't it?"

"Very."

"It isn't even as if he was a successful pianist," she went on. "He called himself 'professional', but professional people make a lot of money, don't they? I was always begging him to sell the piano, give up music, do something that would bring in extra money—I mean, some hobbies pay, don't they? But he wouldn't. He loved his piano more than he ever loved me."

She was talking flatly, quickly, as if glad to have someone to speak to. He had a feeling that when she was alone she talked to herself, as if she were trying to justify herself."

"What does your wife think of your concentrating on music?" she asked.

"I'm not married."

"He should never have married. That's the trouble. However, I'm free now. With my new furniture."

There was a silence. He wanted to broach the subject of the hands but didn't know how to start. The story seemed fantastic now. She would think him mad. So he asked cautiously:

"Did your husband ever notice anything strange about the piano?"

"Strange? No, I don't think so." She was staring at his hands. He moved them in embarrassment. She said:

"You have hands just like my husband's. Strong, short-fingered. Not my idea of a musician's hands at all."

And suddenly he was afraid of her. He wanted to get away from the glossy room in the shabby house. He said he must go.

"Why did you come?" she asked. "What's worrying you about the piano?"

"Nothing," he said.

"Perhaps it just needs tuning."

"I expect so." Hurriedly, he took his leave.

On his way home, he brooded over an idea that had flashed into his mind: That the spirit of her husband, or part of her husband, angry with her for selling the piano, was haunting the instrument as a sort of protest. And he sympathized with the angry ghost. How impossible for a musician to live with someone who was anti-music.

He was in a receptive mood that evening when he sat down before the piano and ran his fingers up and down the keyboard, improvising a melody. But the result was no melody. Instead he found that he was striking notes he hadn't intended to strike, as if some outside force were compelling him. It was as if he were following the reflected hands rather than their following his hands. And his fingers were playing the same notes over and over again. Like a message. A message in music.

Half-hypnotized now, he stared at the reflection.The hands played the same notes again, and again. It was a message all right.

Now, each time he struck a note, he called it out aloud: "B.A.D.B.A.-

D.A." A pause. "B.A.B.E.A.G.E.D." Another pause. "F.E." Then the message was repeated. He left the piano and wrote the letters down.

They made no sense at all. Then the letters in the first word caught his attention — B.A.D.B.A.D.A. — that was not unlike "Barbara". And that was the widow's name. If he could find out how, in code, "R" became "D", he might be able to work out the rest of it. So he drew up the simplest code he could think of:

A. B. C. D. E. F. G.
H. I. J. K. L. M. N.
O. P. Q. R. S. T. U.
V. W. X. Y. Z.

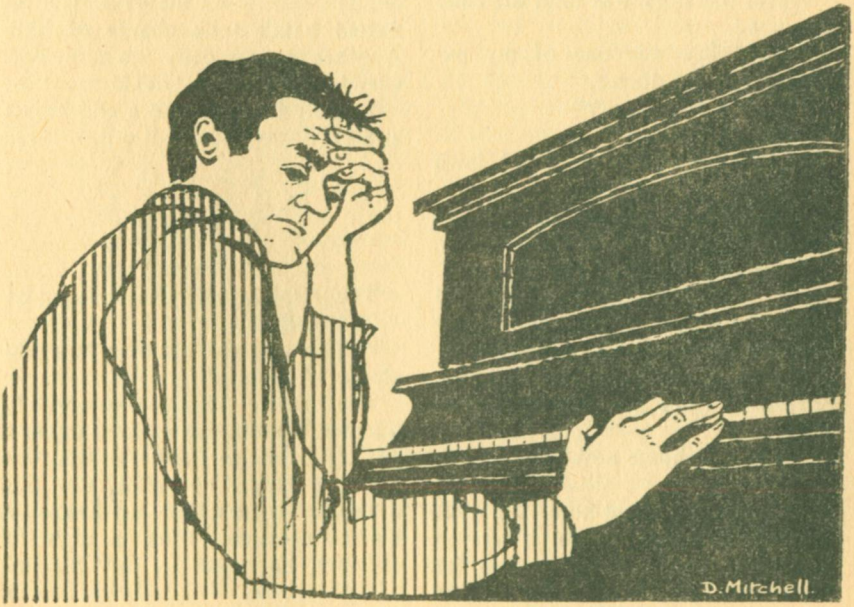
Yes, "R" was in the "D" column. That made sense. Now what about B.A.B.E.A.G.E.D.? He worked out alternative letters according to his code:

B. A. B. E. A. G. E. D.
I. H. I. L. H. N. L. K.
P. O. P. S. O. U. S. R.
W. V. W. Z. V. Z. Y.

Reading the letters across, he tried to find a word. If it were a verb, it might end with "-ED" . . . "-NED" . . . "-ONED" . . . "-SONED". And then he saw it—the correct letters seeming to leap out at him—"POISONED".

After that, the "FE" was easy, for "F" was in the same code column as "M".

The message in music read:



"BARBARA POISONED ME."

Exhilarated and a little hysterical, he went to the police station and told his story. To his surprise he was handed over to a policewoman, who was very kind and made him a cup of tea. Then a doctor arrived and began to ask him questions about his childhood. He suddenly realized that he was being treated like a nut case. He became angry—and was given a sedative.

When he woke, he was in hospital. He talked at length to a nurse, who said to one of the visiting doctors: "He keeps insisting that someone called Mr. Selby should have a post-mortem."

"Selby?" said the doctor, and came to the patient's bedside.

Again the story was told, the code displayed.

"Mr. Selby was one of my patients," said the doctor.

"What did he die of?"

"Food poisoning."

"I knew it! Now do you believe me?"

"I don't believe in ghosts," said the doctor.

"Nor did I—until this happened. Until I can satisfy this wretched ghost, I can't play my piano properly—and it cost me a lot of money."

"I'll make some inquiries," said the doctor. "I can't promise more than that."

"May I go home now?"

"Certainly."

Exhausted, he went home. He went into the music-room. But it was so unnaturally cold in there that he didn't stay long. Nor did he feel like touching the piano for a while. But he did just lift the lid to look at the keyboard. He put his hands behind his back. But the reflected hands were clearly visible on the panel. He slammed the lid shut.

A week later a post-mortem was held on John Selby. Traces of arsenic were found in the body. Barbara Selby was arrested and kept in a cell in the police station for one night, during which she hanged herself with her stockings.

He read all about it in the papers and went into the music-room. Everything would be all right now.

But it wasn't. The room was still icy cold. What the devil did the ghost want now? Hadn't he done enough? He went to the piano and banged his hands defiantly on the keys. The reflected hands took charge of him. Another message came pounding out, very loudly: F.A.A.G.D.E.

Wearily he made out a code chart and sat down to work it out.

F.	A.	A.	G.	D.	E.
M.	H.	H.	N.	K.	L.
T.	O.	O.	U.	R.	S.
	V.	V.		Y.	Z.

THONDE? THONKE? He got it! —"THANKS".

"That's all right, old man," he said aloud. "Any time."

The room became perceptibly warmer. He returned to the piano and put his hands to the keyboard. The reflected hands appeared, but this time they were merely an image of his own hands. With a sigh of pleasure, he began to play his unhaunted piano.

THE SPECIMEN

ARTHUR HOWES

Illustrated by Woodward

JASON PETTIGREW opened his back door and peered into the garden. A gust of wind caught up a handful of rain and sprinkled his glasses. He shivered, blinked in an aggrieved manner at the gloomy rain-clouds and shut the door. There was a cup of tea waiting on the table.

It was the sort of dismal Sunday morning when another man might have found an excuse to stay indoors but Jason resolutely pulled on an old hat and coat. It was time to go to the common and neither wind nor rain daunted him. No one could accuse him of being a fine-weather botanist. A mild little man in his fifties he appeared older with a permanent look of resignation. Two deep lines carved into his cheeks ending in dry lips compressed tightly against the world. His pale blue eyes gazed thoughtfully through steel-rimmed glasses and a nervous movement of the forehead made his cropped grey hair sit up in surprise when anyone spoke to him.

Jason drained his cup and set it down quietly. Then he tiptoed into the garden and as silently crept into the shed. It was all wasted effort for by the time he emerged his wife was standing at the door. She watched him closely, sizing up her prey, mouth set hard and eyes narrowed. Her thin arms tugged an old dressing-gown tightly against her bony frame in vindictive comfort. The attitude implied that Jason was a fool to go out into the rain.

It was the same week after week. No matter how quietly he moved she would be waiting to give him the edge of her tongue. It was a very sharp tongue, honed to razor keenness by years of husband baiting. There was nothing miraculous about the timing; she must have been unstairs on the landing, listening to the movements below. Now she was ready for him.

He bent, making an adjustment to the bicycle chain. He was never sure whether to cut and run and take a chance on a bigger nagging on returning or stay and get it over with. He stayed, and his wife started the attack, arms folded across her thin chest and head bristling with curlers swaying from side to side. She was an adder about to strike.

"That's it," she opened, giving herself a hug and a jerk. Jason worked harder at the chain, heart beating fast.

"Look at you. Any other man would give his wife a hand on a Sunday, but not you," she went on in a triumphant tone as though discovering for the first time what a poor specimen he was.

"Call yourself a man? You don't

even look after your family properly—ask anyone. People round here with cars and televisions and what have I got? Nothing: twelve quid a week after thirty years." Jason ignored the contradiction. It was the safest way.

She let her top lip curl back in a sneer. "That's right. Bury your head in your bike. You haven't the guts to answer, have you? You want to try doing the same thing as other men and bring some money into the house instead of messing about with a lot of filthy weeds."

Jason glanced up with a faint look of reproach. When she started on that topic it was time to go. His botany was the only escape from her whiplash of a tongue and he hated her sneers. She knew this well enough and she could see she had drawn blood. She wanted more and as he pushed his bike round to the front gate she was after him, running through the house in her anxiety to hurt him again. She arrived panting and shouting as he prepared to ride off.

"You old fool. Go and get pneumonia, only don't come running to me to nurse you." Her voice rose until it was almost a scream. "Why don't you clear off and be done with it. We'd be better off for all the good you are."

Jason pushed hard against the pedals. There was more abuse but a merciful wind picked the words from the air and tossed them away. Tears of frustration welled in his eyes. As he rode into the drizzle Jason Pettigrew saw himself for what he was, a caricature of a man, bullied and sucked into a dried-up cocoon. The two daughters must have heard the shouting. He could imagine them fussing round their mother, agreeing with all she said and adding a bit of their own.

As he pushed on, Jason thought of his life and realized that it didn't amount to very much. He was a coward, he knew that. A bit of encouragement might have helped, but as things were he only just held down a job that might have been better let loose years before. He thought of his courting days. She had been different then, not pretty but very capable. They had been happy enough with her managing for him. She used to smile at the way he left the home for her to run. The change must have been so gradual that he had missed seeing it. She wasn't capable any more, just domineering. The girls had turned on him, too, just like their mother. They were the dead spit of her, both of them.

Another wave of self-pity swept over him and his throat tightened. A twelve pounds a week clerk after all that time; no wonder they all sneered. The girls earned nearly as much as he. They didn't realize that a man can't work when the world laughs at him. But not the whole world—there was still his botany, a way out from it all. He brightened a little at the thought.

Jason shoved hard at the pedals aware that he was uncomfortably wet about the legs. His gumboots had been missing from the shed. She

had hidden them, he knew that. She had been waiting for him to ask where they were but that was the last thing he would do. He let his mind drift to take it off the clinging wet of his legs.

Fantastic scenes whirled through Jason's brain, a kaleidoscope of heroic deeds in which he was always the central figure. Battles in which he took on whole regiments of the enemy single-handed—in reality he had been a private in the Pay Corps. Then he was diving into the boiling surf to rescue a child from almost certain drowning. Now he was tackling and bringing down an armed bandit laden with loot until the man screamed for mercy under his brave attack. And all in front of an admiring crowd who fought to shake his hand and offer him jobs at ridiculous salaries. Always in the forefront was his wife.

Jason came back to earth with a start and found that he had reached his destination. Before him stretched the common, looking bleak and forbidding, with the wind racing across to tug at his coat. He lowered his old bicycle carefully at the roadside and untied his vasculum from the cross-bar. His vasculum—how she laughed when she had first heard the word. A posh name for an old tin box she had called it. Never mind—it would soon hold treasure enough for him.

He struck off across the common, wet grass whipping at shoes already soaked and trousers sticking tight to his legs. A lonely little figure against the dark sky, hat pulled down against the rain in a vain attempt to keep his glasses dry. In spite of his liking for the open country Jason would dearly have loved to be in front of a roaring fire with a good breakfast inside him. But at the thought of home his resolution came back in a flood and he pushed on to the hunting-ground.

He kept to the rough path for a while, then turned off to where a clump of bushes stretched to the adjoining fields. He knew where the most interesting specimens were to be found. He cut through the bushes and by threading carefully along managed to avoid the grasping thorns.

Suddenly Jason pitched forward on his hands and knees. He had fallen heavily and lay for a few seconds to recover his breath. Then he gave a casual glance back to see what had tripped him. Jason leaped to his feet, mouth open and heart pounding. Between two bushes lay the body of a man, blank eyes staring at the sky and tiny rivulets of rain running off the waxen face. Then Jason saw the blood and the knife in the dead chest and he turned away and was violently sick.

When it was over he forced himself to look again. He backed away, whimpering with terror. The brambles tore at his coat as though trying to keep him with the horror in the bushes but he thrust back and back. When he was on the path he ran as though the Devil was on his heels.

Jason lurched and stumbled on, sobbing for breath, hat gone and glasses slipping from his nose. He

reached the place where his bicycle lay and snatched at the handlebars as though they were salvation. Frozen fingers fumbled with the string on the cross-bar, trying to tie on the vasculum, and all the while he panted and caught his breath with fear. Then he looked back across the common to where the awful thing was.

He tried to think. Someone would have to tell the police. But it wasn't going to be him. They'd find it, someone would find it. But when? Supposing it lay there for days or even weeks and all the time he knew about it. And the state he was in, muddy and wet, rips and snags in his coat. What would his wife say now if she saw him? Quite suddenly he knew what to do. It was as though he feared her more than the thing on the common.

Jason looked down the hill. By the crossroads was a public call-box and he mounted his bicycle and rode towards it, hands gripping tight and getting reassurance from the feel of something solid in a whirling world. Once inside the booth, Jason panicked again. His pockets contained only a few shillings in silver and he was gripped by the feeling that everything was against him. He forced himself to think, think. Staring at him like a solitary eye was a small white button marked "Emergency" and he cursed himself for a fool. With receiver raised he jabbed a finger at it and heard the operator ask what service he required.

"Police—get me the police," he blurted. Within seconds he heard the matter-of-fact constable at the other end. The voice, unperturbed and calm, cut through the jabbering and asked pointed questions, dragging sense from nonsense. Then somebody else spoke to him and told him to stay where he was and wait for the cars. His spinning mind just about registered the instructions and placing the receiver back on its rest he lurched out of the booth and leaned against the door, panting and sweating.

By the time the cars arrived he was breathing normally and had regained a little more composure. An Inspector leaned out of the car and motioned him in beside him. He told his story, short as it was, and felt safer as he looked at the uniforms about him. Then he led the procession to the bushes. There were men swarming about with cameras where only a short while back he had been alone with the wind and the rain. Then he remembered his companion and he shuddered. The ridiculous thought crossed his mind that all those feet weren't doing his wild flowers much good.

The Inspector and a constable came over and took notes as he told his story again. He was still apprehensive but the shock had left him. The policemen seemed concerned about his welfare, asking him how he felt, and he told them truthfully that he had never been so scared in his life before. It was an admission that cost some pride and the Inspector went so far as to say that anyone

would have felt the same. With returning courage Jason began to wish he had never mentioned it. Then he remembered his bike.

"Excuse me, but I've left my bicycle down by the 'phone box. May I get it? It's the only one I've got," he added unnecessarily. The Inspector smiled faintly and told him to return to make a statement at the station.

He toddled away down the road. They had actually asked him, Jason Pettigrew, to go back and make a statement. He wondered what his wife would say. Well, did it matter? Let her come along to the station and start her nonsense, that's all. They would soon put her in her place. He smiled at the picture of his wife locked in a cell, banging away at the bars. Like a bird of prey at the Zoo trying to escape. She would be in her old blue dress and apron and her hair still in curlers. It always was. When they told her to be quiet she would purse her lips and narrow her eyes. Much good it would do—they were used to handling tough customers.

He was at the crossroads. A small crowd had suddenly materialized. They eyed him with a strange mixture of curiosity and deference but he wasn't to be drawn out. After all, he was part and parcel of the show.

He stooped to pick up the bicycle from where he had skidded to a halt, conscious of eyes on him. Then he froze, still bending over the machine, with the nape of his neck tingling and the old surge of fear rising again. He gritted his teeth, forcing himself to act naturally, and

then, apparently calmly, he mounted and rode unhurriedly away.

He reached the Inspector and looked at him steadily, taking a deep breath before speaking.

"Don't think I've gone mad, Inspector, but I think I've found the person responsible for this," indicating the scene of the crime with a jerk of his head.

The Inspector's head raised in an involuntary movement. His eyes were alert and keen as he looked at the other, yet his face was a warning that he wasn't a man to deal in guesses.

"Look, if you've something more to tell us let's have it," he said. Jason nodded.

"Down there by the 'phone box in front of all those people. See that man in the trench coat and green hat? He's your man."

The Inspector looked past Jason down the hill.

"What makes you say that?" he asked.

Jason took another deep breath. "Well, some years ago a fellow botanist sent me some plants; he wanted me to transplant them about here to see if they would take in foreign soil. Well, they did. I planted them over there, near where the body is. They don't grow anywhere else in these parts, you see. When I bent to pick up my bike I saw one of the leaves. It was stuck on the heel of that man's shoe. It was fresh—he must have been near that . . . that body."

The Inspector quickly fired questions at Jason, who answered in the manner of a man who is sure of his facts. The plants grew nowhere else in those parts, he was certain of it and he started into details. The Inspector cut him short and gave orders to three of his men. Then the four of them shot into a car and were off down the hill, leaving Jason blinking after them.

Before they reached the crossroads the suspect was off, through a hedge and away over the fields. Jason stood on tiptoe, trying to see what was happening, wondering if the man would get away. Then they were back, half-carrying, half-dragging a struggling burden. The three policemen bundled the man into the car, leaving the Inspector to walk back up the hill to Jason.

"This is what you meant, is it?" he asked. "I found this one in his turn up," and he held out a leaf. Jason peered closely and nodded. The Inspector looked at him.

"You're a pretty useful sort of fellow to have around," he said. "It seems to me that you botanists must have a spot of detective in you." But Jason was looking past him.

Another car had drawn up and he recognized both driver and passenger. It was his wife and a neighbour. She opened the door and came towards him and he scanned her face for signs of trouble. Her mouth twitched as she frowned at the scene on the common. Then she looked at her husband with questions in her eyes.

"It's my wife," he whispered to the Inspector, who went over to meet her.

"Wondering where he'd got to?" he asked. She nodded, head moving slowly up and down mechanically. Her eyes, so used to squinting in hatred were now open wide with bewilderment.

"I'm afraid we shall have to borrow him for a little while longer," went on the Inspector. "Mr. Pettigrew uncovered a nasty murder. Don't be alarmed; we think we have the person responsible. As a matter of fact it was your husband here who put us on to him—it was through him that we made the arrest. We'll have to ask him to come along to the station so perhaps you'll keep his dinner warm."

She nodded absently and looked at her husband all muddy and torn. Jason met her gaze steadily and saw something in her face that was never there before. Mrs. Pettigrew looked astounded, but proud of him.

Shake oc this drowsy sleep, death's counterfeit,
And look on death itself! up, up, and see
The great doom's image!

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE.

The bitter past
And the untasted future I mix up,
Making the present a dream-figured bowl
For the black poison, which is caked and moulded
By the inside of the enchasing thoughts,
Even as I taste it.

THOMAS LOVELL BEDDOES.

I saw the opening maw of hell,
With endless pains and sorrows there;
Which none but they that feel can tell—
Oh, I was plunging to despair.

HERMAN MELVILLE.

MAGIC FOR MY LADY

RICHARD BRYAN

Illustrated by R. D. Farley

"HERE SHE COMES. Voice like a gravel pit and face like an unmade bed," complained Dr. Dick Milward as he heard the door chimes sound from the hall.

He straightened up from the table where he had been arranging some glasses and pushed a lock of his steel-grey hair back from his forehead.

"The damned woman makes me sick. She's always first, and early."

"Who, Margaret?" said Jill his wife. She got up and pushed a handful of magazines under a cushion.

"Of course Margaret. Our dear Lady Margaret. Who else? Phew, how I hate these duty-type parties."

He snorted, adjusted his black bow tie and walked towards the lounge door as Lady Margaret was shown in.

She was a tall, ragged woman, comparing, he thought, most unfavourably in every respect with his petite, blue-eyed and fair-haired wife. Apart from an expensive cocktail dress and a cashmere stole she had made no effort with her appearance. Dick decided that if anything she looked better in her customary tweeds and brogues.

"Good evening," she boomed, and the polished horse brasses on the fireplace shivered. "And good evening to you, Jill."

Dick made way for her to take up her place with her back to the fire and her feet planted well apart.

"And how is old Joynson's leg, Doctor? I hear that he's walking on it already. Too early. Much too early, if you ask me, eh? Trouble in the fetlocks needs plenty of time. That's what me old father used to say, anyway, and he should have known. Quite a hand at bone-setting and quackery himself, you know."

"So I've heard tell," nodded Dick. "But just the same I . . ."

"Sherry, Lady Margaret?" Jill interrupted.

Again Dick heard the bell from the front door, and in no time the room was full of people delicately sipping sherry and engaging in the mundanities of polite opening conversation that he found so boring.

He looked around them.

On one side were the Bettson sisters, Alice and Gertrude, chattering together as if they had not met for years. Patrick and Janette Moynihan, his neighbours, were next to them, talking gardening with Jill. In the far corner from where he stood he observed that Major Archie Crawshaw, J.P., hovered dangerously near the whisky, apparently absorbed in a pair of Gauguin reproductions.

The Reverend Binns, vicar of the parish, was, he saw, suffering some long-winded tale from Lady Mar-

garet. Dick overheard her as he passed with a tray of drinks.

"Gipsies . . . the very idea. Wretched people with their undernourished horses and their filthy brats after my fowls all the time.

"Course, I've had it all before. They always take a fancy to that flat piece of meadow in the angle of the stream; you know it, Vicar."

Dick smiled as he saw the old man nod with resignation.

"That old duffer Bradman, my keeper, reckons its shape is supposed to be lucky for 'em," she went on. "Mumbo jumbo, I call it. Lots of stuff and nonsense, eh? I told him though. I told him it wasn't lucky for anything more than fresh trout, and that the sooner he got rid of them the better."

Having handed the drinks to the Moynihans, Dick set down the tray. He could still hear Lady Margaret going strong.

"Naturally, old Bradman went off to do as he was told but I'm blessed if in about half an hour he wasn't back again. And this time, mark you, with the old lady of the circus in tow. Horrible old hag she was. Brown as a boot and twice as dirty. Talked with a foreign sort of an accent too. Shouldn't be surprised if she was an Arab or something."

Smiling to himself again, Dick saw the Vicar look round for some channel of escape, find none, and try to show interest as Lady Margaret continued: "Well, the old dutch had some yarn about her granddaughter being just about ready to foal. And she wanted the young 'un to be born on that particular patch of ground. Huh! Told her to hop it just as soon as she liked. Said I'd get the constable down to her if they weren't off the place in an hour. They need a firm hand these brutes."

"And what happened?" asked the Vicar.

"Oh, she nattered and mumbled a bit. Said I'd stop good fortune coming to the child and that she'd see I was punished. But sure enough they were all gone by sunset and that was that."

"Dear me," said the Vicar. "It must be such a trial for you . . . er . . . looking after all that estate alone, I mean."

"Not a bit of it. Been brought up to it, you know. But that's not the whole story. . . ."

"Dinner is ready, everyone."

With great relief Dick heard Jill's voice interrupt the chatter.

"Shall we go in," he said, taking Lady Margaret by the elbow and steering her towards the dining-room door.

He heard snatches of the gipsy story told at least three times during dinner. The first two occasions he noticed were to Lady Margaret's neighbours, Crawshaw on her right and young Moynihan on the left.

The third time, at an increased volume, he thought, the tale was addressed to everyone and anyone who cared to listen.

One by one he heard the other conversations succumb to the overpowering histrionics of Lady Margaret in full declamation.

He pretended to listen with the absentminded but apparently atten-

tive expression he usually reserved for the more neurotic of his spinster patients. He only pricked up his ears and really showed interest as the story went on from where he had left it an hour before.

"... of course, I thought that would be the end of it," said Lady Margaret. "But no. Believe it or not, yesterday morning, while I was up in the top meadow, the old trollop came to the house again. She collared Mrs. Brown as she was brooming the back porch and offered to tell her fortune.

"Naturally, old Brown being the way she is, a bit dim, you know," she touched her forehead in explanation, "she took it all in. Lot of tripe about winning some money and what not. Then it seemed that she promised to work some charm for the good of the whole household and she asked old Brown for some hair from the head of the owner. I ask you. She said a few hairs from my comb would do."

"Good gracious me," exclaimed Alice Bettson, quite fascinated. "It sounds horrible doesn't it? Almost like magic."

"Yes, horrid," echoed Gertrude.

"Well, fair play to Mrs. Brown, she then had one of her rare shows of intelligence and showed the woman the door. Thought that that was asking too much. I must say though that if I'd been there I'd have chased her off with a shotgun."

She paused to examine the effect of her story on her listeners.

"You have undoubtedly had a very narrow and fortunate escape, Lady Margaret," said Dick, deciding that it was time he interfered.

He was greeted with a prolonged silence. He heard the sound of a half-burned coal dropping into the front of the wrought-iron fire grill.

The faces of his guests turned towards him as he sat at the head of the table. Lady Margaret spoke first.

"Nonsense, Doctor. Don't tell me you believe there's anything in this witchcraft stuff?"

"I most certainly do," he replied.

"Then I most sincerely hope you are mistaken in your opinions," she said, faltering slightly for the first time.

"Why?"

"Because I fancy the old hag had her way after all. We found a ladder up to the bedroom window this morning. My dressing-room had been ransacked but the only thing missing was my old blue hairbrush. Now what do you say to that?"

"I say that you had best be extremely careful for a while."

"Don't be so macabre, darling," entreated Jill. "You sound like the man in black."

Dick realized that the rest of his guests were now quiet and enthralled at the unusual turn the conversation had taken.

"I'm sorry, I'm not trying to be amusing," he said. "I believe it is not only likely but practically certain that Lady Margaret here is going to find herself involved in a most unpleasant piece of Black Magic."

"Rubbish, Doc. Utter rubbish." Patrick Moynihan interrupted. "I don't think its anything more than a pathetic attempt to frighten an uncooperative landowner."

"Now, I'm not so sure at that." It was Major Crawshaw's turn. "Seen a lot of darned funny things happen in my time. I remember not long after I joined up . . ."

"Major Crawshaw, please do not try to convince us with one of your Indian stories." Lady Margaret, Dick saw, had regained full control of herself. "Of course it's rubbish. There's not a shred of proof anywhere that such things are possible."

"On the contrary, Lady Margaret," Dick disagreed, "you are quite wrong. There is proof enough."

"Then I'd jolly well like to see it," she retorted.

"So would I," said Moynihan.

"And me too," added the Major.

"Very well then. If you are so keen you shall. "Dick looked at Jill and received no sign of approval. "If you ladies would like to go into the study instead of the drawing-room for your coffee, when we join you I promise to show you all the proof you need."

* * *

The study was a tall, quiet room panelled with oak from floor to ceiling. Around the walls was a diffuse glow from the concealed strip lighting. A log fire burned in the hearth. The windows were closed and the heavy curtains drawn.

When Dick entered with the other men, he found the ladies grouped around the coffee-table.

"Aha, Doctor Maskelyn, we're ready for the performance," Lady Margaret greeted his arrival.

He smiled. "Good," he said. "I hope you get your money's worth. Now then, if you'd all like to help and clear a space in the middle of the floor. Just push the chairs back from the fire a little. Patrick, I wonder if you and the Major would help by removing the rugs."

He walked over and pressed the fireside bellpush. Everyone was busy. There was a light tap at the door and in came the maid.

"Mary," said Dick, going towards his desk and reaching for his keys. "I want you to go out into the kitchen garden and fill this . . ." He took from a drawer a large shallow silver tray and handed it to her, ". . . with some fresh soil."

"Soil, sir?" she looked at him wondering.

"That's right, Mary, soil," he said again.

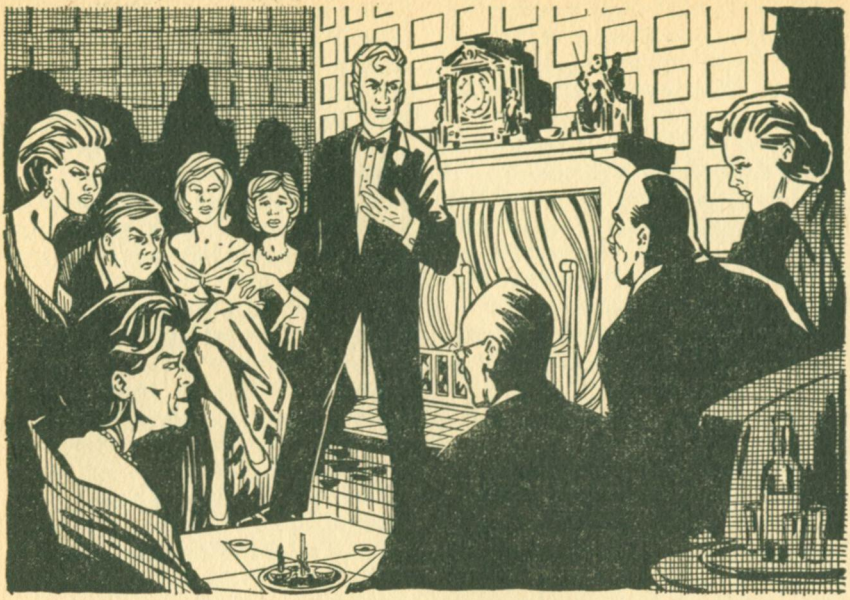
Mary disappeared.

He opened his roll-top desk and picked up a closed black box and a piece of board folded like a large chessboard.

Having finished the task of clearing the room, his audience was arranged in a semi-circle in the open space before the fire. He addressed them seriously.

"What I am going to show you will surprise you," he said. "But there is no need for you to be frightened. Also I would like to point out one other matter. Although I can do this thing and several others, I am not, and I have never been, directly concerned in the cult of magic, neither white nor black.

"I learned these things years ago as a student. I am a Christian, like all of



you, and I am doing this for only one reason, to convince Lady Margaret of her potential danger.

"For success I must insist on absolute silence, but I remind you again that there is nothing to be afraid of."

He was aware that the atmosphere had become suddenly tense and that Mary, returning with the tray, looked startled at the sight of the silent group.

"Thank you, Mary," he said. "Put it over there will you." He indicated the table. The girl put the tray down and turned to leave.

"And Mary . . ."

"Sir?"

"We don't want to be disturbed for anything at all for the next half-hour. Not for anything. You understand?"

"Very well, sir." Mary went out and closed the door.

Dick picked up the folded board, opened it and placed it flat on the floor. On its white surface was marked a large five-pointed star in black . . . an accurately drawn pentacle. In the centre of the star he put the tray of earth so that it reached exactly to the bases of the points of the star.

Then he opened the black box.

From it he took five small silver bowls, one of which he put carefully on each of the star points. Using a tiny spatula he scraped into each one a small quantity of a black greasy substance.

Next he took two more bowls, this time of delicate and intricately carved

wood. In one he stood a small black candle and into the other he poured some water from a firmly corked stone bottle.

The two bowls he placed about ten inches apart on the earth in the tray. He lit the candle.

One more object he took from the box . . . a plain gold crucifix; and this he stood upside down in the earth between the wooden bowls.

Last of all he placed a small bell and hammer on the floor near the pentacle. He was ready.

Without a word the others had watched his meticulous preparations until at last he straightened up and looked at them again.

"Now we can start," he said. He turned to Lady Margaret. "I wonder if you would just pull from the fringe of your stole a few strands of the thread."

She looked at him doubtfully.

"Well . . . er . . . I suppose so, yes." She caught up the stole and removed a tuft of hairs. She rearranged the stole around her shoulders.

Dick walked over and took the tuft from her. Rolling it into a ball he placed it in the centre of the tray at the foot of the crucifix, then crossed to the door and switched off the lights. He watched the lambent flames of the fire illuminate the strange scene as he went back and knelt beside his pentacle.

"Remember now," he said. "Complete silence."

Outside he heard the wind rising a little and somewhere a shutter creaked. But in the tall room was an eery silence. Only the soft hiss of sizzling logs was audible as he took a wooden spill, lit it from the burning candle and applied it in turn to the contents of the five silver bowls.

As he touched them the incense took fire and began to smoulder gently. There was no smoke but almost at once he was able to detect its pungent yet sweet and heavy odour.

He bowed his head on to his chest and the others saw his lips moving.

The shutter creaked again. And again.

They heard the rising wind begin to moan through the frozen leafless treetops in a weird and melancholy complaint.

After several minutes of hushed silence there was a sudden gasp from Lady Margaret and at once all eyes turned towards her.

In the dim light they saw that the corner of her stole which hung from her shoulders over the edge of the chair was fluttering slightly. Slowly, as they watched, the stole moved a little more, then began to slip from its owner's grasp to the ground. A minute later it lay in a heap beside her feet.

They watched breathlessly.

It moved again, twitched at first, then began to roll across the floor as if blown by small gusts of wind. Only there was no wind. The flame of the little candle stood steady and unwavering.

The stole approached the pentacle, paused almost imperceptibly and rolled forward on to the earth. It came to rest at the foot of the crucifix on top of the ball of thread that a few

moments before had been drawn from it.

The atmosphere of the room had grown noticeably cooler.

Now at last Dick looked up again. He picked up the hammer and struck the bell seven times. Its delicate note hung in the air and through it he pronounced a long strange word so softly that the listeners could not catch it.

Almost before the word had passed his lips the stole started to pour out smoke. An instant later it was on fire and in thirty seconds all that remained was a small smouldering pile of ashes.

"Good God," breathed Crawshaw.

Dick got slowly to his feet, and looked around him.

"Now you see what I mean when I say you should be careful," he said. "Lady Margaret, your hairbrush no doubt contained a few of your own hairs when it was stolen. Brushes usually do. In the wrong hands they could be used to put you under a most evil spell."

It was early next morning that Dick was roused from his deep slumber by the distant tolling of the church bell.

The church was half a mile from his house and he could not see two of his oldest patients, Mr. Breen the churchwarden and his wife, as they stood together in the corner of the churchyard, their eyes still heavy with sleep.

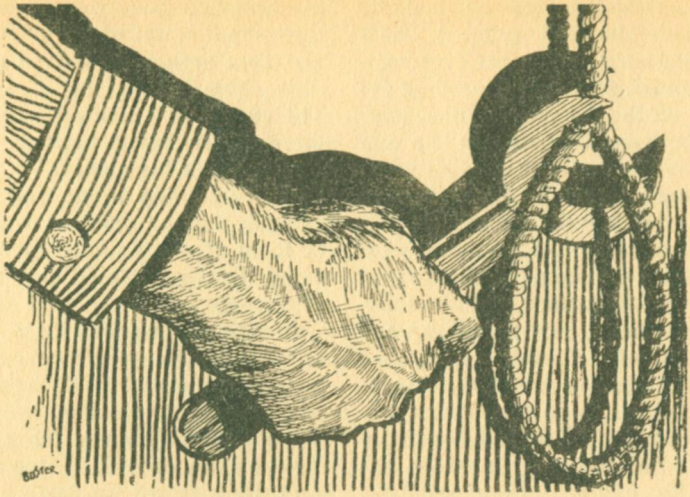
"Better go and see the Vicar, Alf," said Mrs. Breen. "Happen he'll know what it's all about."

"I wonder," her husband replied. "Couldn't be 'im as would chime the big bell at this hour of the morning."

They looked again, puzzled, at the freshly turned earth at their feet, at the beautiful altar crucifix inverted and thrust deeply into it, and at the wisp of smoke that blew from the grotesque human-shaped pile of ash.

A yard or two to one side lay a battered old blue hairbrush and a pair of ladies' brogues.

Along a track through the wood a brightly-painted gipsy caravan creaked slowly away from the village.



DRESSED TO KILL

L. P. DAVIES

Illustrated by Buster

WHEN ALFRED MEERS read in the local paper how, after the heavy rain of the past weeks, the rock face in the old quarry had become dangerous and that a woman, taking the little-used short cut to the main road had been seriously injured by falling rock, his first thoughts were that it could quite as easily have been Gladys, and she could equally as easily have been killed.

He took the thoughts and the paper into the front room, leaving his wife poring avidly over a woman's magazine and no doubt planning her spring wardrobe.

There he read the news item again and then laid the paper aside, taking his pipe and filling it carefully while he pondered.

The idea of ridding himself of Gladys wasn't new. The events of the past few weeks had made it more clear than ever that so long as she was there to spend his money as fast as it was earned he would never be able to make anything of his life. Divorce, with its complications, was one way out. But that wouldn't solve the problem of the deposit on the shop. And the insurance policy would.

Uncomplaining—for he had no confidants—he had suffered under her acid-sharp tongue, her over-bearing manner and lavish spending for almost all the ten years of their married life. Even Mildred, cast in a very different mould from her sister, had never been taken into his confidence. Which was all to the good. In the eyes of the world he had no motives for wanting to rid himself of his wife.

Words and manner could be tolerated. He was an easy-going man and found excuses. They had never had children; she was ambitious and he had been in a groove so far as promotion at the office had been concerned. But the way in which she spent his money was inexcusable: wasting it on unnecessary clothes, trying to appear prosperous although financially they were poor. Running to Mildred each time she had anything new—most weeks that was—just so that she could show off.

He drew sharply on his pipe as his anger rose.

Where Gladys was concerned, saving for the future was impossible. When he protested she always replied sharply that he was trying to deny her her only pleasure in a miserable existence.

"If you had your way," she had said once, "you'd have me going round in rags." And up in the bedroom were two wardrobes crammed tight with coats and dresses and heaven knows what. Most of them only worn once or twice.

Money wasted that should have been saved for a rainy day. And now that day had come. A fortnight ago his firm had gone out of business, throwing him out of work. Ten days ago Tom Seeley had offered him the little shop for five hundred down. The chance of a lifetime had to slip through his fingers because Gladys had spent all his money.

He could find more work easily enough. But the problem would still be there. If ever another opportunity came his way he would have to let it slip again.

But the shop was still there, and his only asset in life, apart from a second-hand car, a relic of his bachelorhood, was the insurance policy. Not a very big one. Fifty pounds for a minor injury; a hundred for a major one. And five hundred for death. He had taken it out in the happy days when they had been courting. By so doing he felt that he could avoid anything happening to Gladys. Nothing ever happened to people who were insured. That was how he had seen it. The terms might almost have been tailored to meet the present circumstances. If anything was to happen to Gladys he would have freedom and security for the rest of his life.

And now the rain had loosened the towering rock that bordered the short cut she used as regular as clockwork every Thursday when she went to the Women's Institute at Wroxham to chatter and show off her clothes.

Alfred let his pipe smoulder while he pondered. An hour later, when Gladys called that supper was ready, he had his plan all cut and dried.

Tomorrow, at four, she would leave the house, walk along the mile of lonely lane, then turn into the now

dangerous quarry path. Had she read the paper yet? He frowned. No. It had only just come when he picked it up. Opening it again he ripped out the page that contained the news item. Then he went to the kitchen for supper.

The ripping of the page was the first positive step.The next came on the following day when, to avoid the remote possibility of asking him to run her into Wroxham, he told her over breakfast that there was something wrong with the car and he was going to spend the day trying to repair it.

At three o'clock he closed the bonnet, wiped his hands on a piece of waste and selected a heavy spanner from the rack. He knew that Gladys would be in the bedroom getting all dolled up. He soft-footed up the stairs, the spanner swinging from one hand, to peer in at the half-open bedroom door.

Her back towards him, seated at the dressing-table, she was rubbing cream into her cheeks. She had changed into a blue dress, one that he couldn't remember having seen before. She had probably bought that in town on Monday, when she had gone for her weekly session at the hairdressers. Anger rose suddenly, burning at the back of his throat, destroying any last scruple he might have had. Stepping lightly and quickly forward he raised his weapon to bring it smashing down across the straw-yellow corrugations of her hair.

Blood spattered on the mirror and on the dressing-table top where her shattered head came to rest, scattering jars and bottles. There was blood and hair and white glistening specks on the spanner. But her frock had emerged untouched. There was one less problem to bother about. Taking the spanner to the bathroom he washed it under the tap, the pink-stained water swirling and vanishing.

Then he went back downstairs and out to the garage, replacing the spanner and then backing the car until it was by the back door. Thick trees hid the lane. There were no neighbouring houses.

Back inside he braced himself for the next move. Gladys had to be made to look as if she had been on her way to the Institute. She would be wearing a coat. Throwing open one of the wardrobe doors he selected a red coat with a fur collar. It was more difficult than he had imagined to force the limp arms into the sleeves while avoiding contact with the matted head. He left the front hanging loose.

A glance at his watch told him that he still had plenty of time left. There was no need to hurry. He could make a perfect job.

A hat? No. On a fine day like today she usually went hatless. Gloves? Yes. He found a pair of white lace gloves in one of the drawers. Handbag? That was ready and waiting on the bed. Everything was ready. He could clear up the mess of the dressing-table when he got back.

Taking a deep breath he set his hands under her armpits, hoisting the body until he could grasp it against his chest, the head hanging over one arm. With the handbag looped over his elbow he staggered with his bur-

den down the stairs to deposit it on the floor of the car, the head resting on a piece of sacking.

He sat for a while in the driving seat, gathering his breath. Up till now he had acted automatically, his mind closed to the past, thinking only of the moves ahead. Now he realized that he was a murderer and that the slightest mistake would mean disaster. He clenched his hands on the wheel, trying to still their trembling, telling himself that nothing could go wrong. The next stage would be the short drive along the little-frequented lane. Pressing the starter he nosed the car towards the gates, pausing while he looked anxiously in both directions, then swinging out into the tree-bordered lane.

Ten minutes later he drew into the side of the road where a break in the trees indicated the start of the quarry path. Again he looked up and down the lane. The world was dead. There wasn't a soul in sight. Climbing from the car he walked a few paces along the path. On his right, the rock wall rose sheer into the flat blue of the sky; to his left were the old excavations. And a little way along the path he came upon a heap of freshly broken rock. Looking at it he realized that this was the site of the first accident. Where stone had fallen once it could fall again.

Walking quickly back to the car he took yet another look in both directions and then opened the rear door to drag the body out and raise it across his chest. At the heap of stones he laid it down, the face sideways, the arms out-flung. Draping his handkerchief over a large piece of stone he lifted it shoulder-high to bring it crashing down across the previously-inflicted wound. Then the blood-stained rock was laid by the body, the handbag arranged where it could have dropped from the hand, and he stepped back to view the finished product. Everything was perfect. There was nothing to show that a very ordinary accident hadn't taken place.

Satisfied, he returned to the car and drove back home. With the dressing-table cleared and tidy again he went to the kitchen to make himself a cup of tea and await the knock at the door which would be the police coming to break the sad news. As he saw it the body would probably be found about six o'clock when some of the farm labourers who used the short cut would be on their way home. He wondered first how Mildred would take the news. Probably not too badly. The two sisters had never had all that much in common. Then he thought about the pleasure he would have in claiming on the Insurance Company and how later he could go and see about buying the shop. He forced himself to forget what had happened in the bedroom. He would have to live with it, but time would take the memory away. In time he might even consider getting married again. But next time would be different. Alfred Meers hummed a little song while he washed his cup and saucer.

The expected knock came to the door on eleven, much later than he had anticipated. But instead of the grave-faced, uniformed constable with an unpleasant task to perform,

he found two dark-faced, hatless, tight-belted men waiting on the step and asking his permission to come inside.

"Detective-Inspector Sturgess," the taller introduced himself unsmilingly, accepting a seat with a brief nod of thanks. "Sergeant Bliss," he added, including his companion in the introduction. Alfred nodded, the right amount of concern and puzzlement on his face.

"I'm afraid," the Inspector started, "we have bad news—"

His mind racing, wondering if it was the usual thing for two plain-clothes men to come on such an errand, Alfred changed his expression to suit the story as it unfolded. When it was done he faltered brokenly, "I told her not to use that path; I wondered why she was so late getting back—" and then rested his face in his hands, looking up after a while to ask, "You're sure that it is Gladys?"

The Inspector nodded gravely. "The body was taken to the mortuary and the sergeant went through the belongings. There was a letter without an envelope in the handbag. A constable was sent to the address given at the top. It turned out to be the deceased's sister, a Mrs. Rowley. . . ."

"Mildred," Alfred whispered brokenly.

"Quite so, sir. She formally indentified the body. A very unpleasant task. The rock had—" He broke off.

"Now, sir," he became brisk and the sergeant produced a notebook. "Just a few details. Routine information. If you would be so kind. What time did your wife leave the house?"

Alfred had answers ready to each question as it was put. At the end the Inspector came to his feet. "Thank you for your help, Mr. Meers." He smiled for the first time. Alfred felt a sudden surge of relief. After all, a death, even an accidental death, was a very important thing. His earlier doubts and worry melted away. The whole purpose of the interview, like the other had said, was purely routine. The worst was over. He was safe.

Then the Inspector spoke suddenly, almost hurling the words. "Queer about the piece of stone that fell on her head. There were two types of rock on that face, pale brown at the top and grey at the bottom. And oddly enough it was a piece of the dark stone that was supposed to have fallen—"

"No!" Alfred protested violently and unthinkingly. "It was the brown stone from the top . . ." Then he stopped, the colour draining from his face.

* * *

"That's how it goes," the Inspector said to his sergeant when they had returned to the station and Alfred had been formally cautioned and charged. "One slip and they go to pieces. Almost pathetic, in a way."

The sergeant looked up from his writing. "I've seen you try some bluffs in your time, sir," he said irreverently, "but that was the sauciest of the lot. For one thing, there was only the one type of rock in that quarry."

"Bluffs can pay dividends, ser-

geant; and when they do catch a guilty conscience off-balance they save a deal of time and worry. I'd have broken Meers in the end, but this way . . ." He smiled. "The station sergeant is to be congratulated upon his observation."

"I missed that bit," said the sergeant.

"Only a little thing, but sufficient to start the ball rolling. It was when the sister was asked to identify the body. People sometimes say strange things at a time like that, but what she said made sense.

" 'That's Gladys right enough,' she told the sergeant. Then she cried a little which is what one might expect; but then, oddly enough, she smiled. 'She must have been on her way to the Institute,' she said, 'and her wearing last year's red coat. Gladys always used to say that she wouldn't be seen dead wearing a last year's coat.' "

Rats die in holes and corners, dogs run mad;
Man knows a braver remedy for sorrow:
Revenge! the attribute of gods, they stamped it
With their great image on our natures.

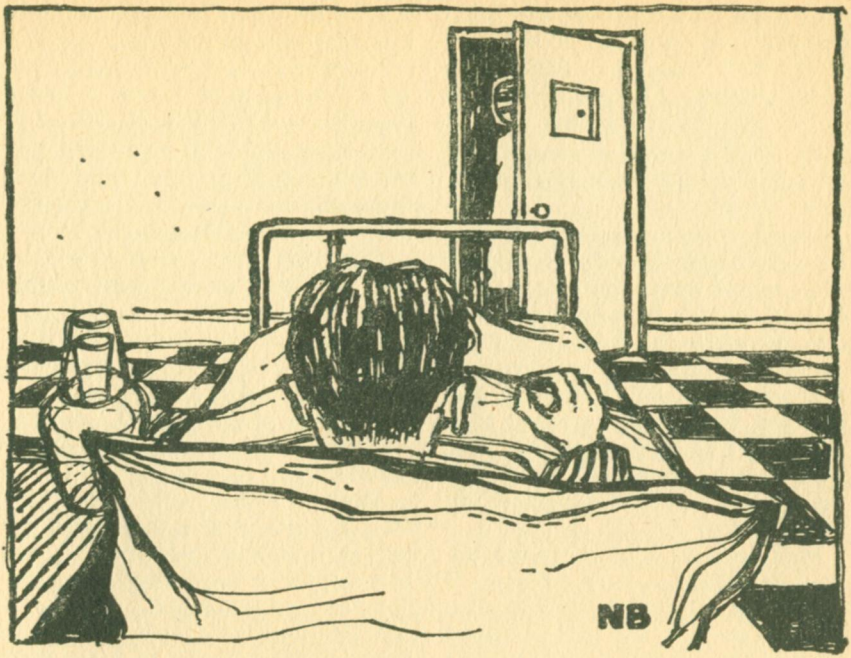
THOMAS OTWAY.

O'er a dark field I held my dubious way
Where Jack-a-lanthorn walk'd his lonely round;
Beneath my feet substantial darkness lay,
And screams were heard from the distemper'd ground.

Nor look'd I back, till to a far-off wood
Trembling with fear, my weary feet had sped—
Dark was the night but at the enchanted dome
I saw the infernal windows flaming red;

And from within the howls of Death I heard,
Cursing the dismal night that gave him birth,
Damning his ancient sire and mother sin,
Who at the gates of hell, accursèd, brought him forth.

PHILIP FRENEAU.



THE THIRD JAR

ANTHONY A. RANDALL

Illustrated by Norman Battershill

THREE DAYS AFTER his admission to Dr. Udai Singh's sanatorium in the Kangra Valley, Cyril Makin's fever subsided and his temperature returned to normal. Propped up by pillows, still suffering from the worst attack of dysentery he'd ever endured in his ten years of service with the Forestry Commission, Makin stared at the thickly wooded slopes of the valley, convinced that he was virtually a prisoner.

He had to admit that there weren't really any grounds for the conviction, yet it persisted—in fact grew stronger, until the desire to get out, to get away from the sanatorium and its silky smooth Rajput surgeon became an obsession.

To begin with there was something decidedly odd about the place. Apart from Udai Singh he couldn't recall seeing another soul—except those five Rajput bearers. Chocolate skinned with shining cherubic cheeks and thick, sensual lips, they never spoke, never smiled.

Makin stroked his chin thoughtfully. It was probably the debilitating effect of the fever which made it so difficult for him to marshal his facts into chronological order. But from the moment his two young assistants, Roger Straun and Bill Fletcher, had vanished from sight things had gone wrong in a sinister, purposeful way. It was just as though all his actions were being governed by somebody else's will.

Makin lit a cigarette and tried to review the situation, step by step. It must be nearly six weeks ago now since Roger, Bill and he had set up camp in the western Kangra to start the enormous task of planting new pine trees to replace cut timber. With a gang of over a hundred coolies the work had gone well—until dysentery struck.

A fortnight or so back, first Roger, then Bill had succumbed. They'd immediately been sent down to Pathankot for medical attention, but apparently not soon enough. Within ten days thirty coolies had become infected, too. Work had fallen into arrears.

Makin inhaled on the cigarette. During that time he hadn't heard a word from Roger or Bill. Their silence had been worrying. They'd promised to write and let him know where exactly they were getting treatment, how they were getting on.

Just when he'd determined to send one of his men to Pathankot to make inquiries he had himself contracted the disease. From that moment the mystery of Roger and Bill had deepened. It was almost as though they'd vanished into thin air.

Three days ago, in considerable pain, Makin'd gone straight to the Pathankot Club. The manager had admitted to seeing Roger and Bill, saying they'd booked in for one night. No sooner had they done so than they'd gone off in search of a doctor.

"Didn't they return?" Makin asked irritably.

Apparently they hadn't. An hour after their departure a chowkidar had arrived, collected their luggage, reporting that the two sahibs were going down to Lahore hospital.

Makin recalled phoning the hospital, his dismay when he heard that the men had never been seen there.

Looking back he knew now he ought to have gone straight to the Commissioner of Police. He could only excuse himself on the ground that he felt so wretchedly ill.

"I've got to find a doctor," he had explained to the manager. "Can you recommend one?"

"For people like ourselves," the Eurasian manager replied with heart-rending hypocrisy, "I always suggest the pharmacist, Rory McCulloch. His shop is in the bazaar. Of course," he went on smugly, "you'll appreciate he is *not* one of us."

Makin had known what he meant —McCulloch wasn't pure white.

Summoning a tonga he'd gone straight to McCulloch's pharmacy. McCulloch, he reckoned, must've been seventy if he was a day. His skin was dry and parchment-like and behind his spectacles his eyes gleamed with an unnatural brilliance. The old chap'd endured the heat of the plains for far too long, Makin'd concluded.

"Guid afternoon," McCulloch had said, rolling his "r" with authentic relish. "What can I be doing for you?"

"Dysentery," Makin replied, pushing back his sweat-stained bush hat. "It's been going the rounds up the valley."

"Aye," the old man replied. "What wouldn't one be giving to be back in Bonnie Scotland at times like these?" He chuckled, shaking his head reminiscently.

In spite of his sympathy for these people and their painfully obvious pretence, Makin asked: "Why don't you go back?"

He thought he detected a gleam of triumph in the old eyes.

"I'm going! I'm going! I reckon I've about made my pile here now. So it's back home I'm going, back to the Isle of Skye." McCulloch cracked a wire swatter on an offending fly and flicked it on to the floor. "So you've got the dysentery, have you?"

"Yes," Makin said. "I want treatment. I was recommended to you."

McCulloch shook his head, artfully, Makin thought. "I'll not be giving you sulphonamide drugs without a prescription. In any event you should be in hospital. You have a temperature and your pulse rate's abnormal."

"Hospital! I can't afford the time. And there's no hospital fit to go in nearer than Lahore."

The old man stroked his nose. "I suggest, if I may, that you make the trip up the eastern valley to Dr. Udai Singh's sanatorium. In a week or so he'll have you cured."

Makin had never heard of the sanatorium nor of Udai Singh. Not that there was anything strange about that. It was just the way the old man made the suggestion—as if there might be something in it for him.

"Tell me," Makin asked. "Have a couple of chaps suffering dysentery been in here during the past fortnight? Names of Roger Straun and Bill Fletcher."

It was some seconds before McCulloch replied.

"They did."

Makin felt a sudden surge of relief.

"D'you know what happened to them?"

Again there was a significant pause before McCulloch answered. "No, I don't. I recommended they go to the sanatorium. Whether they went or not I don't know. They might well have decided to go down to Lahore."

Makin thought McCulloch a rotten bad liar.

He eased his position in bed. From the moment he left the shop he had felt a vague, shadowy suspicion. Nothing he could put his finger on, but nevertheless the feeling persisted. Something sinister had happened to Roger and Bill. As their senior officer in the Commission he considered himself responsible for their safety.

Besides, they were two rattling good men.

Only the conviction that they'd accepted McCulloch's advice and gone to the sanatorium, that the Chowkidar who'd collected their luggage from the club had either been mistaken or carefully instructed to mention Lahore, had prompted Makin to make the trip to Udai Singh's.

He'd found the sanatorium after a two-hour ride in an American taxi driven by a fasting Mohammedan. It was an old, Dak-house-type building high up on a ridge overlooking the valleys of the eastern Kangra. Despite the warmth of the sun, the freshness of the mountain air and the colourful mass of trees rearing their great heads towards a pure blue sky, he had hesitated before passing inside.

The sensation he was a prisoner, that he wouldn't again see the outside world really sprung from his first meeting with Udai Singh.

Makin stubbed out his cigarette. Dr. Udai Singh had proved to be a typical Rajput in appearance. His skin was dark and smooth, his eyes had a curiously hooded quality about them. There'd been a politeness and polish in his manner that Makin had instinctively mistrusted.

Not that the way he'd carried out the examination was to be faulted. Udai Singh had been thorough and had impressed as a competent doctor.

"May I ask, please, why you came all the way up here, Mr. Makin?" he'd asked, very politely.

"I was recommended to come by Mr. McCulloch, the chemist."

Udai Singh nodded approvingly.

"He told me," Makin went on, "that he'd also suggested two friends of mine came."

"Their names, please?"

"Mr. Roger Straun and Mr. Bill Fletcher."

Udai Singh shook his head. "I fear they did not take the advice of the excellent Mr. McCulloch. Nobody by those names has been here."

Makin had felt Udai Singh a more convincing liar than McCulloch.

He threw back the sheets and swung his legs off the bed. Under the pretext of shaving he'd carry out a reconnaissance of the building, discover more about Dr. Udai Singh and his five, mute, Rajput bearers.

Slipping on his dressing-gown, collecting his soap and razor, Makin stepped out into the corridor and walked quickly and quietly to the bathroom. And that was another odd thing—the absolute silence of the place. In a sanatorium he would've expected to hear the sound of voices, the squeak of trolleys being wheeled along the passages.

Once in the bathroom Makin contemplated himself in the mirror. The fever had certainly left him rather colourless, a feature which tended to accentuate the narrowness of his face and the size of his nose. Then, too, he wasn't quite so steady with a razor. A fine tremble in his legs and arms tended to make shaving slightly more hazardous than usual.

He had just removed the last of the lather when he spotted a hairbrush on the window shelf immediately above the bath. It looked vaguely familiar, so he picked it up and turned it over.

Inscribed on it in platinum were the letters R. S.

Roger Straun!

Makin felt an icy trickle run down his spine. So Roger *had* been here—Bill as well. The revelation left him quite dizzy. His convictions had been right! There *was* something funny going on; he and the others had been enticed here.

There and then Makin decided to get out—dysentery or no dysentery. Nothing on earth would induce him to spend another night in the place. He paused.

Where, then, were Roger and Bill? Were they locked away in some room or were they— Makin shivered.

He stuffed his soap and razor into his washing-bag and left the bathroom in a hurry. Dress, get out, if necessary foot it all the way down to Pathankot and report to the Commissioner of Police. A thousand pities, he thought, he hadn't done that in the first place.

His mind was so preoccupied with escape and the possible fates that might have befallen Roger and Bill that it was some seconds before he realized he was lost. On emerging from the bathroom he must've taken the wrong turning.

He was about to retrace his steps when, to his horror, a door opened lower down the corridor and one of Udai Singh's bearers appeared.

Makin pressed his body to the wall and with a sigh of relief watched the man walk silently away in the opposite direction.

The shock had left him feeling quite breathless.

Peculiar! Makin's nostrils twitched quite violently. What on earth was that smell? He peered down the corridor. Phew! Very strong. Whatever that smell was, he thought, it must've seeped from that room.

An irresistible impulse to discover the secret of the room took him to the door. His hand, wet and swollen with nervous reaction, dropped on to the knob.

With a last, furtive glance up and down the corridor, Makin went in.

At once the smell was quite overpowering and somehow positively evil. He placed his handkerchief over his nose and closed the door.

Clearly he was in a laboratory. Illumination was provided by two full-length windows, the lower halves of which were fitted with opaque glass. A bench covered with stands of test-tubes, pipettes and the usual paraphernalia of a chemist occupied the centre of the room. Overhead an electric fan creaked dismally.

Makin licked his dry lips, staring spellbound at two large jars, not dissimilar from sweet jars, which stood at one end of the bench. Filled with some colourless, transparent liquid, they contained a variety of objects which he couldn't identify.

Acutely aware that he was a trespasser, certain that Udai Singh would view his presence here with the gravest disfavour, Makin went cautiously forward to take a closer look at the jars.

And the nearer he went the stronger became the smell.

His curiosity at fever pitch he peered into the first jar. Floating in-

side were two tubular shaped objects, apparently made of some tissue. Beneath them, lying at the bottom like sleeping shellfish were other objects, varying in colour from pink to grey.

Makin glanced into the other jar.

Its contents were precisely and exactly the same, except that the shades of colour of each object were slightly darker.

Then he saw the third jar. Apart from the liquid it was empty, evidently waiting to be filled.

In a sudden flash that left him breathless and dizzy with horror he realized the grisly truth. He was in an anatomical laboratory, looking at the dissected parts of human bodies.

The realization brought him out in a fine sweat. His strength seemed to ebb from his muscles and a faint wave of nausea flooded his stomach.

Nothing unusual, he knew, in an anatomical laboratory. Medical schools, hospitals and research centres had urgent need . . . urgent need of such things. And doubtless paid very well.

But whose bodies had Udai Singh dissected?

Cold, icy fear clawed at his vitals, the conviction that Roger, Bill and he had been enticed up to this lonely, isolated spot became an absolute certainty.

Makin didn't doubt that he was staring at the dissected remains of his two friends.

His heart thumped painfully against his ribs, leaving him a breathless, quivering mass of nerves. McCulloch, the old devil, was in it—in it up to his neck. He was the source from which Udai Singh was getting his bodies—and no questions asked, provided the commission was good. Small wonder the old man had decided to settle in Skye, thousands of miles from the Orient.

Makin gasped for breath. He'd got to get out, get away before he was discovered, before—

Gripped by panic such as he'd never known, he rushed to the door.

At that very moment, from the outside, the key turned in the lock. Frozen with horror Makin stood rooted to the spot. He was caught—caught like a rat in a trap. From the far end of the room he heard the rasp of a sliding door. With a little squeal of terror Makin peered fearfully over his shoulder.

Advancing silently and purposely towards him with a hypodermic needle in his hand, followed by his five Rajput bearers, came Dr. Udai Singh suitably dressed for dissection work in the operating theatre.

And from the bench, gleaming brightly in the sunlight, the third jar seemed to be beckoning Makin.

PERSIAN MINK

J. F. B. BUNTING

Illustrated by D. C. Forbes

OF COURSE THE police swear it was the husband who did it. In point of fact, they are still looking for him. You probably saw that bit in last night's paper where it said that they wanted him to help them in their enquiries. Help them in their enquiries indeed! We all know what that means.

But they're wrong, you know. I am prepared to testify in any court of law that George Stone is no wife murderer. And I think I know him better than anyone.

I knew the wife, too. She was a rare bit of stuff was Ellen Shuttleworth. In the old days, that was. She was the daughter of one of the town's wealthiest publicans and there was plenty that went with it besides. The only trouble with her was that she was born wrong, just about ten years before the Great War—the war they now call the First World War.

By the time she was in her twenties, she was too young for the old men and too old for the young men, if you see what I mean. So she just sort of drifted along until, round about the time of her thirty-sixth birthday, she began to get a bit desperate.

That was when George Stone first met her. He had been with the railway nearly twelve years and was still nothing better than an ordinary porter, with precious little to offer. Yet, in a clumsy, rather bucolic way, he courted Ellen steadily for eight months. Then, a few days after he was promoted to station foreman, he married her.

Nobody really understood why, not even George. In the first place, Ellen was a good five years older than himself, although she tried to disguise the fact by wearing flashy clothes, using make-up like a French chef uses a garnish and dyeing her hair a particularly vivid shade of auburn.

Secondly, she considered herself a cut above her husband socially and never forgot to remind people of the fact. Even though her father had been long dead and gone at the time of her marriage, she still remembered him as one of the town's most important citizens. Civic honours may not have come his way, but his calling had brought him into intimate contact with most of the local notabilities. And the Mayor and Corporation had attended his funeral.

But by far the most marked difference between George and Ellen lay in their respective attitudes towards animals. George had an almost fanatical love for all the furred and feathered creatures that breathe God's good air, especially cats. Ellen hated every single one of them—cats especially.

The fact that there was no animal

in the matrimonial home did not, however, prove too great a hardship to George. He had never been allowed one in the digs he had occupied before his marriage. Yet, now that he had this little terrace house free from such wearisome restrictions, there were times when he longed for a dog to take for a walk and for a cat to be curled up in front of the sitting-room fire on winter evenings.

But, in spite of the differences between them, the couple soon settled down to what was quite obviously a happier and more peaceful married existence than most.

Year after year, the pattern of their life remained unchanged. When George was on early shift, he would rise shortly after four in the morning and, without waking his wife, creep downstairs and make himself a cup of tea. Then, half an hour later, he would slip quietly out of the back door, get on to his bicycle and pedal leisurely to the station. At midday he would return, his work completed and his tongue hanging out for the substantial dinner that Ellen had prepared for him.

The day shift was easy. He luxuriated in bed until ten, reading the newspaper from cover to cover, took his dinner at eleven and got back for a bread and cheese supper soon after eight, after sneaking a quick pint at the "Red Lion".

Late shift was the one that Ellen really disliked, because it left her with three blank, lonely hours at home before going to bed. She tried going out to the pictures to fill in the time, but there was only one cinema in the town and it ran the same programme for the whole of the week. She would have visited friends or had them in for a glass of stout until she realized bitterly that there wasn't a soul in the place she could truthfully call a friend.

Then George got her a telly. He couldn't afford to buy one and even the weekly hire payments were a bit of a wrench, but it solved the problem of Ellen's loneliness. Night after night, no matter what shift he was on, she would sit with her eyes glued to the screen, revelling in every programme that appeared upon it. George wasn't allowed to speak and, because most of the stuff dished out by the television people was above his head, he developed the habit of retiring to the kitchen and reading cheap novels.

Punctuating the Stones' monotonous yearly round like commas, semicolons and full stops in a dreary tract were the obligatory days off, the occasional leaves of absence graciously granted by the railway when George wasn't feeling up to the mark and the annual fortnight of summer holiday. On off-duty days, George would potter about round the back, trying to make something of a garden out of two hundred square yards of arid wilderness. In the summer, they would travel to some overcrowded seaside resort on free passes and spend an uncomfortable couple of weeks in a cheap boarding-house.

For a long time, Ellen continued to face with grim fortitude the fact that her husband was a humble railwayman earning barely enough to pro-

vide them both with the simple necessities of life. Then, as the passing years brought no hint of betterment and carried her relentlessly through her change of life and into the fifties, her true character emerged.

She whined. And she nagged. She accused George of lack of ambition. She extolled the virtues of other men, men whom she assured him had been ardent seekers of her hand in marriage in the distant past.

Then, as if this were not enough, she began to upbraid her husband for his meanness. After a lapse of fifteen years, she suddenly remembered that he had once rashly promised her a mink stole in their courting days. Where, she asked him again and again, was that mink stole now? Where were all those other little luxuries that he had sworn to shower upon her? But, in particular, where was the mink stole?

"You know how it is, Ellen," he would protest feebly. "Things like mink are much too expensive nowadays."

"But it wasn't when you first promised it to me."

"Maybe not. But there were other thing I had to take into consideration. Your engagement ring, for one."

"My engagement ring!" She snorted contemptuously and glared at the modest little stone on the third finger of her left hand. "I warrant that's one thing that *hasn't* increased in price. It's worth no more now than the eight quid you originally gave for it."

"Ten," George corrected her sharply.

"Eight or ten, what does it matter now? What I want to know is where is my bit of mink?"

George tried hard to take things philosophically. He even gave a certain amount of thought to the matter of the stole, although he was positive he couldn't manage mink. But, in the end, he did what so many other distraught men do in similar circumstances. He took to drink. Not in a serious way, mind you. Just a matter of increasing his customary evening pint to three or four, or even five. And it didn't cause any great trouble. Ellen was still too engrossed in the telly to worry about what he did with himself in the evenings.

Then, in the public bar of the "Red Lion" one winter's night, he unwittingly sealed his wife's fate—and his own. Some good-intentioned fellow drinker persuaded him to take home a kitten. An unusual creature, half alley-cat, half long-haired Persian. Strangely coloured and curiously marked.

Of course, there was one hell of a row about it. And that night George occupied the spare bedroom of his house for the first time, taking the kitten and a bowl of milk with him. He also underwent a metamorphosis. From being a quiet, docile, subservient little man he changed into a harsh, domineering tyrant whose every word must be obeyed.

Ellen tried at first to square up to this new, inexplicable being who was her husband. She stormed, she raved, she threatened and, finally, she cajoled. But suddenly she collapsed,

beaten and tearful. And the cat remained. It throve and put on weight.

Yet, with that strange fickleness characteristic of all felines, the newcomer to the Stone household developed a marked aversion to its champion and benefactor. Instead, it followed Ellen around like a familiar, rubbing itself up against her cold, inhospitable legs and purring ecstatically each time, when her husband was out of the way, she aimed a savage kick at it.

By the time the cat was ten months old and nearly fully grown, it had taken possession of Ellen like some evil spirit. For hours on end it would gaze at her fixedly with its large, orange-coloured eyes, as if it were trying to hypnotize her into committing some unspeakable sin. She found herself unable to concentrate on anything she was doing. She could not even lose herself in the telly. And, although at first she went to great lengths to drive it away, it defeated her by occupying vantage points that were impossible for her to reach. There it would sit for hours, fastidiously washing itself and always staring, staring....

Suddenly, one Monday morning when George was on early turn, something went snap inside her head.

Resolutely she went down to the call-box on the corner and telephoned a certain number.

The vet. was naturally very loath to do what she proposed.

"It's a fine cat," he said, "and it's in perfect condition."

"I don't care!" she retorted. "It's got dirty habits and I want it out of here."

"It's still young enough to train, you know," the vet. argued.

'I've asked you to put it down!" she snapped back at him. "And that's what I want you to do. And please don't bring the body back here. Burn it!"

"Very well, if that's the way you want it. But I don't know about burning it."

"Do what you like, but take it away and kill it!"

George never forgave her. He ignored her completely for the next two or three days, brooding silently and spending as much time as possible in the "Red Lion". Then, on the following Friday, he drew his life savings of three hundred and twenty-two pounds from the penny bank, sent half of the money to his wife by registered post, and disappeared.

Ellen remained strangely unmoved by all this. She continued getting up and going to bed and watching the telly as usual and she did not bother to ask the police to make enquiries. But she swore never to forgive George for hoarding money that could have bought her the coveted mink stole and perhaps some other minor extravagances. After a couple of months, with still no news from her husband, she gave up the lease of the house, returned the television set, put the furniture in store and took a job as resident housekeeper in a new block of flats the other side of the town.

From then on, she put all thoughts of George out of her mind and the space they had occupied was filled with what now had become a mink stole obsession. At least twice a week she searched the windows of the town's three fur shops, looking in vain for something that would satisfy her craving yet still come within the limits of her slender purse.

Finally, when it seemed that she would never find what she wanted and her patience was almost exhausted, she plucked up her courage and entered the establishment of A. & J. SCHWARTZ, HIGH CLASS FURS AT BARGAIN PRICES where she firmly stated her precise requirements.

For a brief instant, after he had succeeded in drawing from her the maximum amount that she was prepared to spend, the salesman regarded her somewhat scornfully. He went so far as to say that she would never get what she wanted for that sort of price and suggested that she might consider a stole made from some less pretentious skin. But Ellen was adamant. Then, just as she was turning on her heel to leave the shop, the man suddenly brightened.

"I've just remembered something," he said. "I believe it may be just the

very thing for madam." He opened a drawer behind the counter and extracted a short, narrow strip of fur for her inspection. "It's a really wonderful bargain at only twenty guineas," he smiled.

Ellen regarded the stole dubiously. There didn't seem to be very much of the fur and it had an unusual colouring and marking. There was, in fact, something strangely familiar about the marking.

"I suppose it's secondhand?" she asked.

"Good heavens, no, madam!" The salesman was painfully shocked. "As a matter of fact, we've had that skin for only a few months and we made it up ourselves just a week ago. It's—it's the new fashionable length, you know."

"But—is it *mink*?"

"Of course, madam." He stroked the fur nervously. "To be perfectly frank, it's a home-grown fur. That's why we can sell it cheaper But it's mink all right. Persian mink we call it in the trade."

"Then, in that case . . ."

"Would madam like to try it on? There's a mirror just behind you."

"No, no—" Suddenly her brain seemed to be full of voices arguing this way and that and in the midst of all this confusion a voice—a voice strangely like George's—was saying: "Take it. Take it while you've got the chance!"

"No," she said again, "I'll have it."

She opened her purse and, with shaking fingers, solemnly counted out twenty-one pound notes. In a way, she hadn't done at all badly because, although she had told the salesman that her maximum was twenty pounds, she had come fully prepared to go as far as forty.

Back in her room at the flats, Ellen gazed for a long while at the stole nesting in tissue paper in its box. It seemed such a little thing with which to adorn her sturdy neck and ample bosom: not much more than a necklet —but it was her own. And it was mink. Even if it was still vaguely reminiscent of something she couldn't quite put a name to.

Lovingly she lifted the fur from its wrappings, stroking it gently and uttering soft cooing sounds of delight. Then she walked across to her dressing-table mirror and placed the stole about her neck.

With a feeling of dismay, she realized that there had been some ground for her fears after all. The thing was too short and too tight. So tight that the metal clasp bit into the skin beneath her throat as she struggled to fasten it. Inwardly she cursed herself for not taking the salesman's advice and trying it on in the shop.

"What made me buy it?" she half-sobbed. "I'll take it back! I'll take it back!"

But, by then, the stole had got hold of her. it was as if it had said to her "I belong to you and you belong to me". She would not, she could not give in as easily as this. Removing her single string of artificial pearls, she once more looped the fur about her neck and recommenced the struggle. Pulling hard with both

hands, so that she was afraid that the stole might break in half, she finally succeeded in closing the clasp.

Her face was red from the effort and there was a strange dizzy feeling in her head. She stood, swaying slightly, by the mirror, looking at her blurred reflection, and then she decided she must take the thing off. But it wouldn't unfasten. Instead it appeared to be gaining a stranglehold around her throat.

She tried to scream but nothing came, except a dry, rattling sound.

Then a dark haze swirled before her eyes and, as she fell heavily to the ground, two great orange-coloured eyes pierced through the mist, like the headlights of a car in fog.

That was when her brain performed its last living function and reminded her where she had seen the fur before. . . .

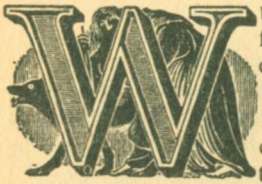
As I said at the beginning, the police are still looking for George Stone. They seem to have the idea that he might have strangled his wife. It's a pity they don't understand what really happened. Particularly for me.

You see, I want to go out and buy myself another cat.

HOW BIG THE MOON....

DOUGLAS RAILTON

Illustrated by Timothy Mathias



HEN HE'D finished his class at the immigrants' language-centre, Santee usually had a cup of coffee and a hamburger with onions at the stand on the corner by the subway entrance and then rode over to his rooms in Newark. That way, he was home by eleven and half an hour after that he would be asleep. Daytimes he worked in a bank, but the three nights a week he taught at the centre was useful extra money. Besides, he liked the change of atmosphere, the opportunity to meet people who were different. And he liked telling them about the American way of life, which to him meant the New York way of life. In his thirty-two years, Santee had never even travelled as far as Philadelphia.

It was when he was standing on the worn steps of the shabby building that housed the language-centre that Santee knew he wouldn't be going home according to schedule. Not tonight.

A voice, a girl's voice behind him in the tiled hall, said in a heavy foreign accent:

"How big the moon. . . ."

Santee stared up into the night sky, beyond the granite cliffs of the city, where the full moon rode free and glistening and milky-white. And he knew it was all going to start again. . . . Was it the third time? He counted over in his sick memory, but it was all so confused. But he knew it was starting—from the curious rushing, liquid sound in his head that made him think of a bath-tub filling. And the sudden hot pain in his temples. He waited, still, on the steps for the rest of it. A sort of blurred, jammed music beat inside his skull, so that he couldn't hear anything else—not even a street-car. And then, after the music, there was this sound as if a big switch had been thrown, like a dynamo master-key, and then there were no sounds in his head at all and his body felt cold, moon-cold, all through. And after that, he knew, it would happen; the really bad things that he couldn't quite remember in detail the next morning when he was working at the bank. The newspapers told a part of it and he could remember more than the newspapers knew. But there were always some events that were dark, forever dark, like the reverse surface of the moon itself. And Santee was grateful for this. . . .

He turned around to look at the girl who had spoken, recognizing her voice before he saw her thin, rather pretty face and almost childishly slender figure. Maria Kals, the Czech refugee who'd started his classes about a month before. The moonlight

reflected in her big dark eyes and Santee had a sudden fearful notion that he was falling from a great height into a shadowy silver lake. He blinked, smiling at the girl.

"Sorry, I was dreaming! What did you say, Miss Kals?"

She smiled back with a natural warm friendliness.

"I say: 'How big the moon. . . .' Like a great ship that never reaches the harbour. Always sailing, with no passengers, no crew. . . . Always she makes me feel—sad. . . ."

"You have a romantic nature, Miss Kals. The moon is just"—Santee hesitated less than a second—"just rock and ice and mineral. That's all. A great magnet. . . ." He wanted to say so much more, but it was dangerous, all this talk. One could easily give oneself away by an indiscreet phrase, or by appearing too knowledgeable, too preoccupied. . . . He looked at the girl again, still smiling. She was completely unlike the others, who had been big, billowy, foolish blondes with an appetite for gin and jazz and off-beat jokes. Two of them. He remembered now. Quite clearly. One had had a small strawberry mark on her left shoulder. Lily. . . . And the other? Vera, who'd lived in Yonkers. He was surprised at the accuracy of his memory, which could even recall that one of Vera's eye-teeth had chipped. She had an appointment with the dental surgeon for that day, the day he killed her on the waste lot behind where she lived. . . .

"Where do you live, Miss Kals?" They were walking down the steps together and he let her choose her direction.

"In Queens," she said. "I like it over there. I've made a lot of nice friends. I work there, too. In a store. A big store, selling"—she searched for the word, found it—"hardware."

"Coincidence," Santee said. "I'm over at Queen's, too. Bay Avenue. You know it?"

She concentrated, frowning.

"No. Maybe I pass it some time, though."

"I expect you would. It's sort of a main thoroughfare. A very nice area." Santee wondered if there really was a Bay Avenue in Queens. It didn't matter, of course. Any name would have done.

"If you like," he said, "I'll see you back there, as we're both going the same direction."

"It would be very kind of you, Mr. Santee."

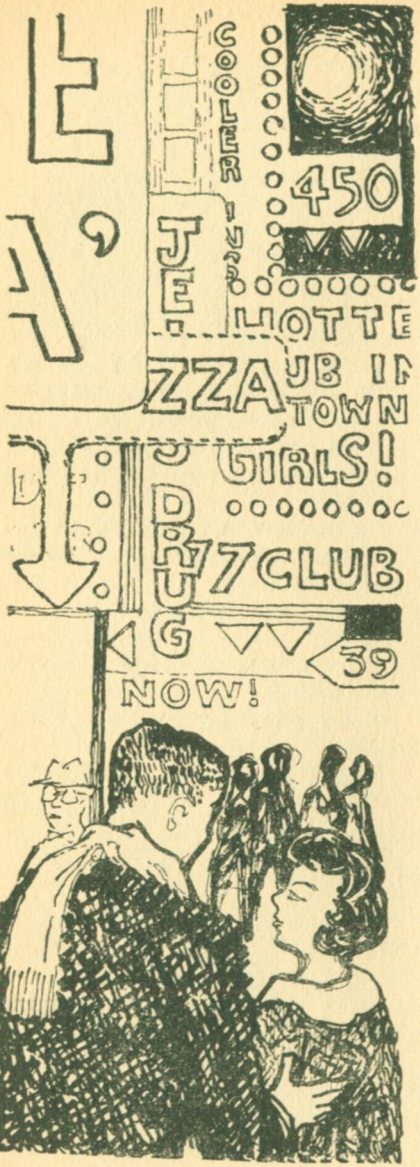
"Sort of extra-mural study," he said jovially.

She wrinkled her brow in concentration.

"What is that—extra-mural study?"

"Well, a lesson out of school you might call it. For free!" He took her arm as they crossed the intersection to the subway. When they reached the other side, she made no attempt to free herself. She's lonely, Santee thought. She may have friends over in Queens, but she's lonely. His confidence made him decide to change his programme slightly.

"Look, Miss Kals. I just had an idea. It's not too late. How about having a bite to eat with me some-



where around here. You're probably about as hungry as I am."

"I'd like that, Mr. Santee. I never ate out yet in New York. Not dinner, that is. It would be an experience. A pleasant experience," she added, making her phrases very distinctly, straining to accent correctly.

"You're learning fast," Santee said. "Six months and you'll have the language problem licked."

"Licked?"

"You know—broken, defeated, conquered. . . ." He steered her into a small candle-lit Italian restaurant he'd never patronized before. The dimmed rose-coloured interior created a mask of anonymity for the diners and Santee relaxed, sure that neither the girl nor himself would ever be recognized if anything went wrong—later.

But what *could* go wrong? Santee was big, muscular, even stronger than he looked. And on nights like these. . . . The others had struggled, but it could have been no more than three or four minutes from the time he tightened the silk cord around their throats until they were dead, lying at his feet on the sidewalk, crumpled and eternally still. And after one choking gasp for air, there had been no sound at all. Three or four minutes, then it was all over. And Maria Kals was as fragile as a bird. She barely came up to his shoulder.

He smiled at her across the candle-lit table, a handsome and youthful escort for a stranger in a strange land. She responded, gratefully. It was incredible, she thought. Only two or three months ago, she had nearly died

of cold and hunger. Then—escape from terror into freedom. And now, sitting here like this. An elegant restaurant, soft candlelight, a good-looking and intelligent companion. . . .

"Enjoying your meal, Miss Kals? I'm very fond of Italian cooking myself. I hope you are, too."

"Oh, yes! I—it's the best meal I—I mean . . ." She was suddenly confused and shy. She wanted to tell him of her gratitude, but in time she remembered that Americans did not like too much show of feeling. It embarrassed and irritated them, she had been told. She wondered if it was the same when they were in love, or when they were married, even. One day, perhaps, she would understand them.

"You're very quiet," Santee teased. He was getting impatient, regretting his choise to delay the purpose of the night.

"I was thinking—I was thinking how lucky I am," she answered, nervous in case he thought her too demonstrative but determined, too, to let him know that his kindness had been so very welcome.

"Shall we go. We don't want to miss the last subway over. What time do you start work in the morning?"

"Eight o'clock."

"That's pretty early."

"I don't mind. In Czechoslovakia I started work at five-thirty." She laughed, seeing it from a long way away. "On a farm. . . ." She wanted to tell him about it, but she decided he might be bored. City people weren't very interested in country-life, she knew. Another time, perhaps. When she knew him better.

As they walked towards the subway, he suddenly remembered his scarf. It even had his name labelled in it.

"It'll still be on the rack. Wait for me. I won't be more than a minute."

Standing on the windy corner, Maria Kals looked after his broad, hurrying figure. No man so good-looking as Mr. Santee had ever taken her out to dinner before. She would ask him back to the room she rented in her friends' flat in Queens, sometime soon. She would cook a very special dinner for him, after she found out the dishes he specially liked. . . .

She felt so very happy, really for the first time since she had come to New York. Happy enough to dream a little, as strangers will do when they are a little frightened by new surroundings, unfamiliar customs.

"There! I wasn't long. . . ." Santee was slightly breathless as he deftly knotted the fashionable white silk scarf and took her arm again. Maria Kals leant into him a little—a very little—as they walked down the broad avenue. His quick, compact bulk gave her a thrill of protection and she wondered if passers-by noticed them, marked them down momentarily as an interesting-looking couple.

The wind was rising, with a keen cutting edge, blowing against her slim black skirt and colouring her cheeks to a flower-pink glow. She felt suddenly excited, as if something unusual was going to happen. Something . . . something. . . . She couldn't find any phrase that might have described what she sensed only in her blood.

But there was some knowledge beating wordlessly along her pulse, a shapeless drama struggling to express itself in her heart. Above them the sky was like curdled milk, the great ragged black and white clouds whipping the dazzling blank face of the hurrying moon. And the wind tuned to a savage hunting yell as Santee almost pushed her around the next corner, where shadows crowded the unlit walls like soft-footed assassins. . . .

Was this the way to the subway? It must be a short-cut. Any minute now it was going to rain. When they got out at Queens' station, she could get a cab. She didn't want to take Mr. Santee out of his way. Or maybe he would drop her at her apartment block and keep the cab. Perhaps . . . perhaps he might even kiss her "good night." In a very respectable sort of way. . . .

She was almost having to run to keep up with him. Their footsteps clattered with swift, hollow echoes along the short dark side-street.

As they passed a single street lamp a truck and tender jerked around the farther end of the thoroughfare.

"He's in a hurry to get home, too." Maria Kals looked up at Santee. In the light from the street-lamp, his face was blank and featureless like the moon. Only a white, round empty disc. There was something in his hands, looped through big, gleaming, steely fingers. . . .

She screamed, ducked her head, running forward. . . .

The speeding truck slewed to miss the thin, wild figure in its staring lights, briefly mounted the sidewalk, then bounced back into the road, dragging Santee in its helpless zigzag skid as the air-brakes clamped, failed, then clamped again. . . . Santee hooked by his elegantly knotted scarf to a bent cleat on the side of the tender. . . . Then Santee dead, in the bleak enquiry of the moon. . . .

THE SLAVE DETECTIVE

THE CASE OF THE BANK THEFT

WALLACE NICHOLS

Illustrated by Juliette Palmer

FOR A HEAVY FEE, paid to Titius Sabinus the Senator, his master, Sollius, the Slave Detective, was hired by Timander, the money-changer and banker, a Greek dominant in the commercial life of Rome.

"What, sir, is your trouble?" Sollius asked as he limpingly ambled along with him to his place of business.

"Theft!" concisely replied Timander. "I have been robbed of a great sum. But you shall see and hear for yourself when we get there," and the rest of the journey was made in silence.

Timander's Bank stood in a narrow street in the busiest quarter of Rome. The area was densely populated, but none of the passers-by seemed aware of anything untoward behind the Bank's iron-barred windows. Inside waited three men, pale and strained, obviously upset by the circumstances.

"These are my three clerks," announced Timander. "My head clerk Servilius, and his two assistants, Trebonius and Beric. This is the Slave Detective, Servilius: tell him what you found when you came to open this morning."

"The door-lock broken, as you can see," replied Servilius, ill at ease and stammering. "Now come with me into the store-vault," and he took one of the small lamps that illuminated the dim interior of the Bank and led the way down some stone steps into a huge cellar. "Another door-lock broken: see!"

From his own lamp he lighted another in a niche.

"Now look at yonder two coffers with their locks also smashed, and open and empty which, last night, were filled with money, part gold, part silver. The loss is prodigious!" he added in a horrified tone.

"Someone knew which coffers to break open," muttered Timander, "for those two had the richest contents. There has been a spy here."

"How were the coins made up?" asked Sollius.

"In small ringed leather bags," answered Servilius, "each coffer containing a number which were to be counted this very day—so I cannot definitely compute either the gold or the silver. But it was prodigious," he repeated.

"You see, Sollius," said Timander, "someone stole my money at precisely the right time."

"Who would know of this?"

"Only my three clerks—and them I trust. But clearly there has been a leak. Nose it out, Slave Detective!

I am paying a great price for your services, and expect you to stretch your utmost powers."

"Yes, lord," said Sollius humbly. "Who possessed keys to the various locks?"

"Only myself and Servilius," replied Timander. "But the thief could not have possessed keys or he would not have needed to burst the locks."

"Unless . . ." said Sollius, but did not continue his thought. "May I speak with you in your inner office?"

Timander led the way out of the store-vault and into a small chamber at the farther end of the counting-house. It was furnished with a touch of Greek luxury, for he was a very rich man.

"Tell me, lord," Sollius began, "what you know—all you know—of your three clerks."

"I told you that I trust them all," objected Timander. "You can take my judgment."

"I take nobody's judgment except my own in a case," firmly replied Sollius. "You know them; I do not. If I am to eliminate them I must know as much about them as possible."

Timander, unused to being withstood, pursed his thick lips; nevertheless, he complied.

"Servilius was trained by my father, and has been with me all my own business life. I rewarded his work by helping him to become a freedman. H is now about to retire from my service and to live with a daughter in Ephesus. He is quite beyond my suspicion. Trebonius and Beric have also been with me for some years. Trebonius is a scion of a noble family—an ancester drew one of the daggers against the great Julius!—and Beric, a most faithful fellow, is a Briton, the grandson of a former captive, and himself now quite a Roman. The Romans domesticate those they conquer!" he added sardonically. "If you wish to question all three, they are at your will."

"Servilius first," said Sollius.

Timander clapped his hands; Servilius appeared at once.

"The Slave Detective wishes to question you. Answer all he asks."

"Alone," Sollius insisted.

Timander raised his brows, but directed his chief clerk to take the Slave Detective into his own office, which was at the top of the steps leading down into the store-vault. The two other clerks were idling, for since the discovery of the robbery the Bank had been closed to business.

"I understand you have worked here many years," said Sollius, accepting the proffered stool.

"All my life."

Though he was grey and bald his face was smooth and very little lined, and he was unbent and vigorous.

"How long have you been a freedman?"

"Five years. My master has been very generous."

"No doubt he appreciated your diligence. But you are now leaving him?"

"My daughter married a rich olive-merchant, and now that she is suddenly a widow I am going to her. I myself am a widower, and have no ties to keep me in Rome."

"When do you leave?"

"Actually very soon. A ship-captain friend is giving me a passage, and he sails on the day before the Nones of next month. Solve the case before then, Slave Detective, I implore you."

"I shall do my best," smiled Sollius. "Has not Timander hired me at a great price? Though my master takes it, I have my pride to give good service. Never fear: I shall find the man. But tell me of your under-clerks. You will know them well."

"Too well to suspect them."

"Speak of Trebonius."

"He is of a great family come to decay, and works here against the grain—but he works. Yet, had he the means, he would be luxurious and extravagant in the manner of his ancestors. But he lacks the means, and it has raised a tide of bitterness in his spirit. That is Trebonius."

"And Beric?"

"He is a Briton," replied Servilius quietly, "with an ancestry of chieftains. If he has one dream it is to get back to his own people. But a poor man, Slave Detective, cannot travel as far as Britain—nor live like high-born ancestors."

"So both men, to fulfil their dreams, need money?"

"Do not all of us?" replied Servilius. "Once I needed it myself to buy my freedom, but my master, satisfied with my long service, helped me. That the Gods may bless Timander is my continual prayer and will be so in my happy retirement."

"Do you suspect either man?" asked Sollius sharply, fixing the other with his eyes.

"Oh, no!—that is far from my thoughts. They have always been exact in their accounts and of the utmost probity. Outside the business I know little of either of them. I live my own life, a very quiet one."

"Will you send in to me each man in turn? Trebonius first," said Sollius, and presently that clerk came to him.

He was in early middle-age, and handsome, but faint lines of dissipation could be seen in his face, incipient as yet, but legible to a glance as deep as the Slave Detecteive's.

"This is a dreadful coil for me and Beric," he burst out on entering. "We must be your chief suspects."

"I have no suspects as yet," murmured Sollius.

"By the Gods that live," Trebonius went on, "we are honest men. Had we been light-fingered we should not have remained in Timander's employment for many drips of a water-clock, I assure you," and he laughed morosely.

"Have you any suspicion as to the possible thief?" Sollius pursued.

"None at all," replied Trebonius with apparent frankness. "Was it not someone from outside? It must have been!"

"Yet someone with inner knowledge of the uncounted large store of money," retorted Sollius. "Who gossipped?"

"Not I," said Trebonius, and in that moment he was every inch the Roman gentleman. "When I leave work I am too glad to be quit of the disgusting necessity to do anything but put it away from my mind—and my mouth."

"Speak to me of Beric," continued Sollius.

"A good fellow! I like these Britons, and he is of a royal race. At least, I believe him when he boasts of it. He works harder than I do, and is a great sportsman. I have boxed with him. He is skilful enough to box in the arena."

With the mock humility of a proud slave Sollius thanked him.

"Send in Beric," he directed.

The Briton was a lean, wiry man, sandy in colour and with a fox's face. He was younger than Trebonius.

"Did you know what the two rifled coffers contained?" Sollius began abruptly.

"We all did. I helped to fill them," answered Beric easily.

"The thief had his ear among you," Sollius murmured.

"It was not I who spoke word out of the counting-house. I swear that by my ancestral Gods."

"Where were you last night?"

"With my girl," answered the Briton.

"And Trebonius? Do you know?"

"With his. At least he said he was. We've been congratulating ourselves that we have their witness. I can give you their names," and he did so.

But both ladies, mused Sollius, were of the type to lie with ease and skill if it were made worth their while. He broke off the interrogation. He then beckoned to Servilius, who came eagerly.

"I should like to examine the store-vault more carefully," he said. "You need not come with me."

"I think I should, Slave-Detective. It is my master's rule that no one should enter the store-vault alone. We observe it strictly ourselves."

"Very well," amiably replied Sollius. "Let Trebonius accompany me."

"He is specially busy with an account," answered Servilius, "I will come with you myself."

"Excellent!" murmured Sollius smoothly. "I feared to trouble you. . . ."

Servilius took a lamp and preceded him. At the foot of the steps Sollius paused to stare about him while the chief clerk lit other lamps from his own. The store-vault was spacious and more or less square in shape but with two apses in the farthermost wall. It was lighted partly by a rusted metal grille through which a wan daylight peered, and partly by lamps within intervalled niches. It was paved by large flagstones. Benches of brick stood along each side, with shelves of slate above them. On both shelves and benches lay coffers in all sorts of woods and metals, the latter mostly of tin or iron. Sollius thought it was like a mausoleum, with money in the coffers instead of bones.

He felt that the place would have a message for him, and he walked round it with all his senses alert. He examined the coffers and the benches and every flagstone at his feet.

"New locks are to be fitted today," remarked Servilius.

"And the keys to them?" asked Sollius.

"My master and I will have them, as before. Catch the thief quickly, O Slave Detective," he added, his face

puckered with anxiety. "I have but few days left in this employment, and fear to lose my ship-passage."

"You may count on my eyes, O Servilius," answered Sollius. "On my eyes, O Servilius," he repeated, stressing each word.

He left the bank shortly afterwards, and set his fellow slave and assistant Lucius to gather the gossip about the three clerks. It was easily obtainable. All three were well liked and esteemed by the Bank's customers, and nobody believed any of them dishonest. But Trebonius affected the company of aristocratic friends and tried to live up to them. Moreover, he was wooing a rich man's daughter. Beric was reported to be an unlucky gambler.

"On more counts than one," mused Sollius, "each has need of money, much money. And Servilius?"

"Everyone thinks," replied Lucius, "that Timander will have great difficulty in replacing so good a head clerk. But rumour says that he has a nephew in training under another money-changer. A further thing," Lucius added slowly, "Beric has at least one gambling friend who consorts with known thieves. Strange people flock together when gambling," he concluded sententiously.

Backed by the authority of a Decurion of the Urban Cohort Sollius searched the lodgings of the three clerks, that of Servilius not excepted, but no trace of the money was found.

"As I anticipated," Sollius confided to Lucius. "But the search had to be."

"It was surely an outside thief," said Lucius.

"Had it been so he would have taken the money away, and I think it is still at the Bank."

"Still at the Bank!" gasped Lucius. "How do you know that?"

"You must not question my magic," laughed Sollius, "nor my observation. This is a clever thief—but not clever enough."

"If you know where the money is why do you not return it to Timander at once and close the case?"

"Because I am out to catch the fellow himself. He left it, as he thought, in the safest place until the time came to retrieve it. But he underrates me, my son. From now on you and I will keep watch in the store-vault each night. It will not be for long; I think I know the term of his patience."

Each evening he secretly obtained Timander's own keys, warning him to tell no one of their vigils.

"Is there a purpose in this?" scornfully asked the Banker. "My money is gone. Why guard empty coffers?"

"You are hiring my skill and experience, lord," answered Sollius. "Trust them!"

"I'll pleasure your folly for a while," grumbled Timander, "yet I don't understand it. But hasten your work. I would have my good Servilius know the truth before he sails. He deserves it. His ship sails from Brundisium, so he has a land-journey first, and he'll leave in four days—or five days at the most."

"I am nearer success than you anticipate, lord," replied Sollius, and with that Timander grunted and had to be content.

So, as Sollius had planned, he and Lucius kept watch in the store-vault during the next run of nights, with materials ready to hand for quickly lighting one of the lamps when the expected intruder should enter. Servilius was now due to leave for Brundisium within three days, and he gave a farewell party, graced by the presence of Timander himself, and to which he invited the Slave Detective, but Sollius declined. He preferred not to break his vigil.

It was the night following the party. Sollius and Lucius had ensconced themselves as usual in one of the two apses. It was cold and not a little damp.

"You say the money is still here?" whispered the unconvinced Lucius.

"Under one of the flagstones. Why should one be loose when the others are well-laid and mortared?"

"You have such eyes!" said Lucius admiringly.

"I have seeing brains!" retorted the Slave Detective.

They settled down to their vigil, but almost immediately Lucius checked an exclamation.

"I can hear breathing. . . ." he whispered.

"He has come," said Sollius. "Light the lamp."

As Lucius did so a figure stepped out from the other apse.

"I underrated you, Slave Detective," said Trebonius. "I did not know you were watching here. You are clever indeed! I saw you enter. I hid down here when the Bank closed

—to watch, like you. I, too, have eyes and had noted a loose flagstone. This is the night—it must be!—when the loot is to be gathered in. I had hoped to be handsomely rewarded when I showed the great Timander his money was safe—but I suppose that reward will go to you," he sighed.

"Put out the lamp, Lucius," whispered Sollius.

"He is at the door, unlocking it. Back into our hiding-places—and keep still!"

"You are the master here," murmured Trebonius.

The man who came in carried his own lamp. He placed it carefully on the flagstones at a convenient spot for his purpose, and its rays did not penetrate into either apse.

He had brought with him a pronged iron bar and a large sack, and soon prised up the loose flagstone. With a sigh of gloating contentment he began taking out the bags of money and transferring them to the sack.

Suddenly Sollius stepped out from his apse.

"That is enough, Servilius!" he said quietly. "The Gods, I fear, do not favour your plan of lording it as a rich gentleman in Ephesus!"

Had I but died an hour before this chance,
I had liv'd a blessed time; for, from this instant,
There's nothing serious in mortality:
All is but toys: renown and grace is dead;
The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees
Is left this vault to brag of.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE.

Asunder, burst asunder Chains or Heart,
And let my ghost go shrieking through the night,
Like a Death-angel lighted on the spire
Of Capitol asleep, bellowing woe.

THOMAS LOVELL BEDDOES.

THROUGH THE EYES OF A CHILD

MARY NICHOLSON

EVILLE WAS . OUT walking for the first time on his own. Usually his mother went with him, but he had managed to elude her today. She fussed too much and he was glad to be free. It was a new feeling. He wanted to sing and shout but that would be silly as she'd hear him and call him home again. He wanted to explore the world—his world—on his own.

He seemed always to be doing something which his mother said was wrong—like pulling the cat's tail. He'd tried to explain that he only held the tail and the cat pulled, but she wouldn't believe him. Rather guiltily he put his hand in his trouser pocket and fingered the bright yellow sweets he'd taken from her dressing-table drawer. She'd be cross if she found out, but they were so pretty he couldn't resist them. Besides, he liked yellow.

It was like the sun, he thought, peering up and screwing his pale, rather protuberant, blue eyes to narrow slits against the glare. He liked a sunshine day. Exciting things sometimes happened then. The gad-flies bit the cows and sent them careering madly across the fields near his home. Wet days were dull because everyone was cross.

He gave a little hop-skip, then looked round to see if anyone had spotted him. There was no one in the lane except himself. It was a funny feeling to be alone. He wasn't so sure now that he really liked it.

When his mother was busy he was entrusted to Alfred, the lad from Moor Farm. He liked to be with Alfred. He knew so much. Alfred could tell you all about the crops, what had been sown in each field, when they were going to roll, harrow, weed or single; and if you were very good he might let you try the hand tasks. Neville wished he could drive the machines, they bewitched him with their whirling blades. But that didn't seem likely. Mr. Grey, the farmer, a square beef of grim determination that all who walked the farm should work, did not like him poking around, not handling things, that is. He was allowed to trail Alfred so long as he didn't touch.

This, on Grey's part, was a concession to the dead father whom Neville could not remember, and who had been the farmer's best friend. Summer visitors, asking inane questions about the pretty calves, and men from "the Ministry" were given short shrift.

Alfred was kinder to them, more friendly. In fact, Alfred was his best friend, he decided, as he trailed his toecaps in the furrows of dust blown beneath the untrimmed grass at the road's edge. A cow thrust ruminating

jaws over a gate and gazed sorrowfully at him. That was Daisy. If Alfred had been here he could have told him how many calves she'd had, and when her next one was due. These things interested you when you lived in the country

Neville supposed it would be dull in the town with no animals, only people, who stared at you or laughed behind your back. He was used to that here a little. They laughed at him for going out with his mother.

He went to the gate and reached out to stroke Daisy's nose. She mooed gently. He gathered a choice handful of grass as he'd seen Alfred do, and fed her with it. He stroked her nose while she chewed on it, and was fascinated by the ridge of loose skin under her chin—dewlaps Alfred called it. Necks were queer. Alfred had a big Adam's apple, but his mother hadn't one. Mr. Grey would have one, too, but you couldn't see it under the checked handkerchief he always wore tied round his throat. He explored his own neck.

Alfred's cap hedge-hopped two fields away and Neville was frightened in case he was seen. Alfred might tell his mother. He was perfectly safe on this quiet road. He would go a little farther. When he got home all right his mother would know he was fit to go out alone.

Neville turned from the gate and found himself looking into a pair of merry brown eyes belonging to a little girl. He hadn't heard her approach. She couldn't be a village child as he hadn't seen her before. She was wearing a bright yellow cotton frock with a white collar and belt, white socks and brown shoes; a very pretty little girl. Her curly hair gleamed like a new penny and was tied in a pony-tail with a yellow bow to match her frock. She was smiling at him as if she wanted to be friends.

For a moment Neville felt foolish —his tongue seemed too big for his mouth and he was unable to answer her first "Hello". She was so fresh and dainty that he felt his shoes to be like boats, his jacket clumsy, and the thatch of his carrotty hair like a badly-built stook of corn, sprouting all ways. He edged backwards and hooked his right shoe-heel over the bottom bar of the gate. Daisy could reach him now. With her wet nose she nuzzled, and her nearness gave him confidence.

When the little girl said "Hello" the second time, he answered, then waited for her lead again.

"I'm Margery Dawson," she told him, "they call me 'See-saw' at school. I've been going to school since Easter, but not this school: I don't live here, you know."

"Why do they call you that?" Neville wanted to know.

"Silly," she giggled, "it's in the rhyme 'See-saw, Margery Daw.' Don't you know anything? What's your name?"

Neville told her, then found his courage and, in a burst of confidence, added that he was going for a walk without his mother, but he would take her with him if she liked. They could go down to the stepping-stones.

This seemed to amuse Margery, who giggled again.

"Auntie Alice let me come out by myself because she was busy. She owns the Post Office," she added grandly.

The cogs of Neville's country brain began to turn over.

"Oh, old maid Pymmie," he chuckled at length.

"She's Miss Pym," reprimanded Margery, "and if you're going to be rude I don't want to see your old stepping-stones. Anyway my auntie isn't an old maid; she's only a middle-aged one, so there."

Neville pondered this and sobered. "Don't be cross," he pleaded, then as an inspiration, "here, have a sweet; they're pretty ones like your dress." He moved away from the gate.

Margery sucked appreciatively at the cool smoothness for a few moments, then bit into it. Her expression changed, and she spat vigorously on the grass.

"It's horrid and it's sour, and you're horrid, too," she whimpered. "I don't like Nana's acid drops much, but that's more horrider."

Neville was upset at her distress and at a temporary loss as to what was expected of him. Then he brightened and ventured, "P'rhaps that one had a lot of sour stuff in it like your Nana's sweets. This one might be better," and he offered her another like confection.

Margery had just popped the second yellow cylinder into her mouth when the sudden violent barking of a dog startled her, and she swallowed it whole.

She coughed and tears sprang to her eyes. "I've swallowed it and it hurt a bit going down. I'm frightened of dogs, that's why."

"Never mind," Neville comforted, "that's only old Rex getting excited about something. He won't come near you: I won't let him. We'll go away: come on."

He reached for her hand and the two set off down the road. Daisy watched them with the sorrowful eyes of her kind.

Margery's unhappiness soon vanished. Hoppity-skip, toes-in-the-dust, handfuls of grass to throw at each other, and sudden bursts of laughter for no reasons that an adult could have seen—they moved towards the sunlight.

Suddenly the little girl spotted a treasure, a golden treasure, in the hedge-bottom and darted to gather a bloom.

"Do you like butter?" she chortled, holding out the buttercup to Neville.

"Butter," he exclaimed, "that's a flower; we make butter on the farm and it's the same colour. Is it a game?"

" 'Course it's a game. Let me shine it under your chin. If it shines a lot you simply love butter."

Her companion's sun-tanned neck gave forth but a pale gleam, like a clump of primroses shrinking against tree-roots. Margery pouted, "You're no good—try me. Everybody says I love butter."

Neville took the buttercup from her as she craned her head back, exposing a swan-curve of lily-white throat, in which he could see the pulses throbbing her blood through the young veins. His hands felt

clammy and his tongue seemed to swell again. Such a lovely throat, quite the loveliest he had seen—so tiny, so near. He longed to reach out and touch it, stroke it with a finger-tip even. Just a finger-tip—oh, he had a flower: that would do instead.

He wavered the buttercup towards the whiteness; and as it drew nearer a small disc of colour appeared, primrose-pale at first, then it deepened till it glowed like a full sun: a tiny sun that shone only for Margery. He peered up at the sky. The big sun was no more brilliant than its little brother, the buttercup's shadow. He looked from one to the other as though he had discovered a great truth.

"Say something," came a gurgling voice, "it hurts like this for a long time."

"You simply love butter," he said, "you're so—so buttery," he finished, lacking a word.

Margery's head returned to the perpendicular as she giggled; then her nimble mind and sharp eyes searched for more wonders.

A clump of daisies, pink-tipped kirtles spread wide to the sun, caught her eye.

"Let's make daisy chains," she suggested; "this is *my* bunch, you find some for yourself."

Neville had gathered but a few when he heard a footstep: a shuffling step that somehow seemed familiar. There'd be trouble if he was seen. As the first swish of a black shawl and blue print apron touched the bend of the road which they had lately rounded, he took fright.

"Come on, hurry," he hissed, grabbing his companion's hand, "run for your life. It's the old witch."

Goggle-eyed and but half comprehending, the little girl allowed herself to be jerked along to a thin part of the hedge, through which they scrambled; then helter-skelter across the fields to the glint of a brook and the woods beyond.

Not until they had slithered down the bank to the water's edge and the stepping-stones, which invited them to the green shadows, did Neville pause for breath.

"I don't believe in witches," Margery gasped; "Nana says they're just in stories. Why did we have to run away? Is she real?"

" 'Course she's real. She witched a whole lot of warts off my hands and they never came back any more, and the doctor couldn't do it. She made Daisy better once when she was ill. They call her Betsy Briggs. I don't think she saw us anyway, but she tells tales."

But Betsy had seen them and understood. Her eighty years sat more lightly on her legs than on her brain. Betsy was a bit "queer" now, but harmless "they" said; so she was allowed to ramble whither she would, gathering wild herbs for her potions and plants for her garden; fir cones to kindle her fire and fallen branches to keep it going. There were those who frowned when they saw her collecting firewood in the churchyard after a high wind, breaking the thicker branches to convenient carrying-length against the tombstones of the village's ancestors. But others were

tolerant, pointing out that she had one foot almost in the grave herself, so no disrespect was intended.

Yes, Betsy's old eyes had seen them and sensed, if not actually watched, the direction of their flight. She'd known Neville all his life, and she recalled his warts, too. Should she watch that no ill overtook him and the little sunshine girl, or should she return and warn his mother?

While the grey matter was slowly spelling out these alternatives the brisker legs had carried her to within sight of the silver ribbon of the brook. She circuited to lurk behind a clump of snowberry so as to see without being seen. She waited.

Here were the promised stepping-stones but they couldn't linger. Neville would not feel safe till they too were folded in the shadows of the wood.

"I'll go first," he offered, "they're quite safe."

No sooner said than done. "Now come on." He held out a hand, ready, on the woodside bank.

Margery had recovered her poise and decided that this was fun. She giggled again and started across, counting the stones as she did so:

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven,

All good children go to heaven"—and she was safe on the bank beside Neville.

"Then it says" she giggled again,

"When they die, put them in a pie,

"One, two, three, four, five, six seven."

Turning sudden solemn eyes to her companion she asked "You won't put *me* in a pie, will you?"

"I like pie," he said.

Not far within the wood they settled in the green-dappled shade of a young beech tree. Neville leant against the trunk, watching the little girl's nimble fingers fashioning a daisy chain from both their bunches. Then he remembered a strange wonder he had discovered on his ramblings with Alfred, and turned towards the tree, placing his finger-tips gently but firmly on the bark. Would it still be there—that queer stirring sensation he had experienced once before?

At first his hands shook in excitement, then when they had steadied down he felt the surge, the strong upward drive of the sap—the life-blood of the tree, flowing unchecked by his touch to the branches and feather tips of the tree above them. Alfred had laughed when he'd tried to tell him what was happening, but it was true. He knew now. His hands could feel it again. Perhaps, like Betsy, he was "magic" as well. Who knew what else he could do with his magic fingers?

Suddenly he tired of the life-rhythm and turned back to Margery.

Her hands dropped idly in her golden lap. Then she raised a childish fist and screwed it resentfully in first one eye, then the other.

"I'm sleepy," she yawned, "but I've finished the daisy chain. Put it round my neck, please." She yawned again.

"You can't go to sleep now: it isn't bedtime."

But her eyes drooped and she began to sway slowly, backwards and forwards, fighting sleep. Suddenly she gave in. Flinging her arms up and backward, she allowed her body to

follow and there she lay, spreadeagled on the soft earth, fast asleep, breathing deeply at first, then more gently as Morpheus bore her farther away.

Neville was nonplussed. He glanced furtively round. No sign of the witch. No sound of anyone else—anyone who might help him. He tried shaking Margery but, though her eyelids fluttered, she made no other sign. His tummy told him it was getting on to teatime. His mother would wonder if he was late. She'd be cross, too. Better go. Margery would know the way back when she woke.

Then his eyes fell on the daisy chain. She'd said to put it on her. Well, he could do that for her. Then when she woke up she'd know he hadn't meant to be unkind. It would look nice round her neck, the yellow middles of the flowers like her frock.

Awkwardly he draped it, not venturing to raise her head in order to fasten it properly at the back of her neck. A little sigh escaped her lips. She swallowed and the ripple travelled down her throat, disappearing under the white collar.

Gingerly he put out a finger and traced the line of the ripple—how soft her skin was, how white. It was soft and white all round. He could feel the throb of life with his finger-tips—his magic finger-tips—just like the tree. But the throat looked bare in spite of the daisies.

A shaft of sunlight peeped through the leafy canopy over their heads, then glanced swiftly away again.

Neville suddenly knew what he should do. Margery had liked butter, so he would gather a big bunch of buttercups for when she woke.

He recrossed the seven stepping-stones and found large clusters glittering in the hedge-bottoms of the field.

Betsy could see him gathering the blooms and was puzzled, wondering why the lively little girl wasn't with him. From her hiding-place she'd been unable to see the pair after they'd crossed the stepping-stones. She must find out why Neville was alone. It was but a stone's throw to another snowberry bush; then she'd be near the burn. He seemed engrossed with the flowers, so she risked the double dash and made it successfully, crossing the burn where she struck it, then working her way to the stepping-stones as a starting-point in her search.

Luck favoured her. A couple of freshly-picked daisies lay a few yards to the right of the sharp eyes used to plant-spotting through the years. Peering ahead in the same line of direction she caught a gleam of yellow and in a moment she had reached the young beech tree.

She was as nonplussed as Neville. The child could not stay here and she didn't think she would be able to carry such a burden as far as the village. Here there was no one to help. Who could she find? Oh, yes, Jim Patten would help her. He'd always been kind when she had had any worries, and never laughed at her weaknesses like some she could mention. Yes, Jim was her man. Jim Patten: Jim Patten: Jim Patten—the old legs quickly took up the rhythm as

she made a beeline for the village.

Neville was not altogether pleased with the effect of the bunch of buttercups, which he'd arranged on Margery's throat so that they'd shine under her elfin-pointed chin. They were less bright here in the wood than the single one had been in the lane. Still, that was the best he could do, and Alfred said to do your best.

His tummy clock chimed again.

He opened the cottage door quietly and sidled in, holding his breath and hoping his mother would ask no questions. A forlorn hope. "Where've you been?" rang from the back kitchen, followed by her worried face.

"In the fields," he mumbled.

"Where was Alfred?" — more sharply.

"In the fields."

She hesitated briefly, then shrilled, "Your tea's been ready long enough: get those hands washed, then come and have that hair tidied before ever you sit down to table."

Neville sighed with relief: it had been easier than he had thought, and he hadn't really told a lie.

The tea was good, sweet and milky just as he liked it. He cupped his hands cosily round the large blue and white mug and drank in big thirsty gulps, one eye on the thick bacon sandwiches waiting on his plate.

A heavy footstep sounded on the flagged garden path. A knock at the door. His mother went to open it. The village policeman was standing there, redfaced and ill at ease.

"Afternoon, Mrs. Rice. Neville in?"

"Why, yes, he's just having his tea."

"Where's he been this afternoon?"

"In the fields with Alfred, he said."

Jim Patten shuffled his feet in embarrassment. "I'm sorry," he said gently, "he's been in the fields all right, but not with Alfred. Old Betsy Briggs just came for me. She'd been watching Neville and a little girl she didn't know, turns out she's Miss Pym's niece, and thought he was acting queer-like, running away when he saw her. She found the little girl in Grey's wood—asleep she thought at first—then realized the mite was dead. She'd—she'd been strangled by someone with long, thin fingers. A bunch of buttercups had been piled on her throat to hide the fingermarks."

Neville quietly put down the mug and slid his hands into his lap.

The constable guided the stricken mother to a chair.

She burst into hard sobbing.

"You can't mean Neville did it, Jim. He's only a child. Too old I was to be having children when he came along, my only one, and always he has stayed like a child."

Very gently the policeman asked: "How old is your son, Mrs. Rice?"

"He's twenty-six past. But Jim, you cannot do anything to him, cannot take him away from me. This is the first time in the years that he's got away on his own.

"He would have his reasons for what he did. He still sees everything through the eyes of a child."

The late afternoon sun, in a last convulsion of brilliance, lanced through the cottage window and found Neville's face.

He stared into its golden yellow glory without blinking.

NEVER SAY DIE

H. L. DRAPER

Illustrated by Jennifer Gordon

"THE ONLY QUIET woman is a dead one," said the man at the bar.

They all laughed, but I didn't. I could have told them something about that. Mind you, I would have agreed with him once—but that was before I made up my mind to kill Margaret.

I remember exactly when that was. I had come in from the shop one Saturday evening about nine o'clock, and I could hear her talking to that beastly parrot of hers. She'd had other birds at times but something had always happened to them. Then she'd have hysterics—and try something else. Nowadays I can hardly bear to hear one chirp in the park.

"Come on, Polly, speak to Mama." That was typical of Margaret—the bird's name I mean—no originality. Her budgies were always "Joey", her canaries "Chirpy", and now the parrot was "Polly".

To look at her now, you'd never think that she'd been quite a pretty girl twelve years ago, when we married. A bit colourless and not very exciting perhaps, but I'd thought myself lucky. Especially as her father owned the thriving antique business where I worked. It was understood that he would take me into partnership, and I was worth it too—but he died suddenly of a heart attack just after Margaret and I were married.

It didn't matter at first. Margaret never took much interest in the business, and after a time she stopped coming down to the shop at all. Her delicate state of health. But she never had the baby after all, although she kept her delicate health!

She turned now and saw me.

"Oh, it's you! Your dinner's in the oven. It's a bit dried up, I expect, but what can you expect when you come in at this time."

I wouldn't have expected anything else whatever time I came in.

"It's all right," I said. "I've had something out."

"With Miss Leigh, I suppose?"

Dinah Leigh was my assistant in the shop, and Margaret pretended to believe there was something between us.

I'd originally taken to having my meals out because Margaret stayed in bed until noon. When she did get up she did herself fairly well, I believe, and then it was the left-over remnants for me at night. You'd never have thought that Margaret was a rich man's daughter. But I suppose he'd always been pretty close, and his family had got the habit.

She wasn't really worried about Dinah, of course. For some reason she had a blind spot where other women were concerned. I suppose

she thought that because *she* didn't love me, no other woman would find me attractive. I dare say she thought I wouldn't have the nerve anyway—she'd got used to regarding me as a worm. And yet she was wrong. I was in love with Dinah. Oh, not all at once: she wasn't any raving beauty, being a bit on the plump side and not so very young—about thirty. But she was kind and good-tempered, and most of all, she had a soft, pleasant voice.

She was a good cook too and liked home-making. She once asked me into her flat, and there was something peaceful and welcoming about its rather shabby living-room with the radio and well-read books, and the comfortable fireside chair.

I was careful not to let Margaret suspect, not that she'd have cared really, but it would have cheapened everything, made something sordid out of our pathetic love affair.

I made my preparations for Margaret's final departure with my usual careful attention to detail. There were two or three regular cronies of hers, who used to come into the shop and ask after her health. I made a point of assuming a spurious brightness.

"Oh, much better," I'd say. "Quite her old self at times; talks of coming back to the shop. Poor Margaret, of course she doesn't guess . . ." and I'd shake my head.

Or: "No, she doesn't go out much, but we haven't lost hope. I keep telling her she'll soon be better."

It wasn't long before it was all round the neighbourhood that Mrs. Spendall was sinking, and, of course, Margaret did nothing to destroy the illusion. She was only too willing to bemoan the state of her health with all and sundry.

I had a word with the doctor next time he called. "I'm a bit worried about her," I said. "Of course, I know her health hasn't been good for a long time, but she seems to think she's worse."

"Oh, I don't think so. Your wife isn't a strong woman, but she may go on for years yet. I don't think you need worry."

"But, Doctor, she gets so depressed. I can't seem to rouse her. She doesn't take an interest in anything."

He laughed at my fears. He wasn't the imaginative type. "The fact is, your wife has got into a thoroughly morbid state. I'm sending her a tonic, and I'll come and see her again in a few days. She'll be all right."

Margaret was talking to the parrot again when I went up.

"Speak up, Polly—say it. 'Polly loves Margot.' Say it."

She must have been the only one that did.

"How do you feel now?" I asked.

"A lot you care! What did the doctor say? You were talking to him long enough."

I spoke brightly.

"Said you were getting along fine. Soon be out and about again."

"I don't believe you. What did he really say?"

I hesitated.

"I told you——"

"Liar! I know I'm worse. There's someone at the door. Answer it!"

It was Miss Gold, an old crony.

"Go right up," I said. "She'll be glad to see you, she's a bit under the weather."

Her beady dark eyes glinted under their rolls of fat.

"Is she in bed again? What did the doctor say?"

"Said she'd be all right, that I wasn't to worry. But you know how it is—they never will tell you anything. Well, we must just try and keep Margaret cheerful."

"You can rely on me."

She laid a plump hand on my arm. "I think it's wonderful the way you've looked after her, I really do."

Margaret called out.

"What are you whispering about? Oh, it's you, Gladys. Well, come in. Isn't it time you went back to the shop, Arthur?"

"Just going, dear."

She turned to Miss Gold.

"I suppose you're another one going to tell me I'm better? I know it's something terrible!" She was working herself up. "Well, I'm not going to hospital, whatever they say. I'll kill myself first!"

"Now now, dear!" Miss Gold bent her head so that the coquettish feathers of her too-youthful hat tickled my face.

"You leave her to me," she whispered.

"Thank you. Good-bye, then. You're such a comfort, Gladys."

That day was a pattern of the ones that followed.

I spoke to the doctor again a few days later.

"Doctor, I'm afraid she's making herself worse. She doesn't sleep much and she's convinced she's got some serious illness. What with working all day and having to be up all night, I really don't think I can carry on. Of course I'll do everything I can for Margaret, but it's getting me down."

He frowned.

"You're not looking too good, I must say. Not sleeping, eh? Well, I'll prescribe a sedative. Give you both a chance of getting some rest. Don't let her take too much though."

At the shop, even Dinah had begun to wonder. She said timidly:

"Arthur, is it true?" And then, with a sudden rush of words, "Oh I know its dreadful of me—to wish a person dead—but if she's suffering. . . ."

I always found it difficult to lie to Dinah, but fortunately I didn't have to. That was the beauty of it.

"She isn't any worse. She just thinks she is. The doctor says she may live for years."

"Oh, Arthur!"

It hurt me to see the light of hope die out of her pretty brown eyes.

"But of course, she may not," I said.

I made up my mind. Margaret had lived long enough. She would be better off dead! It wasn't as if she enjoyed her life anyway. That night, after she had taken her usual dose, I doubled the amount in her cup of malted milk. She was in one of her cat-and-mouse moods.

"What a lucky woman I am to have such a devoted husband. Everyone says so. I suppose you're longing for the day when we can start our second honeymoon?"

"Of course, dear," I said mechanically, watching her put the cup to her lips. "Don't I always try to make you happy?"

"Yes. And you hate every moment of it! You hate me too, don't you, Arthur—you'd be glad if I was dead!"

"You shouldn't talk like that."

She drank her milk and looked at me with a malicious smile.

"You might not be much better off

if I was. After all, you're getting on a bit. No woman's going to look twice at you now, Arthur—except for what she can get, of course. Unless you fancy Gladys?"

I shuddered.

"No, I can see you don't. Well—" she lay back on her pillows. "Don't be surprised if things turn out a bit different from what you expect."

"What do you mean?"

She laughed at me. Suddenly, shrill.

"Oh, it's all right, Arthur, I'm leaving you the shop, that's all you ever wanted. Except money, of course. But I don't think you'll marry again."

She was nearly asleep now, but fighting against it. For a moment her pale eyes opened widely and I was shaken to see the undisguised hate in them. It was as if she knew! She struggled to speak, but all she said was "Polly!" There was a raucous squawk from the bird in answer, that nearly made me jump out of my skin. When I looked again at Margaret her eyes were closed.

I locked up as usual and went to my room, but not to sleep. I tried to read and found myself turning the pages without taking in a word. Towards dawn I took a couple of aspirins and fell into an uneasy doze. I remember I had a confused dream in which Margaret, Dinah and the parrot were all mixed up in some curious way. It was the bird who woke me. I had forgotten to put the cover over her cage.

"Get up," it was shouting. "Get up, Lazybones!"

"Shout all you like," I said grimly. "It won't be for long." But it only went into one of its peals of meaningless laughter.

I was careful not to depart from my usual routine. I washed and dressed quietly, and made tea. Only then did I go to Margaret's room, with her tray. I put it down on the bedside table and drew the curtains.

"Good morning dear," I said.

For the moment I could fancy she heard me, and was about to burst into her usual list of complaints. But she didn't. I went closer. She was not breathing. I went quickly out and called the doctor.

It all passed off quite easily as it happened. I needn't have gone to so much trouble. Still, it's as well to be prepared; I had my story ready if there had been any suspicion. But they didn't even have an inquest.

When I reminded the doctor that he had said there was nothing seriously wrong, he just shook his head.

"Just one of those things. She might have gone on for years—and then again she could have gone any time. Tired heart, and she didn't help herself with those hysterical fits."

"You don't think," I said delicately, "that she could have taken anything? She was always threatening to——"

He looked at me straightly.

"Do you?"

"Of course not. I just thought."

"Well don't. The poor woman's gone, and I'm prepared to sign the certificate. Let her rest."

He put his hand on my shoulder.

"You've nothing to reproach yourself with. You did everything you could."

That's what everyone said.

I gave her a beautiful funeral—after all, it was the last thing I could do for her, and all her old friends enjoyed themselves. Dinah and I had a little talk next morning. She quite agreed that we should wait a little before announcing our plans.

"We don't want people to think there has been anything *wrong*," she said.

"I shall sell the business," I said. "It wants modernizing. I'll open up in a different neighbourhood. We'll start afresh with nothing to remind us of Margaret."

But when I saw the lawyer, I found that wasn't quite right.

Margaret had left me the business all right, like she said, but the house and the money—every cent—was left to the parrot, with me as trustee!

"Does that mean," I said, "that it's only mine so long as the parrot lives?"

"That's right." He actually laughed. "You're lucky compared with some. Parrots are notoriously long-lived. With any luck you can expect it to last out most of your life. Only think, if it had been a dog or cat——" He shook his head.

I pulled myself together.

"Oh well, I suppose I can put up with it. What happens if it does die?"

"Then your wife's money would go to the R.S.P.C.A. She seems to have been very attached to animals. No children, I suppose?"

"No children," I said grimly.

"Well, that's the way it goes."

It was a bit of a blow, but I'd just have to change some of my plans. I could sell the shop, of course, but how would I get a new business running with no capital? I'd never had a chance to save much. I went home, thinking how like Margaret it was. She knew I hated the parrot. And now she'd reached out from the grave to put a spoke in my wheel.

As I put my key in the door I heard a rustling sound and stopped short. It swung slowly open and a rush of stale air met me, mixed with something else. A faint, familiar scent, sickly-sweet. Violet perfume . . . Margaret's.

I shook my head, telling myself mentally to snap out of it. The house had been shut up all day. Of course the air was stale. I stepped into the passage, and immediately a shrill voice broke the uneasy silence.

"So it's you! At last!"

I stopped short, listening.

"Margaret!"

"Your dinner's in the oven. Be all dried up . . . dried up." The words began to repeat themselves amid cackles of laughter, and I breathed again. It was only the parrot.

I drew a deep breath, and stepped up close to the cage.

"Shut up! For two pins I'd wring your scrawny neck."

The parrot pushed its head forward in a disconcerting way, and peered at me through half-hooded eyes.

"*The money, Arthur*," it said. "*Don't forget the money!*"

The sweat poured from me. Margaret's voice!

Then the parrot shook itself, and began to preen.

"Poor Polly," it whispered. "Polly loves Margot!"

I mopped my brow and essayed a laugh. Imagination playing tricks—and I'd always prided myself on my unruffled nerve. The strain must have told more than I thought.

But I no longer thought of eating alone. I rang up Dinah, and arranged to meet her at a quiet restaurant. I looked in at the parrot again before I left, but it appeared to be asleep: a bundle of untidy feathers with its head under its wing.

I was relieved to see that the woman I had paid to tidy the flat had apparently fed the bird, its food and water containers were full. I found myself thinking that if I was quiet I could slip out without its knowing.

Then I got a grip on myself. What was I doing? Scared of a parrot? I slammed the door in noisy bravado.

Dinah was waiting for me, her eyes bright in anticipation.

"I'm longing to know how you got on. Is it all right? Did she leave you the business?"

I sat down heavily.

"Oh yes—and the parrot too."

"The parrot?"

"Didn't you know? It's—it was—her latest pet."

She looked at me anxiously.

"Arthur. What's the matter? You look terrible."

The waiter came and I looked stupidly at the menu.

"Just bring me coffee. I don't feel hungry."

"But, Arthur, you must eat something." She took the menu and gave a hurried order.

"When the waiter had gone, "What's the matter?" she said quietly.

"She—Margaret—won't let me go," I said at last.

"Arthur!"

"I pulled myself together and tried to explain. But I didn't mention the odd fancy I had had in the house. She'd have thought me mad.

As it was, I could see it was a blow.

"You mean that to keep the money we shall have to live in that house—Margaret's house? Oh, Arthur, couldn't we manage without it? You could sell the shop, and start again in a smaller way, I'd help you——"

"I'm too old," I said heavily. "She was quite right. It's too late to start all over again. Besides, why should I let her get away with it. Her and her blasted parrot!"

She toyed with her omelette for a little without speaking and then pushed it aside.

"Don't let's quarrel. I couldn't bear that. It was silly of me, I know. You've worked so hard all these years, of course you feel you've a right to the money. And after we're married we can have the house done up. With new furniture it will seem quite different."

I pressed her hand.

"Let's get out of here. Look, we'll forget this nonsense about waiting. Come and look at the place tomorrow, and we'll see what can be done."

I felt better going home. Naturally I was feeling the reaction. Dinah and I would be married quietly. Let people talk. I had a right to happiness. I was humming as I opened the door.

"*Where have you been?*" said Margaret's voice.

I went boldly into the sitting-room,

and put the cover over the parrot's cage.

"That'll settle you," I said.

It shook its feathers with a hoarse chuckle.

"I'm not dead yet!" it said.

"Damn you!" I said between my teeth. "Damn you, Margaret."

A week later Dinah came to see the house, as we'd arranged. I'd told the woman I was having a visitor and she'd got in quite a decent spread, but somehow neither of us did justice to it. From the start Dinah seemed a bit strained and unnatural.

"Well," I said at last, "how do you like the place?"

"It's . . . it's rather dark, isn't it?" she said. "Do you always keep the curtains drawn?"

"I suppose it is." I hadn't noticed. "Margaret didn't like too much sunlight getting in—said it faded things."

She went over to the window and pulled back the curtain. At once there was a harsh shriek as a gleam of sunshine fell on the parrot's cage.

"Put that light out!"

Dinah dropped the curtain with a start.

"Who's that?"

"It's the parrot—I told you."

"Oh," Dinah laughed uncertainly and went up to the cage. She lifted the cover. "Pretty Polly."

"Damn fool!" said the parrot. She'd have lost a finger if I hadn't pulled her back just in time.

At first when I took Dinah round the house she tried to suggest a few alterations, but I noticed that after a time she became silent, and seemed to give up. I couldn't concentrate either, and after a time I fancied she was looking at me queerly. I was quite relieved in a way, when she said she'd better be going.

As I was helping her on with her coat the parrot raised its head and gave her a baleful stare.

"Better be going," it mimicked.

"Good-bye, Polly," said Dinah foolishly.

"Come again," said the parrot with false *bonhomie*. "Have a nightcap! *What's your poison?*" It chuckled again.

"Oh shut up, Margaret!"

I hustled Dinah out into the hall.

She was staring at me.

"Arthur—you called it Margaret!"

"Did I? Well it reminds me of her. Gets more like her every day." I actually laughed.

She gave me a long look.

"Good-bye, Arthur. No, don't come with me. We'll discuss things in the morning."

But I knew then it was all over. Oh, we still see each other at the shop, but the question of our marrying is never discussed. Afterwards she goes home alone, and so do I.

But I'm never lonely. Habit is one of the strongest things in life—and after. On the whole we've learned to live quite comfortably together . . . Margaret and I.

THE BAG OF SOVEREIGNS

G. DE SELINCOURT

Illustrated by Buster

THE CLOCK in the dark kitchen struck eleven. A tinny, wheezing sound. Old Bridie intoned once again the words. Memorizing them: "Then shall they know that I am the Lord, when I have laid the land most desolate, because of all their abominations which they have committed." Ezekiel 33, 28.

With work-worn, heavy-jointed fingers she marked the place with a strip of paper, taking care not to dislodge other strips in many different places. Reluctantly she closed the great Bible, muttering to herself.

It was time to help the old lady to bed. She loved the old lady with a fierce protective love. The essence of goodness she was, to be looked after and shielded from the abominations raging in the world. But one day the wicked would be cast into the pit. It was why she searched out and memorized the formidable passages. To intone them.

Thus she would remind Him of His covenant.

She picked up the lantern and shuffled, tall, gaunt and stern-faced, across the large kitchen. Through the door and along the uneven, stone flooring slimy with damp where in the jagged cracks dark pools of water caught the yellow glimmering of the swaying lantern.

Up the back staircase and into the corridor.

A rat slithered away into a cranny of the rotting wainscot. The measured, distant, dripping of water from some leak in the roof. Old, neglected house, she thought, drawing the thin rags round her, clutching them to her throat. But we are old. And defenceless against the iniquities.

The bedroom door at the end of the corridor was ajar. Closed, it always was. Through the crack a dim light showed, fading and reappearing. Cautious, scraping sounds came from inside the room. Old Bridie hesitated. She put down the lantern and went a few steps forward. Suddenly, a sharp crack. And splintering.

The old lady's desk!

She put a quick hand to her mouth. But the low moan escaped her, sounding hollow in the emptiness.

Dead silence. Then, the crack in the door widened and a towering figure stood, motionless, one huge hand over the torch. With sneaking steps, crouched, the wooden floorboards creaking under heavy boots, it made for the great staircase, the torch shining low.

Old Bridie drew her lips tight together, went forward, striding, to the top of the staircase. Half-way down he was, almost.

"Get out," she cried in a deep ringing voice, "Get out of here."

He plunged forward. There was a scrunch of rotten wood as a step of the stairway gave under his weight. He reached for the banister rail and his dark cloak swayed out as he balanced precariously. A snapping of worm-eaten wood, a fierce oath as, just saving himself, he made down the stairs.

"Frightened him, I did," Old Bridie muttered as she went back for the lantern.

Then into the bedroom. The old lady's desk was broken open. The drawers prised, the locks shattered. In the bottom drawer lay the bag of sovereigns, flung down in haste, the string untied.

Keeping those here! In the house. It was asking for trouble. It got about. The old lady was that queer, economizing on everything, collecting these sovereigns. It was a madness.

She went and tapped at the old lady's door. Down the corridor. She would be terrified, hearing the noise. But she was unsuspecting. Innocent as a babe. A good thing old Bridie was there to shield her.

There was no answer. She tapped again, louder. Must have dropped off. Opening the door she shuffled into the room.

The lamp still burned by the chair where the old lady would sit reading. But on the table, the gnarled, distorted, animal-shaped roots, gathered in the wood through the years, these, that she loved, had been thrown down by the roughly pulled out drawer. Ransacked. The cupboard forced open. Books dragged from the shelves.

And the chair empty.

On the floor, a small, twisted body. One tiny hand still clutching a book. Steel-rimmed glasses forced up, bent, on the dome-like forehead under the tight curls of grey-white hair.

Old Bridie sank on her knees.

And the staring eyes. The red marks on the throat. Strangled, ah God!

She straightened the rumpled, dragged-up clothes. She got to her feet. Clasped her hands fiercely, interlocking the fingers. She called down a retribution so terrible . . .

With pity and wordless grief, looking down at the old lady. The fiend, she thought. The cruel, cruel fiend. My old lady.

What now to do? It was so late. Too late to go for help. What use was help? In the morning she would tell. Tonight . . .

The little innocent thing. If they must see her, then not like that. Not all dishevelled and pitiful.

She went back to the bedroom. She took out the wedding dress from the old oak chest. Carefully preserved all of fifty years or more. The old lady's wedding dress. She unfolded it with care. Beautiful lace it had, though gone now in places. And the delicate underwear. Handstitched, yellow with age. She carried them back.

Dry-eyed, with love, with gentle tender movements she undressed the old lady, putting on the underlinen, the wedding dress. Smoothing, straightening, with little touches. She removed the spectacles, tidied the grey-white hair, rolling the curls round her finger. Then the coarse, darned socks, mended lovingly by herself through the years; she drew them off, pulling on the fine silk ones. She fetched a pale, gauze scarf, like gossamer, so light. To hide away the red marks on the throat. Then she put a cushion under the head.

"Bide there a minute," she whispered, "while I go to tidy." Moaning a little. Like crooning to a child.

She returned to the bedroom. Put everything back in place. The clothes in the closet. The desk. Shutting the drawers, pulling down the top. She swept up the mud on the faded carpet, left there by the heavy boots. Going down on her knees. Then she turned down the bed, puffing up the

pillows, setting them against the head rail. All in silence. Moving quietly and gently.

She went back to the old lady's room. Bent down on one knee and gathered her up. So light. So tiny. Carried her to the bedroom and lowered her into the bed, sitting up, propped against the pillows. She drew up the sheet, the white coverlet, covering the thin legs. Like a little doll she looked, sitting there so straight.

But the wide and staring eyes. The open mouth.

Old Bridie stood, tall and gaunt, before the bed and looked down on the old lady. She folded her work-worn hands on her chest and bowed her grizzled head. She wept. The tears falling softly, soundlessly, down her furrowed cheeks. If they must see you, then it shall be like this.

There was a sound below. As of a boot grating on the stone flooring. Stealthy footsteps began mounting the stairs.

'Tis him again, then. Come back for the sovereigns. Old Bridie doused the lantern and slipped behind the curtain. The creaking on the stairs drew nearer. The heavy breathing. She waited in the darkness.

The footsteps stopped outside the door. A moment's pause. A subdued rattle as the handle turned, and, through the slowly widening aperture, the thin beam of a torch flickered. Cautiously, he came in, a dark mass filling the doorway. Shone the torch on to the desk. Hesitated. Bending down. Eased out the lower drawer. The bag of sovereigns hung, an obscure whiteness, in his hand. He

turned and went towards the door.

Old Bridie watched, holding back the curtain.

Then: "Murderer. Look there. There in the bed."

He swung round. Stumbled. The torch beam threw a great arc across the wall and struck full on the face of the old lady.

The frozen moment of uncertainty. And then the rising horror, and the shaking of the torch . . . dropped, with a gasp of terror, as, clutching the bag of sovereigns, he wheeled and crashed through the door.

The knocking of great boots descending the stairs in lumbering haste. An almighty splintering. A reverberating crash. A great cry. And silence.

Old Bridie came out from behind the curtain, her mouth set. She relit the lantern and approached the top of the staircase. She held up the lantern and looked down. She saw the gaping hole where the step had gone. The banister rail torn out. She descended slowly. At the bottom lay a huddled figure. Gigantic in the swaying light of the lantern. And round about, on the damp, stone flooring, gleamed the scattered sovereigns.

She put down the lantern by the twisted head, the broken neck.

Then she lifted up clasped hands in fervent invocation: "Behold, the day of the Lord cometh, cruel both with wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate, and punish the wicked for their iniquity."

She climbed back to the bedroom. She drew up a chair. She took the old lady's cold hand in hers and sat holding it through the night.

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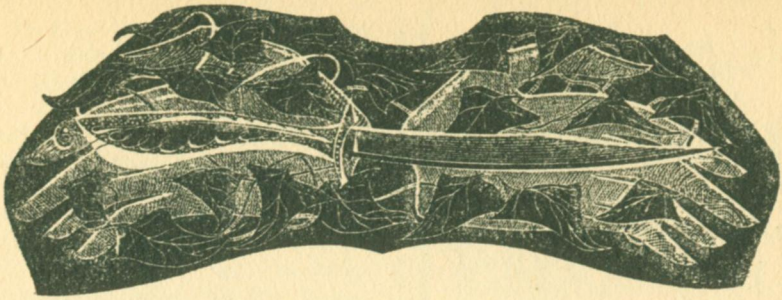

CROOKS IN BOOKS

A review of some recent crime, mystery and detective books

STEVE AUSTEN

"THE RAVINE", by Kendal Young (*W. H. Allen*, 13*s.* 6*d.*).

Slightly sensitive (lady novelist) but rewarding study of sex maniac murders in a New England country town. The Ravine, a menacing shadow of unpleasant boskiness, dominates the book, and the townsfolk, and is, of course, the locale for the sadistic killing of young female innocents. The Jekyll-Hyde is suspected but there is no proof. Courageous, talented and attractive art mistress, with surgeon boy-friend, tackles the thoroughly frightening problem. Very nearly a thoroughly good book, but good enough, anyway, to merit a high place on your reading-list.

"TEACH YOURSELF TREACHERY", by Jonathan Burke (*John Long*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

A decidedly, and rewardingly, off-beat situation: a young, beautiful widow knows her husband is dead but then sees his namesake and mirror-image coming through the door to claim her as his lawfully wedded mate. Piquant. Nothing, naturally, is simple. The sea beats on the newly-constructed dykes, archaeologists get their danders up over planted fakes, Americans look for wartime loot, the heroine fights to free herself from her tangled web and rushes round Holland and Denmark, and even the course of untrue love runs roughly. Very readable, like all Mr. Burke's books, this is complex, twisted stuff, effectively presented: it is good and unusual. It is also almost unusually good.

"COUNT-DOWN", by Hartley Howard (*Collins*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

Glen Bowman, not exactly my favourite P.I., in the thick of it again.

But, having declared my prejudice, the thick is good and dense this time and the it is interesting. A fast, clever plot and a very good and intriguing opening situation almost made me forget Bowman-Howard's incessant not-so-wise-gagging. Almost, but not quite. Enthusiasts will lap it up anyway: as for the rest, I recommend a cautious dip. What can you lose?

"THE HOUSE OF SOLDIERS", by Andrew Garve (*Crime Club,* 12*s.* 6*d.*).

Mr. Garve's books are always interesting and almost always excellent. This, for my taste, chalks up another alpha. Under all headings, plot, setting, characterization, suspense, originality—*The House of Soldiers* deserves full marks. A festival, a good full-blooded Irish affair, is created round the archaeological "finds" on Tara Hill, outside Dublin, and the House of a Thousand Soldiers is recreated (halls, harps and High King) to raise money for further digs. Or, at least, that seems to be the purpose until disaster strikes. But read on, dear book-buyers: it's well worth the price; intelligent, exciting, unexpected.

"CRY VENGEANCE", by Ludovic Peters (*Abelard Schumann,* 12*s.* 6*d.*).

I had a general feeling of *déja vu* in reading Mr. Peters' book: but this is both unfair and inexplicable. It is a more than competent first novel set in Mittel-to-East Europa, that section of the Continent devoted to dictatorships, assassinations and secret police. Someone is stirring up trouble between two minor Balkan powers—

trouble in the form of assassinating one big-wig visiting a neighbouring bigger-wig—and Colonel Llewlyn Rhys, late liaison officer to the local partisans, is called in to sort out the mess before the inevitable local war leading to Great Power intervention and Big Bang takes place. Apart from types like Brosc and Pavlic, there is also a girl (modern, political version of damsel in distress) and a realistic sense of Balkan claustrophobia; crises, truncheons in the cellar, informers, double agents and revolutions (or counter-counter-revolutions) round the corner. Thoroughly readable and intelligible.

"IT'S MURDER, MR. POTTER", by Rae Foley (*Hammond, Hammond,* 12*s.* 6*d.*)

A slick, readable American murder novel; not slick in the gun-slinging, rye-swilling Private Eye mode but in the measured convolutions of its plot, the rationed sentimentality, the unreality behind the suspense. Nonetheless, this is a tricky murder, set amongst a world of money, expensive leisure, big business and most of the lusts that well-provided Western man is heir to. Mr. Potter, Private Income, investigates in his gentlemanly but effective way and gets, not so gentlemanly, roughed up in the process. It provides a pleasurable, if uninstructive, hour.

"CORPSE IN THE CARGO", by Belton Cobb (*W. H. Allen,* 13*s.* 6*d.*)

This, I suppose, is a variant of the Dr. Watson ploy; the mystery and its

unravelling as seen by the near-foolish chronicler. Here Watson is played by Detective-Constable Armitage (Bryan to his chums) and Holmes by Chief Inspector Cheviot Burmann; and neither, to be honest, are up to the level of the original trad. combo. On the other hand, this is light entertainment and if Mr. Cobb is no Conan Doyle, he is nonetheless a skilled and experienced writer. Set mainly along and off some northern Norwegian fjords, D. C. Armitage heavily ingenuous and C. I. Burmann equally heavily disguised, the plot concentrates on one of those small passenger-cum-cargo boats. The murder apart, this is good light-hearted stuff and, of its kind, pleasurable and amusing.

"THE DARK CRUSADER", by Ian Stuart (*Collins*, 15*s.*).

This, most certainly, is a thriller; a secret service adventure, British and 1960-ish. Almost inevitably there are echoes of James Bond, in the same way that one used to find echoes of Conan Doyle, A. E. W. Mason *et al.* in so many books of a generation ago. But Mr. Stuart, and this seems to be his first attempt, has a decided line of his own; a tough, ruthless, tense and pessimistic hero up against impossible odds and with nothing to fall back on except his own incredulous stubbornness and growing anger. If you don't like secret service novels, then clearly this is not for you, but if, like me, you're attracted by the predicament of the spy, alone and indefensible, then I recommend your giving this book a try. It's strong stuff and it has a splendid post-finale ending. Also

once you have accepted Mr. Stuart's terms and realized that Bentall is not Bond, and is not even trying to be like him, then this becomes an original and thoroughly exciting, if horrifying, adventure. A promising start for a new thriller writer.

"IMPACT", by Harry Olesker (*Boardman*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

Mr. Olesker has an attractive way, and a neat, amusing style, of looking at the crazy, criminal world around us. This, his third book, has more of an American suburban tragedy about it than his earlier novels, but still his originality and brightness carry on. A middle-aged, short, pebble-lensed accountant marries a tall, gorgeous blonde. He is madly and conjugally happy. He thinks she is. He finds her dead and disfigured and, then, it is revealed, unfaithful. His world falls apart. Meanwhile, the murderer must be found. A tight, neat plot, well constructed and well completed. Worth reading.

"THE BUSY BODY", by Elizabeth Ferrars (*Crime Club*, 10*s.* 6*d.*).

A well-constructed, smoothly written crime story that proceeds at a fair pace with an unusual twist to the old, identical twin plot. Good average stuff, but it is my impression that Miss Ferrars has done much better. Her strength lies in suspenseful, foggy, doom-heavy atmosphere and though, in this book, her slightly breathless female narrator tries hard to produce it, the result is not altogether successful. (Why *do* all these

young women in crime novels marry young men they know practically nothing about, and, having done so, why don't they simply *ask* when something bothers them?) Still, a cosy read, even if the end is a bit of a let-down—belonging to *it was the butler what done it*, genre. (It's not the butler, though: there isn't one in the book.)

"BLUE DIAMOND", by Paul Costello (*Cassell*, 12*s*. 6*d*.).

Mr. Costello's O'Hara is one of the better, new generation Private Eyes. In addition, his books are written pleasantly, the dialogue is good, the characters are interesting and well sketched and he tells a fast-moving story with zest. This, the second O'Hara volume, is an unpretty tale about one of those excitingly beautiful and priceless diamonds that cause death after death. Mobsters, dope-runners, psychotics, cops (honest as well as dishonest), society dames, Indian (Oriental not Wild West) investigators, ex-cons. all play a colourful part and it says a lot for the author that one believes in many of them and enjoys all of them. In all, a good readable thriller, not quite up to alpha standard, maybe, but worth recommending.

"DEATH OF A SCAPEGOAT", by Gabriel Hythe (*Macdonald*, 10*s*. 6*d*.).

Not, I admit, my idea of a well-written book. Susie, for example, is "young, virile and attractive". It seems a bit hard on the poor girl but elsewhere she gives the hero "another of those shock realizations that she was more woman than girl", so perhaps everything is really all right. In addition to the touch of sex, there's a complicated plot, a know-all Scot who "comprehends" (or doesn't), an unfortunate psycho, a no-good psychiatrist and Capn. Black Garnet and crew. All this plus cliffs and a boat. I suppose, if you tried, you could call it exciting, after a fashion; but not enough, I fear, to compensate for the style.

"SHOW RED FOR DANGER", by Francis Richards (*John Long*, 12*s*. 6*d*.).

An up-state New York murder involving film actors, actresses, directors and hanger-on. In its comparatively quiet and undistinguished way, this is a satisfying whodunit with a colourful pack of suspects and a somewhat morose, but endearing, grizzly bear of a Police Captain investigating. Quite exciting, quite entertaining and rather competently done.

"MURDER REVISITED", by John Rowland (*John Long*, 21*s*.).

This is a careful, and highly competent, analytical study of two famous poisoning cases. They concern two country-town solicitors, Major H. R. Armstrong and Mr. Harold Greenwood, both of whom were accused of poisoning their wives with arsenic. Fascinating and excellently assembled, this book should appeal to amateur criminologists.

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