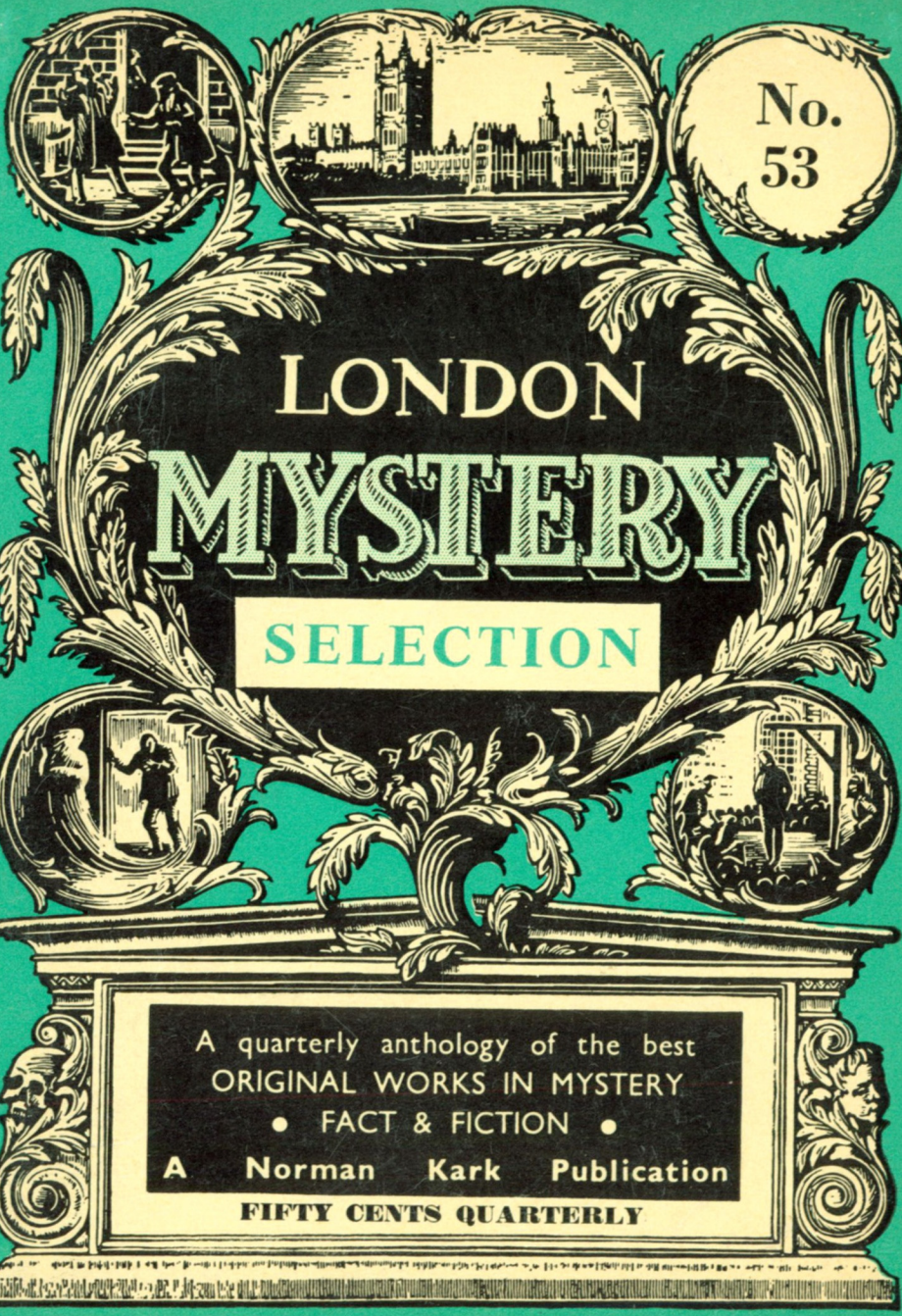
No.
53
LONDON
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SELECTION
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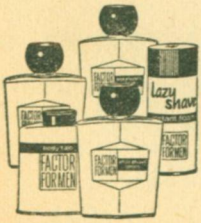

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THE LONDON MYSTERY SELECTION

The winter has been an unconscionable time adying this year, but at last the spring and summer are making a brave effort to appear. There is a touch of spring madness in the air as the "silly" season approaches. Soon Midsummer Day will be upon us, and with it the ancient rites of the country Morris dancers, the druids who congregate at Stonehenge and others who hold fast to the customs of our ancestors. There is far more to these old customs than mere picturesqueness; they have their roots deep in the life and beliefs of our forefathers and still have the power to impress even though we may not fully comprehend.

The quality of defying comprehension is inherent in mystery, and throughout the history of mankind, mystery has held a fascination. The mysteries of natural and supernatural phenomena, of science and of the mind of man have presented a continual challenge to writers and thinkers throughout the ages. Though the mysteries we present in this anthology are less profound than those which have exercised the minds of philosophers, we hope that they will mystify our readers and defy comprehension for a while.

We hope, too, that our readers will suspend their disbelief; that they will allow themselves to be lost for a while in the world of the incredible which, who knows, could some day become the credible. Or that they will gain pleasure from solving the mysteries we have described for them. We hope, in fact, that this collection of stories will give pleasure and entertainment to the credulous and incredulous alike.

EDITOR.

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

THE ROSE IS BLACK

to this little girl, and so is everything else, for the child lives in the perpetual darkness of blindness.

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THE LONDON MYSTERY SELECTION

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THE MIRACLE WORKERS

MORGAN EVANS

Illustrated by Jennifer Gordon

HEN I STARTED to tell Benson what had happened he was too busy to listen.

"Write it up," he said brusquely, "that's if you think you've got something."

And when I tried to explain that I had got a story but that it would be waste of time setting it on paper he lost his temper.

"You've been a reporter long enough to know when a story's good. I'm trying to run a newspaper, not a kindergarten. If you think it's worth anything, then get it down on paper. The lot—right from the start."

It started in the police station. Because I had to pass it on my way to the office I always dropped in to have a word with the sergeant to see if anything had turned up during the night.

When I asked him if there was anything of interest he shook his head.

"A quiet night, just as we like it. Nothing since that hit and run affair. You'll know all about that? Late yesterday evening. A child."

"I was out most of yesterday," I told him.

He opened his book. "Mandy Travers, aged ten. They took her to the Tavern Hospital." He shook his head. "They said there was no hope. They haven't rung us yet so she must still be hanging on." Then he was suddenly fierce. "I'd like to get my hands on the bastard. . . ."

I went out of my way to call in at the hospital. A hospital porter always seems to know more about what goes on in the place than anyone else. I had known Willis for as long as I could remember. He was pouring himself a cup of tea.

"Who'd be a porter?" I asked him.

"I'd rather be a reporter," he grinned. That was an old joke of ours. Corny but it made for good relations. He took out another cup.

"Got something for you this morning," he said, pouring. "Right up your street. A miracle. That's what they're calling it. Child brought in yesterday. Hell of a mess. They tidied her up as best they could. The police were here, and the parents. You know the routine."

One word sometimes makes you think of something else. That word "miracle" nagged at my mind. There was a connection, somewhere.

"And?"

"Instead of dying like they all said she would she's getting better. Old Foxley is puzzled. He says it doesn't make sense. How's that for a story?"

Mr. Foxley was the Chest Specialist. He was rising sixty, had worked in most of the well-known hospitals,

and was as grey and unemotional as a granite statue.

"Lend me your phone," I said. I called Benson.

"Mandy Travers," I said. "Have you got the latest on her?"

"What happened to you yesterday?" he wanted to know.

"I got held up on the Pemberton story. Then it folded. What about the Travers child. I'm at the hospital now."

"Dead?"

"No. That's the story. Apparently she's made some sort of miraculous recovery."

"Follow it," he said and rang off.

Willis took the phone from me and asked to be put through to surgical six.

"A comfortable night," he reported to me. "Doing as well as can be expected." He grimaced. "That can mean anything, but you can take it from me that she ought to be dead. You want her address?"

He knew all the angles. Parental reactions. "How does it feel to know that your daughter has been snatched from death, Mrs. Travers?"

I took out my notebook.

"Walters Street. Number ten. The parents were here last night of course. And a young man—a neighbour's son. He came with them. In a state, they were. You know.

"They stayed until midnight. Then Foxley said the child was out of danger and there was no point their hanging on. There was a lot of running about. Then Nurse Mathers told me that the child was getting better so quickly that it just didn't make sense. She said she'd never seen anything like it. . . ."

The word "miracle" nagged me all the way to Walters Street. It was associated with the Tavern Hospital and with something else. But I couldn't complete the puzzle.

Mrs. Travers was leaving the house as I arrived. She was on her way to the hospital. We walked down the street together. Small and fussy she was garrulous in relief.

"I've just been on to the hospital now. They say she's doing well and there's no need to worry. But last night—" She shuddered. "When the police came we just didn't know which way to turn. We could tell by their faces that Mandy was bad. Peter was with us. That's Peter Marsden, the next door neighbours' boy. George—that's my husband—had been round to see if Peter had seen Mandy at all. She'd been playing in the park. Peter passes the park on his way home from the library where he works. He came back with George and we were just getting ready to go and look for Mandy when the police came. So we all went together to the hospital. She was very bad, they said, but now she's getting on all right. I wanted to stay there all night but they said there was no need. . . ."

I was glad when our ways parted. I wanted to think. The name Peter Marsden was the missing piece to my puzzle. In some way I felt sure that he had been connected with another miracle. When I got back to the office, instead of writing up the story, I went to the files and started going through them. Then I went to the room where

we keep the old issues of the paper and worked my way through them.

Benson sent for me halfway through the morning and I had to tell him that I had a story but it wasn't complete. I told him that I had a feeling that something very like the Mandy miracle had occurred before. He grunted and I returned to my search. Then I found the item. Another child. A small boy called Ronald Blake. He'd been playing in the park and had tried to climb the railings. He'd slipped on a spike. The doctors had said there was no hope for him, and then suddenly he had made a miraculous recovery. But there was no mention of the name Marsden. And yet I felt sure that he had once been linked with a similar incident.

I looked at the date. It had happened two years ago, in the summer, while I had been on my holidays. Someone else had written that particular story up. So I still had another one to find.

And when I did find it I saw that it was dated another three years before the Blake affair and that it was about a boy of twelve who had made a miraculous recovery from paralysis left after an attack of polio. His name was Peter Marsden. So now I had three miracles. All within a space of five years; all connected with the same hospital and all happening to children who lived in the same street.

One, yes; even the best of surgeons can make mistakes. Two? A coincidence. But not three. I couldn't accept three similar miracles. And there might be more of them. I carried on with the search, going back another five years. It took me the rest of the morning and produced no results. The sequence had started with Peter Marsden and ended with Mandy Travers.

I wrote the story after lunch. Benson read the typescript over my shoulder.

"Not bad," he allowed. "A neat twist. Got your facts straight?"

"Of course," I said with some annoyance.

"We'll use it. Might even use a follow-up. Reactions of the parents. And that first one—Marsden. He'll be seventeen now. You might have a word with him. Find out what they all think about it."

I went to see Peter Marsden first. Not only because I had a feeling about him but because Mrs. Travers had told me where he could be found. And the library was just round the corner from the office. He was standing behind the desk, a folder in his hands, a willowy youth with a sweep of pale flaxen hair, unusually dark eyes and a wax-white complexion.

"It'll be about Mandy?" he asked when I had introduced myself. "Her mother told me that a reporter had been to see her. I'm afraid that I can't tell you anything about her that you don't already know."

There was something evasive in his movements. Years of experience in interviewing had taught me to know when a man has anything to hide. I watched his face while I spoke.

"It's not so much about Mandy. I'd like to talk to you about yourself."

His face stayed expressionless but I saw how his knuckles whitened when

his hand tightened on the folder. I looked round the library. "Is there anywhere we can talk?"

"Not while I'm working." There was certainly fear in his eyes. "We're not allowed. . . . Not during library hours."

"What time do you finish?"

He was evasive, but I persisted. He was a callow youth of seventeen and I was a hardened reporter. He told me finally that he finished at six. I said that I would be waiting for him.

I was there at five. He left the

building at quarter to six. It was obvious from the way he glanced furtively up and down the street before crossing the road that he had been hoping to avoid me. And yet, when I stepped into his path at the corner there was something beside fear in his eyes. Something that might almost have been relief.

He had a large book under his arm. I read the title automatically: *Habe's Atlas of the Universe.* I took him to a tea-shop. People often speak more freely in strange surroundings. In their own homes they seem to use the familiar things about them as a bulwark against prying.

"Now," I said firmly, "what's this all about?"

"I don't know what you mean," he said in the manner of a schoolboy caught cheating in class.

I smashed straight into him. "Look, Peter; three miracles all in a row. First, yourself; polio, wasn't it? And then a small boy called Ronald Blake. And now Mandy. The Blake child lives two doors away from you; Mandy lives next door. You can't tell me that it's all coincidence." I watched his face. "'And you're afraid of something, too. It's written all over you."

All shots in the dark. I didn't know what I was trying to find out. Perhaps I just needed reassurance that coincidence was the answer. The age of miracles is past.

He looked at the table. "Yes," he said. "I am afraid. But I just couldn't stand there and see her die. She's a grand little kid. The other times—" He made a gesture of hopelessness. "I was younger then. I didn't see anything wrong. Now I'm not so sure."

I had hoped that once I had got him talking he would keep on. But he stopped, picking up a piece of bread and crumbling it in nervous fingers.

I tried to read sense into his words. "You're trying to say that you had something to do with Mandy's recovery?"

"In a way." He nodded. "But I didn't do it. I only asked for it to be done."

He seemed on the point of tears. I made my voice as gentle as possible.

"Perhaps you'd better tell me all about it. It's to do with the miracles?"

"They aren't miracles," he said. "I wish you—they—wouldn't call them that. It started with me—when I was six. That was when I had the polio. . . ."

And so the story emerged. He spoke of his illness and the outcome. He spoke rationally, almost absently, without having to think, giving the impression that he didn't care one way or another whether I believed him or not. And it was that, more than anything, that lent a certain credulity to his impossible story. But he was imaginative. That was soon clear. He had been over-imaginative right from the start.

"You can blame the paralysis for that," he told me. "It left me with both legs and one arm completely useless. They—the doctors—said it was permanent. There was nothing to do but lie in bed all day and read. Picture books at first. Fairy stories and kid's stuff. But I easily tired. My good arm used to ache and I would

have to put the book down and close my eyes and try to think myself to sleep. Picturing the people I had been reading about. Making them come to life. Young as I was I could take the stories a step further. Riding side by side with St. George when he slew the dragon. Sir Lancelot. You know? That sort of thing. In a way I could make them come alive.

"I spent six years in that room. I made my own world. Sometimes it was hard to tell which of the things about me was real and which make-believe. As I grew older I wanted books of a different kind. Mother used to bring me comics. Stories told in pictures. Images ready to bring to life."

He stopped and I signalled the waitress to bring another pot of tea.

"Space," he said. "Science fiction of the more colourful kind. Monsters and planets and space ships. There was a character called Captain Mars. The first explorer of outer space. I lapped it up and dreamed more than I read. I was twelve when it happened. . . ."

I poured the tea without taking my eyes from his face. Then I had to use a napkin to mop up the mess.

He watched me. "Instead of riding with Sir Lancelot I sat in the prow of a space ship with Captain Mars. That was how I came to meet Them. I never saw them, but I knew they were there. Out in space, somewhere beyond the Milky Way. They spoke to me—" He put one hand to his forehead. "In here. Inside my mind. Asking questions. They wanted to know who I was and where I had come from. As first I thought they were part of my dreaming. But the next time I went out there They were waiting with more of their questions. I was frightened at first but then they became more gentle. They asked what my world was like. I told Them as best I could. I told Them how I had to stay in bed all the time. They said that They would cure me so that I could go outside again. When I got back I found I could move my legs.

"Mother sent for the doctor. I had to have massage and things. Within a month I could walk and run like other boys. But each night I went up to talk to Them. They wanted to know what we looked like, what kind of food we ate—" He spread his hands. "All sorts of things like that. I used to put pictures in my mind for Them to read. They seemed satisfied. Then there was the dog. That must have been about six months later. I found it down by the canal. It had been drowned. I had always wanted a dog of my own. And this was a little brown and white terrier and it was dead. I remember how I crouched over the body, crying.

"I carried it back home and put it in the shed. When I went out there that night They knew. They must have seen it in my mind. They said They would make it come alive again if I would tell Them about other things. The air we breathed; what happened if we broke our skin. Things like that. I told them as best I could. When I got back it was morning. But the dog had gone. There were scratches where it had managed to

open the door and marks in the soft mud on the path. So I knew They had kept Their part of the bargain."

He picked up his cup, cradling it in his long white fingers. I didn't know whether or not to just get up and go away and leave him. The long years lying in bed had unhinged his mind. He had reached the stage where fact and fancy become indistinguishable. At the back of my mind had been some idea about faith-healing, the laying on of hands. That is what I had expected him to be telling me. Not this impossible story.

"Then there was Ronnie Blake," he said suddenly. "Of course, I was much older then. Fifteen. I had begun to have some idea what They were after. For a time I managed to keep away from Them. But now and then something would happen and I would climb in the space ship and go in search of Them. Small things, chiefly. Mother had a toothache once. They cured it in return for pictures about the kind of buildings we live in. And then there was the woman who keeps the little shop at the corner. When I had been in bed she used to send me things. Bags of sweets. . . . She got cancer. They said it was incurable. The doctors, I mean. Those up there said They would make her better if I told Them about the weapons we use. I pictured guns and tanks and planes. I remember I could sense Their excitement when I tried to picture an atom bomb cloud.

"There was an old man who used to come round selling firewood. He was going blind. They made him see again. And then there was Mandy. . . ."

He looked up at me. "I couldn't let her die. You must see that. Not when I knew I could do something. I was old enough to know just what They were after now. I hadn't been to see Them for over a year. But when I saw her lying there. . . .

"I went to the—the toilets. A little room off one of the hospital corridors. It only took me a few minutes to get up to Them. They were waiting. I told Them what I wanted. Then They told me what They wanted in return. They hadn't got a world on which to live. They wanted to come here. They wanted me to show Them the way. All I had to do was picture the night sky. The positions of the stars. That was all. That would be sufficient for Them to know which planet I had come from.

"But I'd never paid much attention to the stars. I tried, but it was no use. I made the bargain with Them. If They would make Mandy well I would study a map of our night sky and take a picture of it in my mind. . . ."

I looked down at the book that was propped against his chair. He followed my eyes. "Yes. That's what it's for. It's in there. You see, I don't know how strong They are. I don't know if They can reach down here without me being here for Them to make contact. I can't take the risk. They might undo all the good They've done. You do see that? I've got to keep my side of the bargain. I've got to go back out there tonight."

He sat back in his chair and closed his eyes. He was sweating a little. I

beckoned the waitress over and paid the bill.

Then I patted his shoulder. "I shouldn't worry too much," I told him. "It may not be as bad as you think."

Stupid, futile words. I could think of nothing else to say.

We parted in the street. Benson was still in the office when I got back.

"Been working on the follow-up to that miracle story?"

There was no point in hiding the truth. "I've not made much progress yet. I'll chase the Blake child's parents up tomorrow. I've wasted most of today on Peter Marsden."

"Wasted?" He looked fierce.

I tapped my head. "He's a little queer. Over-imaginative. Probably the result of the years he spent confined to the one room. He has an explanation for the miracles but it's the product of his own fancies. A sort of self-grandeur. There's a medical word for it."

"No doubt," he said drily.

When he had gone I sat for a while and thought. Three children. A dog, a woman with cancer, a mother with toothache and an old man who had been going blind. Extra frills to his invented story? Clever, self-deluding touches? I wasn't so sure. I knew that the three children had had their miracles. But what about the others? Had he invented them to add to his hallucination? Or had they actually happened? If they had then there might be some truth in his story. But that was impossible.

I could speak with his mother, but it was only reasonable to expect that if ever she had been suddenly cured of a toothache a couple of years ago she would most likely have forgotten all about it by now. But a woman who had had cancer would never forget.

I put the cover on my typewriter and went out into the street. It was the first time I had been inside the frowsty little sweet shop on the corner of Walters Street. The jangling bell brought a small, stoop-shouldered woman to peer at me over the tops of metal-rimmed spectacles. I didn't even know her name. I lied, blatantly. I was doing a research for a local government office on the health of the local people. To do with the proposed smokeless zone. Was there anything about her health that might be of use to us?

There was. Once she had started to talk she hardly paused to draw breath. She said that each Sunday she made a point of going to church so that she could offer thanks for her miraculous recovery.

I escaped at last, taking my teeming thoughts out into the cool evening. It was beginning to get dusk. I had a sudden picture of Peter studying his book and then going to bed with the map of the heavens clear in his mind. I pushed it aside angrily. There was still not enough evidence to prove his story. I wanted to talk to him again. And to his mother. I wanted to ask her if she remembered having the toothache.

It was an ordinary semi-detached house with a scrap of front garden. One of the upstairs windows was a square of golden light. Mrs. Marsden

was a tall woman with the same intense dark eyes and waxen features as her son. Without giving any reason for my visit I asked if I could have a word with Peter.

"You'll be one of his friends from the library," she decided, and gave me no chance of confirming or denying. "He's up in his room, studying. He missed a lot of schooling, you know. Now he's trying to catch up." She was anxious that I should know of his industry. "I tell him that if he's not careful he'll overdo things. He hasn't been looking so well just lately."

We had reached the foot of the stairs.

"Peter?" she called up. And when there was no reply: "There—what did I tell you? He's got his head stuck in a book and he's deaf to everything."

She led the way. At the top she used the edge of her apron to wipe invisible dust from a small table. A bedroom door was open, flooding the landing with light. Peter was lying on his bed, his eyes closed. I recognized the book that lay open on the bedside table.

She made a gesture of annoyance. "Look at him! Read himself to sleep with his clothes on and the light blazing." She shook his shoulder. "Peter!" And again, "Peter!"

I knew then that something had happened. I could see the way his body rocked at her touch. Empty, like a sawdust dummy.

Then I looked at the book, at the open page. A map of stars; constellations and groupings. Even to my inexperienced eyes they looked strange. The title was at the foot of the page. "The Heavens as they would appear to a viewer on the planet Mars."

It was no time to ask the mother if she remembered having the toothache. Not while she was bending over the dead body of her son. She didn't know he was dead. She was still shaking him, trying to make him wake up. But he was dead. He had gone up to Them with the picture of a strange sky in his mind. Had They discovered what he was trying to do and punished him? Or had he lost his way?

Or had he just been a weakly youth with a head full of fancies?

The only certain thing was that an empty shell lay on the bed. The living part of Peter Marsden had gone.

Had They, after all, just been part of an hallucination?

Or had They been up there, waiting for him?

One day men will ride the skies beyond the Milky Way. They will be men of flesh and blood in ships of gleaming steel.

And will They still be out there—waiting?

STOPOVER AT NATHAN

JOHN WRIGHT

Illustrated by R. D. Farley

MALLOY SPOTTED the patrol car just ten minutes after passing through Paso Robles on Interstate Highway 101.

The patrol car did not stop, but its appearance was sufficient to give Malloy something else to worry about. At the first intersection he swung the Packard off the highway and let his foot fall heavily on the accelerator.

The Californian sun was hot, and when Malloy stopped to read the battered sign at the side of the road a half-hour later, his shirt was wringing wet. "Nathan," he growled, reading the sign. "Probably named after the jerk who founded it." In the stillness of the afternoon his words had a hollow, empty sound.

Once more he slipped the big car into gear and gave it gas.

Visions of the town that waited for him at the end of the dirt road sent Malloy's thoughts drifting back to Frisco. San Francisco. The start of the big run.

For the umpteenth time he swore at Davey. Davey and his damned bright ideas. The idea of holding up the gas station had been his. It was a natural for them, Davey had insisted when Malloy had voiced misgivings about the job. They'd knocked off bigger, hadn't they? That was true. So he'd gone along with Davey's plan. Only at this one some punk had tried hard to be a hero. He'd given Malloy a scare when he'd tried reaching for the gun under the counter, and Malloy had shot him.

And that had started it. Within hours all the cops in San Fran had been alerted for them. It had been his idea to part company with Davey once they had split the take. Where Davey had gone he did not know. Malloy had grabbed his share of the miserable pickings and had bolted for L.A. Davey could take care of himself from here on.

Nathan was just as he had suspected. About the size of a large shoe box with one of everything essential to that kind of town. A gas station, a general store, a few other things which included the crummy restaurant in which he sat sipping coffee. Malloy cursed his luck, but decided that Nathan was as good a place as any to stop over for the night.

Moodily he pushed aside the empty cup and got out his wallet. "Forty lousy bucks," he said to himself. "How far is that going to take me?"

He took out a crumpled single, shoved the wallet back into his pocket and pushed back his chair. But at that moment the door of the restaurant creaked open and Malloy turned instead to look at who had just entered.

The newcomer wore a grey stubble around the chin of his sunburned face and his clothes were old and dusty. The hat on his head was sweat-stained, but beneath the wide brim two blue eyes glinted brightly, flashing briefly over Malloy. He walked straight up to the counter, one hand dug deep into the pocket of his pants.

The counterman put down his dog-eared copy of *Fantastic Detective* and smiled. "Hiya, Lonesome."

The old man mumbled something which Malloy could not hear, then made a quick purchase, palming a sweaty five spot on the counter in payment for the items he'd selected.

Malloy's first impression was that he was the town hobo looking for a handout. But five bucks in your pocket, he told himself, and nobody in a dump like this would call you a bum.

With his purchase clutched under his arm the old man said a brief goodbye to the counterman and started for the door. There he stopped to glance briefly at Malloy, and then he was gone.

The counterman wiped his hands on an apron before saying how much the coffee was going to cost Malloy.

"That," Malloy said, indicating the door with his thumb, "your local millionaire?"

"Stranger?" the man behind the counter asked, taking Malloy's money.

"Tourist. Passing through to Frisco." The lie sounded clever.

The counterman digested that fact as he rang up the sale. "Nope. Lonesome ain't no millionaire. Least he ain't the town millionaire."

"That's not his real name—Lonesome?"

"Nope. Don't really know his real name, come to think of it. Showed up in Nathan a few years back and took over the old Carter shack which nobody was using any more. Lives by himself. Don't hardly mix with other folks. Reason why we here call him Lonesome."

"Very original." Malloy grinned without humour. "What's he? Hobo or hermit?"

"Neither," answered the aproned man. "He comes to town now and again, so I guess you wouldn't call him a hermit." He scratched his bald head thoughtfully. "Can't rightly say he's a hobo neither. He's always had a little ready cash the times I seen him. Some folks here claim as how he's got a fortune stuck away in that shack of his. Folks think maybe old Lonesome was a rich man once. Reckon on how he maybe came here to get away from everything—you know?"

He pushed Malloy's change across the counter. "Personally, I ain't never seen him with more than a few bucks at a time. But you never know with people do you? I mean some folks just like to save money—you know?"

Malloy nodded. "There's a character like that in most towns. Why not in this dust heap?"

"Pardon?"

"Nothing." Malloy scooped up his change and dropped it into a pocket. "There an hotel here that can put me up for the night?"

"Sure. At the end of the street. The Nathan Hotel."

"The Nathan? What else?"

The sarcasm was lost on the counterman.

The room given to Malloy was on the ground floor. Small and cold and dreary, and like most hotel rooms. Perhaps a little shabbier than most. He felt the bed and was surprised to find it soft.

A few minutes later he was stretched out upon it. Asleep.

Night had descended upon Nathan when Malloy finally awoke. He sat up and lit a cigarette, appraising the room he occupied. What a dump compared to some of the places he had known. He thought about Davey, wondered how he was making out, and then he began to wonder what he himself was going to do. Now he had less than forty dollars, and that much money wasn't going to take him very far. It would get him to Los Angeles if he was lucky, if the cops didn't pick him up before then. And then what? Maybe he could sell the car....

Malloy thought about it for a long time. It was while he was thinking about money that Lonesome entered his thoughts.

He spent a longer time thinking about Lonesome. What if the old man did have a fortune hidden away in that shack of his? Nuts! If he had as much money as these hicks thought he had, he sure wouldn't live the way he was. And yet he remembered stories of people like that. They lived their lives like tramps and hoboes, and when they die they leave a small fortune behind them. Malloy lay back on the bed and spent more time thinking about the old man.

What if the stories were true? What if he did have a pile of cash hidden away? And what if somebody had to go and visit the shack—somebody with a gun? With that kind of money he could get a plane out of L.A. to New York or Chicago where things would be a lot cooler for him. The more he thought about it the more he began to like the idea that was slowly maturing in his brain.

A few more cigarettes later it was ten-fifteen. Nobody stirred on Nathan's single street.

Malloy rose, stretched, ran some water into the hand basin and splashed it on his face. He shrugged into his coat and looked at himself in the mirror. He looked tired. He felt tired.

Before leaving the hotel he checked the chambers of the ·38 snub-nosed revolver.

A light squinted through a gap in the curtain covering the window of the shack. But no sound came from within. Malloy edged closer to the wooden building. A cold hand ran icy fingers up his spine as he felt, rather than heard, something move in the darkness to his right.

He had not noticed it lying there, but now it got slowly to its feet and came stealthily at him. Malloy held his breath as he stared into the gleaming eyes of the huge, vicious-looking dog.

It came closer as its huge mouth dropped open and a soft growl escaped its throat. Malloy's legs felt suddenly weak. He wanted desperately to turn and run, but he knew what would happen if he did.

In a hoarse whisper he called to the

dog. "Here, boy . . . Here, boy . . ." Under his breath he screamed all the curses he could think of, curses that befitted an animal that scared anyone like this dog was doing. ". . . Here, boy. . . ."

The dog drew closer until eventually Malloy could reach out with shaking hand and pat its head. Its mouth was still open, and even as he patted the big head another low growl came from the open mouth. The huge animal stood perfectly still, neither trusting nor challenging Malloy. And that was all he needed, he certainly wasn't going to wait for it to make up its mind.

The butt of the ·38 made a dull sound as it connected with the dog's head. It dropped to the ground without making any more noise.

With sweat heavy on his back, Malloy sucked in his breath and started again for the shack.

Through the crack in the curtain he saw the old man, and as it appeared he could not have chosen a better time to look. Lonseome was kneeling on the floor, and as Malloy watched he placed a metal box under the floor and then proceeded to fit a few loose boards back in place.

The stories had been true!

With his hat pulled well down and a handkerchief covering the lower part of his face, Malloy shoved open the door of the shack.

At the sound of the intrusion Lonesome leapt to his feet. In doing so he dropped one of the boards leaving a gaping hole in the floor. ". . . What? . . . Who. . . .?"

"Shut up and you won't get hurt!" Malloy snapped viciously at him.

"I—I don't understand" the old man stammered.

"You're not suposed to, Pop. Just get out the box and open it."

"You—You're not going to rob me?" In the weak light of the table lamp the old man's face no longer seemed as old as Malloy had remembered it. "You're not going to . . .?"

"Shut up and do like you're told."

"You plannin' on takin' all my money, son?"

"Huh?" Malloy was surprised in the swift change that had come over the old man. He apeared to have got over his shock pretty fast.

"You come to take my money?" The voice was soft now that the shock had subsided.

"What do you think?"

Lonesome's head nodded slowly. "Yes," he said with a deep sigh, "guess you're goin' to do just that."

"Make it easy on yourself, Pop. Don't make trouble. I don't want to hurt you, but I will if I have to. Get me?"

"I don't want no trouble, son. I'm an old man. Guess there's no point in tellin' you this is all the money I got in the world?"

"Not much point, Pop."

Lonesome sighed again and returned to the hole in the floor. "It ain't goin' to do you no good, son. You're goin' to get in a heap of trouble for this."

"Let me worry about that," Malloy said softly.

Lonesome began pulling up the rest of the floor boards. "It ain't goin' to

do you no good. No good at all," he said, his face turned away from the gunman.

Malloy congratulated himself. Luck was holding hands with him. The job was a pushover. He wondered why nobody had tried it before. Casually he looked around the room. It was a small two-room affair, bare of any luxury. An old stove stood in one corner of the room and a few sticks of furniture took up the rest of the space.

Too late Malloy realized his mistake in taking his eyes off Lonesome.

The old man had been waiting for such a chance. His old body shot across the room in a movement so quick and agile it surprised Malloy. In the corner of the room was an ancient Winchester carbine, and Lonesome was going for it, his hands already closing around the stock of the rifle.

Malloy came to life in a hurry. He stepped quickly across the room and brought the barrel of his gun down heavily on Lonesome's head. A slight whine slipped from the old man's mouth as he crumpled to the floor.

Quickly Malloy scooped up the metal box Lonesome had dropped. It wasn't locked. He opened it and his eyes above the handkerchief grew big. The box was three-quarters full of crisp green currency.

With the box parked on the table and his gun in his pocket, Malloy began scooping out the money and stuffing it into his shirt. Under the mask his mouth twisted into a grin as he noticed the money was made up

almost entirely of fives and tens. That was good. Small bills don't arouse attention. As an afterthought Malloy replaced a small bundle of bills back in the box. He felt a kind of pride about his act of kindness.

Moving back to where the old man lay, Malloy bent down and turned him over. Cold sweat broke out on his face as he noticed the look in Lonesome's eyes. Blood pounded in his head as he felt for a pulse, a sign of a heartbeat, the sound of breathing. There were none of these things.

Panic seized Malloy. His first thoughts were to clear out of the shack. But then he got control of his nerves. He knew he would need time to get out of Nathan, and he'd have to leave quietly. He knew he'd have to destroy all signs of his visit and hide the old man's body if he had any hope of making a graceful departure from Nathan.

At first there seemed no likely place to hide the body. But when Malloy opened the back door of the shack he found the answer staring him in the face. A few yards from the shack stood an old well.

Back in the hotel Malloy packed the money into the bottom of his suitcase. All except fifty dollars which he shoved into his wallet. A half-hour was spent reassuring himself that he'd left no trace of his visit to the shack, that the body was well concealed. Satisfied that it would take some time before anybody would notice that Lonesome was strangely inactive, he stripped and got into bed.

It surprised him to find how tired he really was, and how fast sleep came to him when he closed his eyes.

When again he opened his eyes, Malloy cursed loudly. Bright sunlight was streaming through the window. He glanced at his watch. Ten-forty-five. He swore again. It had been his intention to leave early.

Malloy lit a cigarette and got out of bed. No panic. It would take some time before the body was discovered. The well had been a gift. He looked out the window, up the dusty street, and smiled. His stopover in Nathan had proved rather profitable.

The lobby of the hotel was quiet. The desk clerk looked as bored as he had the previous day. A couple of men sat around smoking, and in a big easy chair sat an exceptionally fat man, his head behind a newspaper.

Malloy paid his bill, spoke briefly and cheerfully to the clerk and then left after collecting his change from the two five-dollar bills.

The engine of his car responded immediately to the touch of the starter button. Malloy engaged the gear and was about to let in the clutch when he felt and smelled a warm tobacco breath on the side of his face.

He looked up. It was the fat man he had seen at the hotel. Only this time he saw something else—the sheriff's star pinned to the fat man's shirt.

"Morning," he said. "Like to talk to you, son."

"Sorry, sheriff," Malloy answered a little too quickly. "I'm in a hurry. Business, you know. As it is . . ." The rest of his words droned off into nothing, for now he was looking down the barrel of an ancient Colt.

"Reckon as how I'll have to insist," wheezed the fat man.

In his office the sheriff showed Malloy a chair, and then he lowered his own bulk into a chair behind a battered desk.

"So now we're here," Malloy said, almost shouting. "So let's talk. What you want to talk about?"

"Murder," the sheriff said in almost a whisper. "Ugly word," he added slowly.

"Murder?" Malloy's voice echoed in the tiny office.

"Yep. Murder sonny. You see in my job I get up kind of early—do my rounds and all that. Only this morning was a little different from others. Mighty early this morning I heard old Lonesome's dog a'howling its fool head off. It was kind of unusual because Lonesome and that dog of his are pretty quiet creatures. Well, anyway, I decided to find out why the dog was making such a ruckus.

"I went up to the shack, and when I got there know what I found? That fool dog sitting by the well howling and howling." The sheriff wiped a coloured handkerchief under his several chins. "Found Lonesome down in the well. Had a devil of a time getting him out."

"Why are you telling me all this?" Malloy asked. "It's not my concern."

"That's where you're wrong, sonny. I figure you as the one who killed the old man."

Malloy jumped to his feet. The gun in the sheriff's hand moved only an inch, but it was enough to let Malloy know what any foolish move would mean. "Sit down," the fat man roared. "You're not going any place, feller."

Malloy sat down and the sheriff continued. "After I got him out of the well I poked around inside of the shack. I found some loose boards in the floor, and under them? Yep, a tin box with some money inside. There was something else under the floorboards. Know what? '

"What?" Malloy's voice was a rasping sound of fear.

The fat man chuckled. "I got a pretty good idea why old Lonesome came to Nathan now, and also why he's been stuck away by himself all this time. Right this minute I got the boys in L.A. and Frisco checking it."

"You said you found something else?" Malloy's voice was devoid of emotion. "What?"

"Some plates, sonny. Printing plates. Way I figure it, Lonesome was a counterfeiter way back before he came here. I figure he was on the run from something when he stopped off at Nathan a few years back. He must've brought those plates and a pile of that money with him. Those two fives you used to pay the hotel clerk were duds, phonies. Good imitations, because nobody around here has ever spotted them before. But then, come to think of it, Lonesome never spent much money, only when he had to." The fat man chuckled contentedly. "Anyway, you being the only stranger in town I had to check you out first."

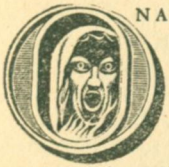
Malloy glared at the sheriff as his mouth twisted out soundless words.

"What's the matter, sonny?" You getting regrets?"

Malloy was silent.

A GENTLEMAN WHOSE NAME WE COULD NOT GATHER

HAROLD ADSHEAD



ON A COLD December afternoon in the year 1832, the London stage coach pulled to a halt in the yard of the "George Inn", centre of the quiet Middlesex market town of Enfield, having taken a leisurely two hours to make the ten-mile journey from Town.

Among those alighting was a jolly young Cockney sailor who had just returned from a voyage to the East Indies, and he had kept the company entertained *en route* with exciting tales of his adventures in the Far East. He was glad to have reached home before Christmas and delighted to have received a warm invitation from his cousin to come down to Enfield and join in the seasonal festivities at which he would be fêted as a special guest of honour on his safe return from his travels.

Ben Danby, like all young lusty sailormen, had already had some little experience of the hazards and dangers to be met in the waterfronts of the world, and now he was looking forward to the merry wassail awaiting him in what was then still a sleepy country town. Not in his wildest dreams would he have thought that before his shore leave had hardly started, he would become a subject for ballad-mongers.

There was to be, however, no Christmas for Ben, for, in the poignant lines of an old broadsheet:

This young man he was a sailor,
And just returned from sea,
And down to Enfield Chase he went,
His cousin for to see,
Little thinking that ere night,
Would prove his destiny.

With all his wordly belongings stowed in a bag slung on his broad shoulders and his money tucked into a silk purse with steel slides and tassels, Ben soon found the house of his cousin in Enfield's Chase Side, for Peter Addington was a prosperous master baker who lived in one of the larger mansions of the town.

The young sailor was met with a cordial welcome and was soon enjoying a substantial tea with his relatives. As the evening wore on, Ben, with his savings burning a hole in his pocket, declined the drinks that were proffered him, and plumped for a visit to the local, promising to be back by ten o'clock.

He had not far to go, for the "Crown and Horseshoes" lay just behind Chase Side, a quiet wayside inn nestling on the banks of the New River, still there to this day.

It was not long before the gregarious young sailor became the centre of convivial company for, like most men of the sea, he was spend-

ing his money freely. The fun grew fast and furious as Ben joked with his newly found friends and regaled them with hair-raising stories of the Indian Ocean and the China Seas.

And then suddenly "the funny little gentleman in black" came in. He lived close by and was always received in the tavern with great respect.

As he pushed open the door a little diffidently, "the funny little gentleman in black" as he had become affectionately nicknamed by the regulars, received a cheery welcome from Mrs. Perry, the landlord's wife, and he was invited into the snug bar-parlour.

He remarked that he had called a little earlier than usual owing to the fact that an old friend had paid him an unexpected visit. Finding that he had nothing in the house to offer his guest by way of refreshment, he had excused himself, and come to the inn to obtain "an additional pint of porter" for his visitor. On occasions such as these, the little gentleman was not entirely uninterested in the life of the inn, or indeed in a desperate hurry, as his visitor was in the good hands of his sister; and so, as he invariably did, he stayed for a little refreshment himself.

Through the open door he could see a cheerful fire blazing in a small side room. He shuffled through to find a small group of men engaged in a harmless game of dominoes.

One was the cheerful and still comparatively sober Ben, and the other three were men whose names were destined to appear in the annals of the Old Bailey before many more weeks had passed. The young sailor had casually mentioned that he enjoyed a quiet game of dominoes and had been persuaded to leave the crowded bar by the three suspicious looking characters now seated round the small table.

The little gentleman stood watching the game for a while, quietly supping his ale. One of the men invited him to join in the game and, not wishing to appear unsociable, the little gentleman did so, but soon finding that he had forgotten how to play the game, excused himself and dropped out. Ever since he had been in the room, Ben thought that he should have known who he was and addressing him, said that, if he were not mistaken, he seemed to remember as a child, seeing him in London.

"I'm certain it was in my father's barber's shop in the Temple," said Ben. "My name's Danby."

The little gentleman expressed gratified surprise at the young sailors keen memory, and acknowledged that he was indeed an old customer and friend of Ben's father, and began to chat enthusiastically of his recollections of those old days.

The three men sat surly and silent as the game lagged during this conversation. Aware that his presence was becoming unwelcome to the three men, the little gentleman suddenly brought the conversation to an end, bade the assembled company "Good night" and shuffled out of the room and the inn with his pint of porter tucked under his arm.

It was the last he was ever to see of poor Ben Danby.

By the end of the evening, Ben had drunk himself into a state of utter helplessness, and it was no surprise when the three men lifted the hapless sailor to his feet and helped him out of the bar, loudly asserting that they were going to see that he got home safely to his cousin's house.

But they did not go very far with their burden.

Early next morning, a young boy walking down Holtwhite's Hill, a stone's throw from the "Crown and Horseshoes", was terrified to see a body sprawled in a ditch. He ran to a passing farm labourer who was on his way to work, and stammered out his gruesome find. They both hurried to Holtwhite's Hill, where the labourer found that the young sailor was dead, having been stabbed in the throat.

The police were immediately contacted and it was not long before the body was identified as that of the unfortunate Danby. Mr. Addington had already informed the police that his young cousin had not returned home the previous night, and he was already therefore posted as missing.

Investigations pursued by the police soon established that the dead sailor had spent the previous evening in the "Crown and Horseshoes". All those known to have been in the tavern that night were visited and closely questioned by two keen investigators, John Mead, the burly beadle of the parish, and the alert Richard Watkins, one of the horse patrol of Bow Street stationed at Enfield.

Soon "from information received" the three men last seen with Danby were apprehended on the road some miles out of Enfield. They were searched and found to be in the possession of the silk purse with steel slides and tassels, and were taken into custody on suspicion of having been concerned with the death of the young sailor.

There were further investigations to be made.

In consequence of having also been seen in the company of the three accused and their victim on the fatal evening, the "funny little gentleman in black" also received a visit from the formidable Mead and Watkins. The bewildered little man found to his consternation that he too was being apprehended by the police as a possible accessory after the fact.

The four men thus arrested were taken to the police station and brought before Dr. Cresswell, a local magistrate. After a long private examination, the three men giving the names of Cooper, Johnson and Fare were remanded in custody to await the verdict of the Coroner's inquest.

Dr. Cresswell had been very surprised and shocked to discover that the little gentleman had been brought in with such disreputable company as he not only knew him very well but would have been prepared to swear to his good character and integrity. The examination of this "suspect" was therefore "conducted with all delicacy", and the perplexed and confounded little man was able to account fully for his movements on the fateful evening. He gave the name of his visitor who, he assured the Doctor, would be able to provide

convincing testimony along with his sister, as to the time he had returned with the "pint of porter", and swear that he had not gone out of the house again that night.

As the time of the death of poor Danby had been fixed by the available evidence at round about midnight, Dr. Cresswell was quite relieved to find his friend was but an innocent spectator in the inn, and the little gentleman was soon released from custody. But he feared that the newspapers would soon surround him with distasteful and unwelcome publicity.

He breathed more freely when he found that the only reference to him in the Press was to "a gentleman whose name we could not gather".

The Coroner's inquest was held shortly afterwards in another Enfield inn, the "Old Sergeant" in nearby Parsonage Lane to where the body of the young sailor had been taken. Henry Sawyer, Coroner for the Duchy of Lancaster, in whose jurisdiction Enfield was then situate, came to the following verdict.

That Benjamin Crouch Danby was wilfully murdered by William Johnson and John Cooper at or about midnight of Wednesday December 19th and that Samuel Sleath also known as Fare aided and assisted in the commission of the crime.

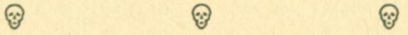
At the Old Bailey on 4th January, 1833, Johnson only was found guilty of murder. Fare was found guilty of robbing the body and Cooper acquitted on the capital charge. In accordance with the swift and summary procedure of those days, Johnson was executed three days later.

The "funny little gentleman in black" was not seen in the "Crown and Horseshoes" again. He told his friends that he had felt very queer ever since the murder, and the very thought of the little bar parlour with the blazing fire, the memory of the eager young sailor and the tragic aftermath, made him so sick at heart that he never wanted to go there again. He transferred his custom to other taverns in Enfield, so that he would not be forcibly reminded of the events of that sinister evening.

Had Dr. Cresswell not been convinced of his innocence, a sensation would have been caused in the Police Court if the little gentleman had been charged there.

All England would have gasped with astonishment and dismay.

"The funny little gentleman", a "gentleman whose name we could not gather", was in fact none other than Charles Lamb, the gentle Elia.



THE SLEEPERS

G. E. FOX

Illustrated by J. V. R. Davies

IT WAS A GOLDEN day in the fall of the year. Around him the ancient land lay in a drowsy peacefulness and he himself felt in accord with it all—part of the rolling hills and the ageless calm. It was a land of stories and legends, a land of strange beliefs and superstitions, despite the hard realities of the age of nuclear physics, space satellites and the deep cynicisms that accompanied them. Forester knew all the old stories. He had collected them over the years and one day he would compile a book. A good book it would be too: exciting—and perhaps disturbing, for in the old legends there always existed a core of truth.

He lay back in the heather and stared up into the blue iridescent sky and let his mind drift into conjecture. He wondered, for example, how the legend of the Sleepers had originated. The Sleepers were five mounds of boulders—four and a sort of large stalagmite to be exact—in a cavern under Aysgard Crag. Legend said they were warriors petrified in sleep by ancient magic until the day they were struck in true anger. Then they would awake.

As a boy he had often gone into the cavern to look at the Sleepers, but of recent years he had not been near Aysgard Crag. Indeed, it must be at least twenty years since he had scrambled through the narrow opening to the Sleepers' Cave behind the thin drizzle of the tiny cascade that trickles over the crag. Because of the cascade, the slippery rocks and the difficult opening, very few people attempted the exploration of the cave. It was an exploit for adventuresome children rather than for adults. He smiled at the memories of those early explorations and how he and his companions had tried to waken the Sleepers by striking the rocks. Nothing had happened, of course, but whimsically he recalled how happily they had gone about it. Hardly in anger, so naturally the Sleepers did not awake. In his half-drowsy state of mind he found himself half-believing the legend. Strange how credulous one can become in that grey half-world between wakefulness and sleep.

When, at last, he decided it was time to return, he had made up his mind to have another look at the Sleepers in a day or two's time. If he were to write his book on local curiosities and legends, it would be as well to have the features of the Sleepers' Cave clearly in his mind. He would visit Tom Saunders at Aysgard House and check the story of the Sleepers, for Tom also had a reputation for being very knowledgeable in the folklore of the district.

Next day, then, he called on Tom Saunders. It was always a pleasure to call on Tom. Children loved him for his endless stories, his generosity with apples and pears, his enormous strength and his fierce red beard. Grown-ups liked him for his rollicking good humour and his generosity with something more than apples and pears. In the thirty years he had been at Aysgard House he had built himself a reputation for being a "character". He must be getting on for sixty, thought Forester, as he knocked at the good solid oak door of Aysgard House. He carried his age well too.

It was Raynor, Tom's house-servant, who opened the door.

"Morning, Mr. Forester," said Raynor. "Tom's expecting you. He saw you coming up the drive. He's down in the cellar drawing beer."

"Oh no!" Forester grimaced.

"Well, you know what he is," said Raynor. "And it's a month or two since you called."

"I do, but I can't drink ale like he does!"

"Nobody can, except maybe myself!" laughed Raynor, leading the way to Tom's study.

Everybody knew of Tom's easy intimacy with his servants, and Forester wasn't put out by Raynor's casual ways, nor was he surprised when he bawled down the cellar steps: "Don't be all day, Tom! We're all thirsty when there's beer going."

"Draw your own, Raynor!" yelled Tom from the depths, his mighty voice rumbling in the vaulted cellar like the breakers in a sea cavern.

He came in with a great pewter jug foaming with fresh drawn beer, and his great, jolly, red face sparkling and brilliant with good humour.

"Young Forester, by thunder!" he shouted.

"Not so young, Tom!" grinned Forester. "It's a quarter of a century since you first caught me stealing your pears."

"Aye, and licked you for it!" said Tom, pouring ale into pint mugs.

"And gave me a basketful to take home and an admonition to ask next time," laughed Forester.

For an hour they drank strong ale and talked; Forester quietly and appreciatively, for Tom was good company; Tom himself noisily, bubbling with jollity, always ready with the pewter pot, until Forester had to turn his mug upside down in desperation.

"Tom," he said at last. "I want you to tell me the legend of the Sleepers. I'm going to write a little book about local curiosities, you see. Nothing ambitious really, but I feel I don't know all the legend of the Sleepers. Maybe you can fill in a few blanks."

Tom stopped laughing, his blue eyes lost their brilliance and for a moment he frowned. Then, in a flash, his momentary seriousness vanished and he smiled again. It was just as if a little cloud had sailed across the big, red sun of his face, changing sunshine into shadow, tranquillity into storm. It was a little disconcerting, that sudden irrational change of mood.

"Why, young Forester, there's nothing to it. I don't suppose I know

any more than you. What's your version?"

Forester told him.

"That's about it," said Tom. "Just a fairy tale like 'Sleeping Beauty'."

"Well, how old is the story?" Forester persisted.

"Probably Norse," said Tom a little hesitantly. Forester sensed reluctance in Tom's voice. Why didn't he wish to talk about it?

"Why Norse?" he asked.

"The Norsemen colonized this region—or conquered it, whichever you prefer. The evidence is in the local inhabitants. Look at 'em. Tall, fair, blue-eyed, tough as nuts, ready to fight their own shadows if they could find a pretext. Obviously of Nordic ancestry. There's never been much marrying out of the district."

And, indeed, he was right, Forester decided. Even Tom's small household demonstrated this fact. Raynor, tall, blond, independent, blue-eyed; Sam, the gardener-handyman, big, loose limbed, red-haired, always in a brawl at the pubs; Bert, who managed Tom's bit of a pig farm, a tall strong ox of a man, as red as Tom himself, argumentative and truculent, even with his pigs.

"Yes, I see what you mean," said Forester slowly, and because Tom apparently wasn't interested, he left it at that, a little disappointed, but in no way deterred from his intention of including the story of the Sleepers in his book.

Several days of rain and wind followed, and Forester spent most of them indoors, jotting down notes for his book. The idea was getting hold of him and from what he admitted had been something less than a hard cast resolution, had evolved an enthusiasm. He found himself thinking about his project with a warm complacency.

In this mood he equipped himself with a torch and an old mackintosh and set off for the Sleepers' Cave. The cascade over Aysgard Crag was a silver curtain over the cavern's mouth after the recent rains, but Forester knew the trick of squeezing his way behind it so that he was no more than slightly damp when he slid backwards into the Sleepers' Cave.

The cave was not very large and was slightly vaulted like a crudely fashioned church. A tiny subterranean stream leapt out of the wall opposite the cavern's mouth, splashing across the rock-strewn floor and then disappearing into a crevice low down in the left-hand wall. In consequence of this boisterous, hasty, little stream within the cave the whole interior was damp and mossy. The boulders they called the Sleepers, however, were obviously accumulating layers of limestone as a result of the everlasting splashing they were being subjected to. Forester shone his torch on them. Four were so apparently just heaps of stones, but the fifth, a massive block of shiny limestone, had a faint grotesque resemblance to a man, seated, relaxed, bowed forward in a doze.

It was cold in the cave, eerie too, and the two falls, one within and one outside the cave, made a strangely ominous harmony—a murmur almost of warning, it seemed to Forester. He

tried to account it to the depressing effect of damp and cold, but, nevertheless, he admitted to himself a feeling of superstitious awe.

Tentatively he kicked the loose rocks and stones of the nearest of the Sleepers, then he shone his light on the big stone which had the faint resemblance to a seated man. He wondered why the legend so explicitly dwelt on Five Sleepers when there was only one boulder with any appearance of a sleeping man. The other four heaps of loose stones could not by any stretch of imagination be made to look like men. Had the other four at some time disintegrated into heaps of stone? The continual spray of lime-impregnated water from the stream would tend to produce the opposite effect—a building up, indeed.

There wasn't much else to see so he turned to retrace his steps and in doing so turned his foot on a stone and stumbled. In an effort to save himself he automatically dropped the torch, and in a moment he was in darkness. Again he stumbled and fell, and in exasperation found himself sitting in the cold waters of the stream.

Angrily, he staggered to his feet and groped around for his torch. Frustrations crowded in on all sides. The torch obstinately refused to come under his searching fingers, boulders continually caused him to stumble, he tore his trousers at the knee and cut the knee itself. When he found the torch at last he was almost hysterical with rage at the inanimate, that so mulishly persisted in being inanimate. He pushed the button on the torch and nothing happened. The last tatter of self-control fluttered away in the tempest of his anger.

"Oh blast!" he cried and kicked angrily in the darkness. He did more damage to himself than to the thing he kicked, as one inevitably does on such occasions of rage, and the pain sobered him up.

A little ashamed of his foolish outburst, cautiously groping his way in the darkness, shivering in his wet clothes, he made his way towards the pale glow which indicated the opening to the cave. Under the palely shimmering fall of water from the crag above, he paused for a moment, and it was then he heard movement behind him in the darkness. Distinct from the sibilant rush of water was the sound of a slow, ponderous rhythm as if something heavy and gigantic were moving evenly at regular intervals. The sound he compared to the thudding of a cumbersome piston or the slow marching of a body of guardsmen at a distance.

The weird sound was unexpected and inexplicable. He stared into the darkness, seeking explanations. What could there be in the black shadow of the cave to make so awesome and purposeful a sound? Only moss and stones and a little stream surely? He had not the courage, he realized, to go back and investigate.

"Who's there?" he shouted, knowing the futility of it, but finding comfort in the sound of his own voice.

Only the terribly slow and remorseless rhythm of heavy sound answered him. He began to shiver more violently, but not from the chill of his wet clothes. It was the more intense

chill of fear that caused him to tremble and stare and wonder. But fear of what? He felt that he had no grounds for his mounting terror. In him was a purely illogical fear of the unknown. Superstitious fear no doubt, and a thing as ancient and primeval as the rocks around him, but still illogical.

Then he fled from the unknown, frantically scrambling over the rocks behind the fall, running up the hillside, never looking back for fear of what he should see emerging from the Sleepers' Cave. Only when he was two miles from the cave did he recover his complacency and his wits and come to a stop, panting and exhausted with the wildness of his flight.

"I'll never go near that place again!" he said to himself. He knew this, too, was illogical and incomprehensible for what was there to fear? Only moving water, moss and stones.

Stones! He remembered the legend. He had struck—or kicked, which amounted to the same thing—in anger in the darkness. Had he kicked the monolithic Sleeper? He couldn't be sure. And did it matter if he had? Surely he wasn't so credulous or superstitious as to believe the old legend? He had run away like a terrified child from the darkness and his own incomprehensible fears. The thought was so utterly repugnant to him that he decided to go back and settle his doubts, and to prove to himself that he was not afraid and . . . He was confused and really not sure what was compelling him to retrace his steps.

He went slowly and try as he would to still his apprehensions he, nevertheless, found himself oddly fearful of what each new horizon in the undulating countryside would reveal. Every movement, every rock, every tree or bush coming into view he scrutinized anxiously.

The sun was lower now and distant shapes were black and hard-cut against the paling blue of the sky. In an hour it would be dusk. Already birds were wheeling low over the trees, selecting branches for their night's roosting and the evening solemnity was dropping like a flimsy mantle of blue silk over the hills.

He would not go farther than the next rise which hid Aysgard Crag from his view, but he had barely made his decision when he saw that the familiar horizon of unbroken irregular curves had an incongruity—something alien and disturbing. A man walking along the rim of the horizon, a cloud sitting upon it would have disrupted the harmony without being alien; but this was more, it was rugged, grotesque and vaguely familiar—a crumbling monolith it seemed and Forester had a certainty that it was slowly and laboriously moving.

He stared, fascinated beyond measure. Light and distance, aided by imagination, were building up within him a phantasy so horrifying and so hideous that he had a hysterical desire to scream and run. He did both but it was towards the thing on the horizon he ran, willing it to be nothing; to be a man, to be a tree, to be a

cloud, but not to be a limestone monolith.

Yet it was a rock—a crumbling limestone rock. He saw the limestone disintegrating, falling away in chunks, like pieces of broken pottery and as each piece fell, what remained became more human in shape—gigantic, but human. And all the time the thing slowly, wearily, ponderously, advanced down the hillside. Forester intuitively sensed purpose in the slow movement and that purpose he knew was directed against himself.

Wherever he should go he felt that this monstrosity would follow, and in horror so utterly desolate and irrational, he fled again.

His mind reiterated: Aysgard House! Aysgard House! There I shall be safe! There I shall be safe! As he ran he thought of Tom and Raynor and the hard, sane, comfortable materialism of the household, the barrels of strong ale, the love of solid, happy things like pigs and easy chairs and noisy talk. The firm hedonism of Tom's household, of his easy life made the odd, the intangible, the inexplicable, ghosts and bogies, the old legends, the Sleepers in their cave seem absurd. Tom and Raynor, Bert and his pigs, Sam and his gigantic marrows would dissolve his nightmare, he was assured.

And when he reached Aysgard House he *was* assured. When Raynor took him into the study, there were Tom and Bert and Sam, all seated

together before the fire enjoying massive tankards of strong ale, shouting loudly and happily at each other—big red-blond men, tough as the Northern Seas and as boisterous.

They bawled welcome and invitation and only when he had downed a great draught of ale would Tom hear his story.

They listened attentively and Forester noticed as he proceeded that they exchanged significant glances and their cheerful indifference gradually gave place to a sort of grimness.

At last their unnatural silence caused him to falter and then to stop. He stared at them wonderingly.

"It's all right, isn't it?" he asked shakily. "I mean . . . I . . . I imagined it . . . or something. The legend. . . ."

"Yes, the legend," said Tom slowly and softly.

"Well, what of it?" whispered Forester, awed now by their seriousness. Raynor, Bert and Sam were looking at him with eyes as hard and blue as the Northern sky. What had he said to cause this strange change in them? Were they indeed so deeply superstitious?

"Young Forester," said Tom. "When the world was young, men were nearer to an understanding of the supernatural powers. They made pacts with these powers of good and evil. Our Sleepers, they say, were warriors who made a pact with Loki, Norse god of mischief and evil——"

"Loki—the Norse god!" ejaculated Forester. "That's something new! I've never heard Loki mentioned before!"

Tom ignored the interruption.

"The Sleepers obeyed the will of Loki by destroying, killing, burning throughout the land. They burnt the monasteries, killed the monks, sacked the towns . . . and their reward: to live twelve hundred years. A hundred years for every lunar month."

"Fantastic!" interrupted Forester. "How could you?"

"But Loki the mischief-maker, the great joker, put them into a deep sleep which could only be broken by an angry blow," Tom went on remorselessly.

"How do you know?" yelled Forester. "Tom, you're inventing it all! And why are you all so damned queer?"

Only the hard, inflexible stares of Raynor, Tom, Bert and Sam answered. It was as if they were stone and gilt images of men, slouching there in the easy chairs, waiting and watching for some event, unknown and inexplicable to Forester.

"Loki!" said Tom bitterly. "He knew the improbability of an angry blow on sleeping men. And when the waters of the cave petrified the Sleepers to blocks of stone the improbability became almost certainty. What a sly, twisting devil, that Loki!"

"But only 'almost'," murmured Raynor. "Five times the Sleepers were struck in anger."

"Raynor—" whispered Forester. "What are you saying, man?"

"There has only been one Sleeper in the cave these hundred years, young Forester," said Tom grimly. "Today you released the last from his sleep. He is walking the hills towards Aysgard House."

Forester looked at the four granite-hard faces before him, at the cold blue Norse eyes, at the red gold of their hair, at the power and strength in the thick bodies and limbs. Thoughts ran through his mind, like flying shadows on a hillside. His intelligence sharpened by fear, he remembered that Aysgard was the Norse place of the dead; he calculated that the twelve hundred years must almost be at an end.

"The other four . . ." he whispered. "Tom . . . you . . ."

"Go to the window and look," said Tom and his voice was cold and terrible as ice.

Forester obeyed.

He saw moonlight, brittle on the hills and trees, and a figure, distant, small and yet bold and terrible, slowly moving towards Aysgard House, across the fields. He knew it was the last of the Sleepers. It was irrevocable. The thing out there under the high full moon was merciless and purposeful, and there was no escape, for behind him, too, was death. Behind him were the others. . . .

He turned. Inside he felt bleak and cold as if already he had died.

"Tom . . ." he began.

Was he going to beg for his life? Incredible to beg for one's life from men who by the laws of Nature should long since have gone from the face of the earth. Incredible indeed! Fear was in him and a deep horror. He saw in these sprawling figures what he had never seen before—evil and cruelty under a veneer of terrifying good humour.

"How high is the moon?"

Tom's voice was ironical. Forester did not reply.

"Loki, the joker!" laughed Tom bitterly. "Twelve hundred years pass at the full of tonight's moon, young Forester," said Tom. "How near is death, young Forester? To you? To us? To the Sleepers?"

Tom's bitter laughter rolled round the room in terrifying peals. The others took it up, until deafened, Forester put his hands over his ears to shut out the fearful row.

He ran to the window and saw the same high moon and the same hills; hard and black against the sheen of a black sky. The last Sleeper was nearer—a slow, massive thing of a terrible and unbreakable resolve.

In agony he stared at the high significant moon. Where in all that depth of sky was the moon's zenith?

When, for pity's sake, had the ancient gods decreed the zenith over the Five Sleepers?

SHOWDOWN UNDER CAPRICORN

ANTHONY A. RANDALL

FROM THE DECK OF the island supply boat, *Katura Maru*, Shelagh Larson watched the bottle being carried over the moonlit Pacific by the inshore current.

Neither the soft surge of the wake nor the sea glittering like a thousand fires under the moon and the stars could ease her anxiety about Dan Vickery. Her fingers clasped the rail tighter. Something was desperately wrong.

The slight breeze rippled through her red curls; her sensitive lips parted for an instant. What could have happened to Dan? He was supposed to have arrived in Brisbane four days ago for their wedding. The only evidence that he'd ever arrived was his signature in the hotel register.

She couldn't avoid a sense of foreboding. Rumours had been drifting back from the islands that trouble was brewing at the pearl Concession on the Capricorn Shoals in which she and Dan were partners. She wondered if Luigi and his Jap divers were trying to muscle in again.

Shelagh rather doubted it. Dan would have said something before now. It was unfortunate that she'd had to leave the Concession six weeks ago to look after Uncle Frank in Sydney. She was out of touch.

Dan's disappearance was worrying enough, but the anonymous note which she'd received at her Brisbane hotel convinced her that something sinister had happened to him. Written in block letters it had scared her then; scared her now.

"Sail tonight for Tarowa on *Katura Maru* Brisbane Docks. Trouble at Concession since Dan quitted."

That was four days ago. She had found only two passengers on board the *Katura Maru*: old Kingsford, the Commissioner at the Tarowa settlement, some two miles east of the Concession, and Luigi, the Jap, who owned the island supply boats. Neither of them had seen Dan for some days.

Shelagh beat a tattoo on the railing, staring across the sparkling white crests to the dark Tarowan coastline. The *Maru* must be parallel with the Concession now. In two hours it would be dawn and the boat would be docking at the settlement.

It was three years now since her father had left her the concession by his will, two and a half years since she'd sold a half share to Dan.

She turned as she heard soft footsteps behind her. Luigi, the fat little Jap, emerged from the shadow of the deckhouse. He wore a white, open-necked shirt and smoked a cheroot. She glanced down at him, unable to conceal her contempt.

"So pleased to find you, Miss Larson." Luigi bowed. "You are concerned about your fiancé, Meester

Dan Vickery? I have news for you. This way, please." He motioned her to the companionway.

Shelagh caught her breath, searched Luigi's inscrutable face and then quickly followed him to his fan-cooled cabin.

"Please be seated, Miss Larson," Luigi said, pointing to an armchair.

The cabin was small and stuffy. Two armchairs, a table and a bunk under the porthole comprised the furniture.

"You've heard from Dan?" Shelagh asked, sitting forward tensely, watching the large yellow face and the dark, unfathomable eyes.

"Meester Dan Vickery in Brisbane sell out his share in Concession, Miss Larson. He sell it to me."

"Dan's sold out!" She gasped, jumping to her feet. "I don't believe it."

"It is true, Miss Larson. And now, please permit me to make offer of twelve thousand Australian pounds for your share."

Shelagh felt a surge of soul-searing bitterness against Dan. So that was why he had evaded her in Brisbane! He'd double-crossed her, deserted her, left her to fend for herself as best she could. Deep anger with Dan burnt inside her; he must have realized that she couldn't possibly work in partnership with Luigi.

Besides, she had to remember that the boys at the Concession would certainly be sacked by Luigi, who would bring in his own divers. She forced her fingers into the cold palms of her hands and looked at the Jap through half-closed eyes.

"Where's Dan?"

Luigi shrugged his shoulders, a smile on his lips as he seated himself at the table and produced a document and pen from his pocket.

"You sign, please."

"I'd require certain guarantees—full employment for the boys, Serango to remain foreman," she said decisively.

"I do not accept any conditions, Miss Larson," Luigi said softly, leaning over the table. "I pay a high price."

She met his gaze unflinchingly.

"Then I don't sell. That's final."

She turned from him and opened the door.

At that moment a scream of pain echoed through the ship.

Shelagh froze with horror. Luigi, smiling cynically, drew her back into the cabin and closed the door.

"You see, Miss Larson, you are in no position to refuse offer. That little scream came from the lips of Meester Vickery. Like you, he is my prisoner."

She felt suddenly faint.

"You see," Luigi explained, "my boys shanghai Meester Vickery in Brisbane. After a little persuasion on board he sign the agreement selling his share to me. Now he receive a little treatment to persuade you to sign. You sign now, please?"

She could only stare with horror, too shocked to reply. Dan a prisoner!

When she spoke her voice was brittle. "You sent me that note in Brisbane?"

"Correct, Miss Larson."

"You dirty scoundrel, Luigi! What's the game?"

"I want the Concession. I pay fair price."

"You'll go to prison for this."

Luigi laughed, slowly shook his head.

"I do not think so, Miss Larson. I know what I am doing. Listen!"

Another scream echoed down the corridor, sending shivers down her spine. Luigi's boys were probably using their bamboo canes on Dan's legs and back.

"And if I sign, you dirty little Nip?"

"Then I guarantee your safe passage with Meester Vickery anywhere you like."

Shelagh licked her lips. "I want to see Dan first alone."

Luigi looked thoughtful. Finally he nodded. "Okay, Miss Larson. You see him."

"Dan!"

Shelagh could hardly believe her eyes. Dan was lying on a bunk in an adjoining cabin. His shirt was torn to ribbons and his fair hair matted with blood. She ran to him, kneeling by the bunk.

"Dan!"

"Shelagh!" he gasped, clutching her hand. He glanced at the two Jap guards holding bamboo canes, dropped his voice to a hoarse whisper. "Listen! Don't sign! L—Luigi knows ab—about the new bed at the C—Concession."

"New bed?"

He nodded violently. "I discovered it three weeks ago. Worth—worth a fortune. If you s—sign, Luigi'll kill both of us."

Horror filled her. She felt a cold sweat on her forehead as the full implication of their situation struck her.

Dan's brown eyes closed, he swallowed hard. He turned his head to the wall, his hand tightening in hers.

"Hold out till—till . . ."

A shadow fell across the bunk. Luigi was back.

"Time, please, Miss Larson."

"Dan!" She buried her face on to the pillow, tears spilling on to her cheeks. Inwardly she cursed herself for her weakness in front of Luigi.

Faintly she heard Dan murmur: "Hold out till . . ."

Then his eyes closed as he sank into unconsciousness.

It was still dark when she found herself back in Luigi's cabin. What on earth had Dan tried to say? "Hold out till"—what? Till they got to the settlement?

Two thoughts pounded her brain again and again. New wealth had been discovered at the Concession and if she didn't sign Luigi would go on beating Dan—perhaps kill him.

Luigi motioned her to the chair by the table. She sat down, gazed through the porthole.

"How do I know you'll keep your promise and let Dan and me go free?" she snapped suddenly.

"You are a beautiful white woman, Miss Larson. I envy Meester Vickery —if you sign."

Dan might be tough, but he was only human. She'd got to hold out somehow, yet protect him from Luigi's boys.

"I'll sign when we get to the settlement."

"We are there; Now sign—or my guards start again on Meester Vick-

ery. Then, Miss Larson, he won't be worth marrying." His whole body heaved with mocking laughter.

For the first time she realized the ship's engines were silent. Outside the first streaks of dawn had appeared. Seconds ticked on. . . .

A scream came from Dan's cabin.

She shivered, her hands clenched beside her. She was at her wit's end. Without understanding the words she forced herself to read the agreement. Minutes ticked away. Luigi drew closer, a revolver in his hand.

"You sign now—or Meester Vickery die."

Her body as tense as taut wire she picked up the pen, glanced again through the porthole. The perimeter of the sun had risen dramatically in a blazing ball of fire over the horizon. There, in full view, was the settlement with its Residency.

Not seventy yards away from the *Katura Maru* some four canoes were tied to mooring buoys. She saw a native dive into the sea. Shelagh's pulse quickened. The canoes belonged to the Concession.

She dropped the pen, tore the agreement in half.

"No deal, Luigi! You're too late!" she cried hysterically.

Luigi's astonishment turned to incredulity as shouts suddenly sounded from the deck. Serango's voice!

"My divers are boarding you, Luigi."

Like some terrified rabbit the Jap scuttled from the cabin.

Shelagh went to the porthole. Serango and the boys must have swam underwater from the canoes and boarded the starboard deck. With shrieks of delight they were hurling the Jap crew into the harbour. Her heart racing, she dashed to Dan's cabin.

He was sitting up, his head buried in his hands. He swung his long, bruised legs over the bunk, then collapsed back on to the pillow.

"Dan! The boys are here—swarming all over the decks!" She was half-crying, half-laughing, with relief and pleasure. "But how?"

He smiled wanly as she sat on the edge of the bunk. He took her hands.

"Managed to drop a beer bottle through the porthole with a message for Serango," he explained. "The inshore currents along the coast are strong here. Thank God, they must've picked it up."

The door burst open and the tall sinewy figure of Serango appeared dripping water on the floor.

"All Japs in water, boss. We find bottle at Concession only twenty minutes since."

"Good man, Serango! And Luigi?"

"Him in sea, boss. Him no swim!" He turned down his thumbs. "Him had it!"

When Serango had gone, Dan put his arms round Shelagh and pulled her close to him.

"We'll get the priest at the settlement to marry us, you green-eyed darling. Give me a couple of days and I'll be there—without fail this time."

"You'd better be, Dan Vickery," she said, kissing his lips, "or I'll start the biggest showdown ever seen under Capricorn."

MEMBERS ONLY

L. P. DAVIES

Illustrated by R. N. McClements

I WOULD LIKE TO state, here and now, that he's one geezer I have the greatest respect for. He's one guy who really knows his job. I guess he must have had plenty of practice. A bunch of back-street hoodlums must have been small fry to him.

I'd never seen him before that night. I rolls up to the club earlier than usual, it being a special kind of night. I think that it would be a nice thing if we can get the joint looking really smart for the last time. So I decides to get there by seven so's I can give Nonnie a hand.

The door is locked so I give my usual knock. I wonder if Old Pete is feeling well enough to be on the job. He isn't. Instead, this guy wearing Pete's uniform opens up and fixes me with an eye like blue china and wants to know what my business is.

I know it's Pete's uniform because I recognize the patch on the sleeve and the place where the tarnished braid has come away. But it fits this geezer like it was made for him. Which means he is only a small guy.

He's got a lot of white hair like Pete but his face is not shrunken, being round and pink. I figure that he's not as old as our regular doorman. I figure nobody could be as old as that.

Old Pete has a face like a walnut that has had the shell took off and then been left out in the sun. He started life as a bell-boy and by all accounts he's been door-man at most of the posh hotels in the city.

Nonnie gave him the job because he felt sorry for him. Come on hard times, had Pete, him having no pension except for his Old Age and too proud to ask for Assistance. But more than anything else he wanted to get back in uniform again so that he could feel he was still useful.

Just a year ago it is when Nonnie and I pool our money and buy this joint down by the docks. We turn it into a night-spot and call it "Nonnie's Place"—me only owning a quarter-share. We fix it up real classy and I get Ellie to come and sing while I strum on the old Joanna.

Old Pete rolls up the second day. I'm with Nonnie in the little upstairs room we've turned into an office.

"A door-man?" Nonnie says. "Well, now—" Then he winks at me. "That's something we hadn't rightly thought about."

Pete stands in the middle of the floor and plays with his old faded cap. He's round-shouldered and his suit is way past its best.

"I heard tell it were going to be a club," he says. "You'll have to have a register. You'll need someone to see as only members are admitted."

It's cold outside and his nose has been running.

"I got a uniform," he says eagerly. "I done this kind of work before. I know what's needed."

Nonnie looks at me and I nod. "It would look good," I say. "But we couldn't pay much."

"I don't want much," says the old man. "I just wants to get back on the door again."

And then he starts in to tell us all about the doors he has kept at one time and another. I guess that he must be even older than he looks.

"I got plenty of experience," says he.

"There's some tough hombres in this part of the world," Nonnie says, thoughtful-like.

He's right at that. And in those days we haven't even heard of Garrett and his boys.

Old Pete tries to square his shoulders.

"I can handle them," he says confidently.

"Five?" Nonnie says and meets my eye. I nod. "Five a week."

Pete smiles. "When do I start?"

Right from the start he and Ellie get along like a house on fire. Within ten minutes she's ruffling his hair and calling him "Pop". She says it's sweet of us to take him on. She only hopes he don't run into trouble. I say I will keep my eye on him.

By rights, Ellie is a waitress and a good one too. She has black hair that rests on her shoulders and a mouth that some say is a bit on the big side. But that's the way I like mouths to be. And eyes.

We have a kind of arrangement. One day we're going to have a little café and I'm going to look after the tables while she does the cooking.

Her singing brings in a few extra quid each week, but at the rate we are going we figure it will take another ten years. Until Garrett comes along. And he doesn't make his appearance until we've got the club nicely on its feet and showing a little profit.

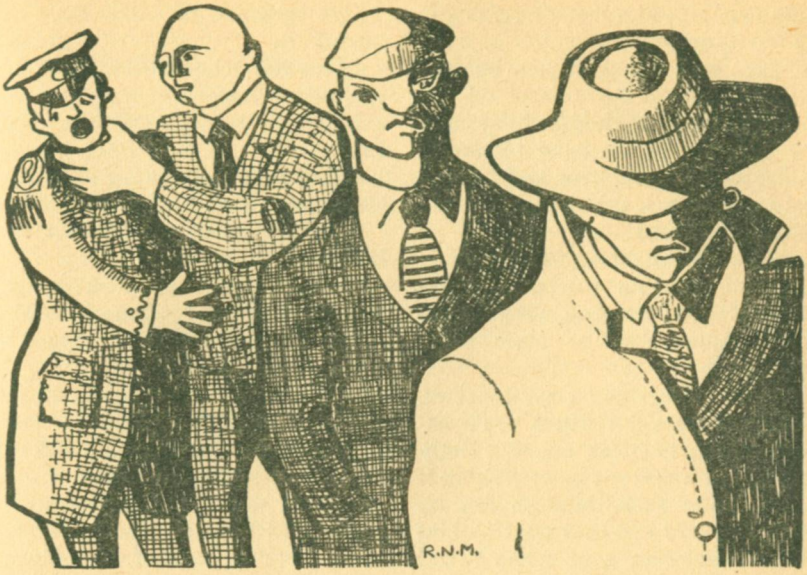
Not that it's easy, what with most of our regulars having little enough to spend. But we're the first club in the district and we give membership tickets and Old Pete wears his uniform and touches his cap to the regulars and calls them "sir".

And they like Ellie. Not that she has much of a voice but she looks good in the pink spotlight. Real class. Even if she does have only one evening gown.

Like I say, we're making a profit which is enough to live on and have a bit put away, and then Garrett comes along.

By this time we've heard of him. Seems he dabbles in most everything. So we are told. Protection rackets, blackmail. Even dope. And he owns a couple of pubs which he runs under another name and it looks like we might be treading on his toes.

I'm banging away and Ellie is waiting to sing and all at once the place goes quiet as the grave. I stop playing and look up. It's the first time I've seen Garrett but I guess right away who it is. He stands by the door with his hat pulled down over his face and from what I see of him the more of it



that is covered the better. It's long and white and he's sneering like there's a bad smell under his nose. There's two of his boys with him and one of them has Old Pete by the neck so that the old man is getting blue in the face.

"Who owns this dump?" Garrett asks. I don't like his voice, either.

Nonnie isn't there, being upstairs, so I go to see what I can do.

"I'm one of the owners," I say. "And tell your gorilla to take his hands off Pete."

Garrett grins wickedly. "He tried to stop me coming in. Nobody does that to me. You tell the old goat that if it happens again he'll really get hurt."

"What do you want?" I ask him.

"You heard me the first time," he snaps.

I take him up to the office. Ellie sits at the piano and strums to try and break the silence. I nod to her and smile, which isn't the way I'm feeling inside. There's this other gorilla following us and I can tell by the bulge that he's carrying something strapped under his arm. There's that much trouble you can smell it.

I'm expecting fireworks but it doesn't work out that way. Garrett talks quiet-like to Nonnie while his gorilla waits by the door and I sit on the window ledge.

"Got the joint real pretty," Garrett says.

Nonnie says it's decent of him to say so.

"All run legal and above-board?"

Nonnie tells him that everything is on the up-and-up.

"Let's have a look at your books," Garrett says.

Nonnie says: "What the hell?" and the gorilla slips his hand inside his jacket and Garrett grins and Nonnie sighs and opens the drawer to take out the cash book.

Garrett flicks through the pages.

"Coming along nicely," he approves. "Slow, but sure. I'll give you five hundred for the place as it stands."

"No," Nonnie and I say together.

This is the point where you'd expect trouble to break out. But nothing happens. Garrett says: "Think it over; I'll be back," and gathers up his bodyguard and they go. I look at Nonnie and he's gone white round the edges.

"I don't get it," he says. "And I don't like it. Not one little bit."

Then Old Pete comes in with his cap in his hands. He's really upset.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Nolan." He looks at me. "Mr. Poulter. I tried to keep them out."

It looks like he's ready to burst into tears.

Nonnie puts his arm round his shoulders.

"Not your fault, Pete," he tells him. "It would have taken a battalion of infantry to have kept them out."

Which is overdoing things but cheers the old man up.

"They took me by surprise," he says. "I'll be ready for them next time." He tries to throw his shoulders back and look fierce. He's a little guy who wants to make good in his job.

I go back and take over the piano from Ellie.

"Trouble?" she wants to know, her eyes all anxious.

I try to sound confident. "Not really. . . ."

Pete comes past on his way back to the door. He's fingering his throat.

"Did they hurt you?" Ellie asks him.

"Some," he says and coughs. There's a couple of purple bruises where the gorilla must've gripped his throat.

"I'd like to get my hands on that big lug," she says through her teeth.

By the end of the evening Old Pete is looking really off-colour. I don't expect to see him next day but he rolls up as large as life with a scarf tucked in the neck of his uniform. He can't speak all that clear. Ellie tells him that he ought to see a doctor but he says he's all right.

It's the next day again when Garrett comes back. Only this time he pays his fee and signs the members' book as quiet as you please. Which gets me more worried than if he'd forced his way in. He wants to know if he can talk to Nonnie and me in private.

I take him to the office and Nonnie sits at the desk and I go to the window to see if there's anything doing in the street below. It looks like Garrett has come alone.

He says: "I been thinking about the place you got here. I'll give you five thousand for it."

Which same offer left me gasping and dividing by four and then turn-

ing my share into glass shelves and little tables and Ellie turning out fairy cakes by the dozen.

Nonnie recovers first. He looks at me and I nod. He says, "Done," and then, quickly, "No strings and no cheque. Hard cash."

Garrett grins at that. He's got black teeth and a thin line of moustache that makes his smile real wicked.

"I figured you'd be like that," he says. "Nobody seems to trust me." He brings an envelope out of his pocket.

"I figured you'd accept the offer. I got a contract here all drawn up nice and legal. I give you five. In cash. You hand over the business as a working concern. It's Wednesday today. How about Saturday?" He takes out a fountain-pen.

"We usually close at midnight," Nonnie says automatically.

"Saturday, midnight," Garrett says, writing. Then he pushes the papers towards Nonnie. "No need to sign it now. You'll want to look this over. I'll drop in tomorrow."

All very cosy and pleasant. All nice and friendly.

"Be seeing you," Garrett says.

When he's gone I say: "I don't like it. It stinks."

Nonnie puzzles over the contract. "It looks all right. . . ."

"It doesn't make sense," I ponder. "He must know something that we don't . . . I'm not at all happy."

"Developments?" Nonnie wonders. "Maybe they're going to tidy the district up. Maybe they're going to build flats and things. Maybe this property is going to be worth more than five thousand."

"I'll have a word with Hanson," I tell him. Hanson is the lawyer who saw to things when we bought the place.

"Let him have a look at this at the same time," Nonnie says, giving me the contract.

The next morning I go to see Hanson.

"I know everything that is going on round here," he tells me. "It pays to keep an eye on things. Nothing is going to happen in this part of the world."

Then I show him the contract.

"Simple and straightforward," he decides. "Legal and binding. What it boils down to is this: once you and your partner have signed it you have to hand over the deeds of your place, all the fittings and fixtures in good condition and all the books, at midnight on Saturday. And you get five thousand in cash. You've got yourself a bargain. That'll be a guinea."

So Nonnie and I sign the contract. Garrett rolls up later in the day, puts his name to it, takes a copy and goes. Almost without a word being spoken. And I still get the feeling that something's wrong.

"Well?" Ellie asks.

"On Sunday," I tell her with more confidence than I'm feeling, "we start looking for our café."

"I can hardly believe it," she says dreamily.

And neither can I. It's all too good to be true. Garrett's got something up his sleeve and I don't know what it is.

On Friday I do a spot of snooping to see if any of our regulars have

heard anything. But nothing comes to light. Old Pete rolls up to work as usual but by the evening he's looking very dicey. Nonnie says he ought to be home in bed. We haven't told the old man about our selling the club. We decide to give him a bonus and find him another job somewhere.

He sticks on the door till about nine and then has to pack up. He tells us that his throat is much worse, that he thinks he's got a cold into the bargain and he's going to call in at a pub on his way home and buy himself a whisky. He says he will be all right for the next day.

But he isn't. I roll up early and there's this other old geezer all togged up in Pete's uniform. Nonnie has to vouch for me before he'll let me over the step. It seems that he's a pal of Pete's and standing in for him for the time being. When Ellie arrives she has the same trouble getting in. And Lofty the barman. Real hot stuff is this little guy with the white hair and a face like a cherub.

Nonnie and Ellie and I get together in the office.

"I been thinking," Nonnie says. "There's this clause in the contract that says we have to hand over all the fittings intact. D'you reckon he might send some of his boys along to smash the place up before midnight?"

I see what he's driving at and I try to reason it out.

"He could've done that before. He could've smashed the place up as many times as he liked so that in the end we would have to have sold at any price he liked to name."

"The more I think about it," he says miserably, "the more it stinks. And yet it's too good an offer to let slip."

I look at my watch. "We'll soon know. One way or another."

Ellie takes my arm. "I do hope everything will be all right."

At half past eleven Nonnie has Lofty take a bottle and some glasses to the office. Ten minutes later Garrett rolls up grinning all over his face. At ten to twelve I get Lofty to clear the place of customers and I go to the old boy on the door and tell him he can pack up for the night. I thank him and tell him I'll make things right for him through Pete. He says that Pete has told him that twelve-thirty is knocking-off time and if it's all the same to me he's going to make a proper job and stay till the end.

"You're used to door-keeping?" I ask, just to be polite.

"Bless you, yes, sir," he comes back, smiling. "You might say it's the only work I've ever done."

I pick up Ellie and we go together to the office. Garrett has a brief-case and he spills its contents on the desk. I count it and it's all in fivers. Twenty to a bundle, fifty bundles.

"Five thousand," I tell Nonnie.

It's five to twelve. Garrett looks at his watch and yawns.

Nonnie signs the completion agreement and I put my name under his. Then he gives the deeds to Garrett who stuffs them in his pocket without looking at them. I put the money in the only drawer of the desk that has a key.

Then Garrett comes to his feet and goes to the window which is open, it

being a warm night. He leans out and gives a low whistle. I'm at his side like a shot and it looks like the street has suddenly become full. There's dark shapes coming out of every alley and doorway and all making for the front of the club. I figure there's at least twenty but it turns out later there was only nine.

Then it strikes midnight.

Garrett says: "It looks like there are some real bad types coming to be my first customers. I wouldn't like to say what tricks they'll get up to. I wouldn't be surprised if they hadn't got to hear of that money of yours. Mind, I'll do my best to stop any monkey-business but there's more of them than I'd care to tackle. Perhaps it would be best for all concerned if you were just to hand the money over now. I mean, we don't want anyone to get hurt.

"The trouble is," he adds, "when the police come I won't be able to remember just who these guys were who took your money."

So that's how it goes. Nothing subtle. Garrett is the owner of the place with the deeds to prove it. All he's got to do is take his money back. And we'd never be able to prove it was one of his gorillas who took it. He's got the place for nothing.

Then I hear a scuffle from downstairs and I remember the old geezer at the door, all by himself. I think of all the shadows that are moving in on him and I race out of the room and down the stairs. There's not much I can do. I only hope they haven't hurt the old boy before I get there.

I don't see the start of it. When I get to the door there's one of the gorillas nursing his arm and leaning against the wall and swearing. Another is lying across the steps with blood on his face where he's come up against something hard. There's two of them coming up the steps together and I can see that one of them has a gun.

The old geezer asks politely, "Are you members?" and when they take no notice but just keep coming he reaches out and bangs their heads together as if he had been doing it all his life.

I see the flash of the gun and hear the shot and I duck as the plaster smashes just above my head. I wonder how the shot came to miss at such short range.

It's all over in a couple of minutes and the last of them belting hell-for-leather round the corner and out of sight. And there's five bodies scattered about and three of them aren't moving.

"Well," I gasp. "I've never seen anything like that before."

The old boy is modest. "I'm used to it," says he. "Nobody what hasn't the right ever gets past me. Not ever."

We escort Garrett to the door and see him on his way. Nonnie and I share out the money and I take Ellie's arm and we go to the door. The old geezer has got a dirty brown mac over his uniform and he's standing under the light and smiling.

"Be seeing you," he says and turns and goes. And we never see him again.

And that's how Ellie and I come to have our little café. It's at the

other side of town and it's real smart and sometimes Nonnie takes time off from the pub he bought to drop in for a cup of tea.

I figure we're the only café in town that has a doorman. Real smart Old Pete looks in the new uniform we got for him. He lives with us in the flat upstairs and he's handy about the house.

I ask him once about the geezer that stood in for him that night. Pete says that he met him on his way home that Friday night when he was feeling off colour and worrying about not being able to carry on with his work.

"Seemed like he knew me," he says thoughtfully. "Just like we was old friends. Seemed to know everything that was going on. He said his name was Peter."

"Peter what?" I ask.

"Just Peter," he says. "That's all he was called. And he was in the same line of business as me. Only he'd been at it much longer."

And then I remember how the old boy stood smiling on the pavement that last time we see him. And he's under the light and maybe it isn't the reflection on his white hair that makes it look like there's a circle of gold round his head.

"Be seeing you—" he tells us.

I wonder who was standing in for him while he was looking after the door of the club. A sleazy club down by the docks.

"A decent chap," Pete says. "He comes to say goodbye to me and won't take a penny for what he's done. He says he'll meet me again one day. Seemed real sure of it. I wonder if we will see each other again?"

"I'm sure you will," I tell him.

SHADOW OF DOUBT

CECIL F. S. HILL

Illustrated by S. J. Bullimore

THAT SUMMER I happened to be spending a holiday on a cycling tour of France, and one evening, after a hard day's riding, I arrived in the small market town of St. Henetienne, in the Loire district.

I felt tired, hungry and thirsty, and I decided to look around for a meal and a place to stay for the night. For its size, St. Henetienne seemed to be fairly littered with cafés, bars and small hotels.

The trouble was that every place I looked into was crowded. The whole town had the air of being *en fête* and every bar and café was filled with people drinking and chattering excitedly in the inimitable French fashion. Noisy, jostling groups paraded the streets, evidently bent on celebrating something or the other. It seemed to be quite an occasion.

But eventually, after a lot of wandering and searching, I found a place where I could stay. It was a small bar on the outskirts of the town, but it was quiet and it offered a bath, and that was really something. Furthermore, the landlord, who was a red-faced, amiable fellow, spoke quite good English. Later, after a good meal and a bottle of wine, we had a chat over our drinks.

I was still curious about the atmosphere of festivity in the town and I asked the landlord what all the excitement was about. He seemed surprised.

"You do not know?" His jovial features puckered up in a puzzled frown. Then he nodded understandingly. "Ah, of course. You do not read the French newspapers, eh?" He smiled. "Why it is the monster of St. Henetienne, my friend. Tomorrow is his third day at court. A verdict is expected then. He will die, that one." He nodded his head with ponderous certainty. "My son is a member of the jury," he added, drawing himself up with an air of importance.

He went on to explain. During the past two years four women had disappeared from the district in most suspicious circumstances. Each in turn had gone to work as housekeeper to a local farmer named Barbelin. After working a few weeks at the farm the women had disappeared one after the other and had never been seen or heard of again.

At last these mysterious comings and goings began to attract local attention and people talked. Rumours started to spread. Relatives of the missing women turned up at the farm and demanded explanations. Barbelin's answers to all these inquiries had been short and to the point.

Each of them, he said, had left his house without reason or warning. On

each occasion they had left without his knowledge, taking their belongings with them. No messages had been left and they had given no indication of where they were going.

But there was no evidence to support the farmer's statement. No one had seen any of the women leave the farm and no one answering their descriptions had taken a train or bus from St. Henetienne on the mornings of the days in question. Certainly a woman carrying her belongings through the town would hardly have passed unnoticed

When he was asked why he had not reported these strange disappearances, Barbelin had merely shrugged his shoulders and disclaimed all responsibility. If they chose to leave him like that it was their own affair. He was entirely indifferent regarding their present whereabouts.

Tongues began to wag furiously after that and certain people recalled seeing mysterious fires burning on Barbelin's farm after dark, just about the time of each disappearance. Each of these fires had been noticed particularly because of their vile stench . . . very like the smell of burning flesh.

The next day, following the intensive operation of an extremely efficient grinding machine, Barbelin had been observed digging up certain parts of his land.

Suspicion against Barbelin became so strong that the police were forced to act. They questioned the farmer several times and always received the same answers. The women had left him, that was all he knew. What had become of them or where they had gone he neither knew nor cared.

The police were not satisfied with his answers, but with no evidence of an incriminating nature to go on there was little they could do. However, they watched Barbelin's movements closely, hoping he would make the one false move which would enable them to bring a charge against him.

At last their chance came. When the farmer was reported to have sold some pieces of jewellery which were identified as the property of Madame Bovene, the first of his unfortunate housekeepers, the police pounced. Barbelin was taken in for questioning.

"Ah! He is a fox, that one!" The landlord grimaced and spat expertly into a convenient cuspidor at his feet. "The jewellery, he told the police, had been given to him as security for a sum of money he had lent to Madame Bovene. Can you imagine the cunning of that, m'sieur?"

Naturally, the police did not believe his story. Barbelin could produce nothing to support his claim to the jewellery and he was held in custody. The police now had the opportunity to investigate the matter of the missing women. An order was given to search the farm.

The house was searched thoroughly from top to bottom, but the searchers found nothing to suggest that murder had been committed within those walls. The outhouses and barns were also searched, and here again the police drew blank. Particular atten-

tion was paid to the big grinding machine, which witnesses had said they had seen working diligently after each disappearance. But the great rollers, capable of crushing the bones of an ox, were white and clean.

Digging operations were started at several points on Barbelin's land, and this went on for two days, with no better results. The upturned earth revealed nothing to justify the suspicions that any human remains had ever been buried there. Certain samples of the soil were collected for examination and, straightening their aching backs, the police prepared to leave.

Then, when their equipment was loaded on the truck, the vital discovery was made. One of the men, idly kicking the loose soil a few yards from the grinding machine, stooped to peer down at something lying at his feet. He picked it up, and no doubt a little proud of his find, took it to his chief. The inspector smiled, wrapped the object carefully in his handkerchief, and put it away in his pocket.

And so with no more than an upper denture plate as a reward for their labours, the police went back to town.

"But it was the beginning of the end for that butcher," the landlord said with a wide grin. "As you may have guessed, m'sieur, the teeth were not those of Barbelin. Like the monster that he is, that one has perfectly good teeth of his own."

"The denture belonged to one of

the missing women?" I asked, and at once felt a trifle foolish.

"But of course. Who else?" The landlord's tongue clicked with impatience. "Naturally, it was only a matter of time. Now it has been established beyond all doubt that the teeth were those of Madame Bovene."

It was a strange story and one which to my mind seemed to hold a large element of doubt. The case against Barbelin appeared to be based solely on circumstantial evidence, which consisted mainly of local rumours, a few pieces of jewellery and a woman's upper denture plate. Nothing had been found which pointed directly to the crime of murder. Here was a man accused of killing four women who might still be alive and well.

"You think then that Barbelin will be convicted on such evidence?" I asked doubtfully.

The landlord met my question with a short laugh of contempt. The expression on his face seemed to suggest that he had not heard me aright.

"But certainly, m'sieur," he said at last, his tone sharply decisive. "Barbelin is guilty of killing these women and he will pay for his crime. Tomorrow you will see."

There was a strange sense of curiosity about the case which could not be resisted. I felt a compelling desire to see the closing stages of the trial the next day. I wanted to see this man Barbelin in court. I asked the landlord if this would be possible.

"The court has been crowded every day. It will be difficult." The landlord looked thoughtful. "However, it might be arranged. I have some influence here. I will do my best."

My friend was as good as his word. It *was* arranged, by the aid of a little monetary persuasion, and the following morning I sat beside him in the public gallery. The part of the court reserved for the public was filled to capacity. It was plain to see that the case had aroused intense interest. Men and women whispered together in an atmosphere of hushed expectancy, waiting eagerly for the accused man to enter the court.

Presently, in a few moments of dramatic silence, Barbelin appeared between two warders and took his place in the dock. The jury filed in, the judge entered and took his seat. Counsel busied themselves with their papers. The final stage of the trial was about to begin.

It had been explained to me by my friend the landlord that the case for the prosecution had been concluded the previous day. It now remained only for the counsel for the defence to make his plea for the prisoner. While the opening formalities were being concluded I took the opportunity to study this man accused of the murder of four women.

He was a big, brutish-looking fellow, and his wide shoulders and thick neck gave the impression of great strength. His black eyes, set close together in his bearded face, gave him an appearance of malicious cunning which certainly fitted the nature of the crime of which he was accused. He looked constantly about him with an air of contempt, and now and then a mocking smile flickered in his

eyes. He was evidently very much at his ease and apparently confident that the verdict of the jury would go in his favour.

The counsel for the defence gathered his papers together and rose to his feet. He was a short, sharp-featured man who moved with quick, bird-like movements. He seemed in no way perturbed by the task before him, and he smiled easily at the jury as he turned to deliver his address. He spoke in a clear, confident voice, using his hands in gestures frequently to emphasize some particular point and striking dramatic attitudes at times when he wished to impress the jury.

I understand very little French and so had to rely on whispered explanations from the landlord at my side. It appeared that the main hope of the defence lay in casting a conflicting shadow of doubt over the minds of the jury.

What was the significance of those mysterious fires, the defence asked. Surely it was well known that every farmer had occasion at some time or another to burn refuse on his farm, which of necessity was not always of a pleasant odour. The grinding machine had been used for its sole purpose, that of crushing animal bones and other material for fertilizer.

An upper denture, said by the prosecution to belong to Madame Bovene, had been found. But it had since been established that the denture was ill-fitting and loose, and that the woman had dropped and mislaid it on several occasions. Madame Bovene had been observed working near the grinding machine more than once. Was it not possible that in her carelessness she had herself lost the denture there?

No bodies had been found; there was not a shred of evidence that any human remains had been buried on the farm. There were no signs in the house or anywhere on the farm to suggest that a crime had been committed there.

Yet the prosecution alleged that Barbelin had murdered these women. And for what purpose? With what motive? Barbelin was a man of property, prosperous, a man of substantial means. Was it conceivable that such a man would give employment and shelter to these women . . . these women whose only possessions of any material value were a few pieces of cheap jewellery, in order to murder them and secretly dispose of their remains?

Was it not possible, the defence demanded, that a grave misjustice had been done to this man in bringing him to trial? One could not escape the terrible shadow of doubt which hung over the court. Who could say with absolute conviction that these four women were not even now alive and in excellent health, and that for reasons best known to themselves had failed to reveal their existence?

"He is one of the best lawyers in France," the landlord whispered. "And as full of tricks as a cart load of monkeys. But it will take more than tricks to get Barbelin off."

It seemed at that moment that the

counsel for the defence had reached the end of his speech. But suddenly, stepping quickly in front of the jury, his voice rang out again in an impassioned flow of words. He raised his right hand and pointed with a dramatic gesture to the door at the rear of the court. Every head turned, all eyes followed the direction of his pointing finger.

As though answering his command, the door opened and a woman dressed in black and heavily veiled walked slowly down the aisle. Reaching counsel's table she paused, and in a silence that could almost be felt, she raised her veil briefly. In the intensity of that silence a paper fluttering from the lawyer's table seemed to hit the floor with the impact of a brick.

Slowly the woman turned, and followed by the eyes of all those who watched her, she retraced her steps to the door.

"That was not one of the missing women," the landlord whispered as the judge started to address the jury. "It was merely a trick. As I told you, he is a clever one, that lawyer."

"All the same," I ventured, "I think he made a big impression on the jury. I have a feeling that your monster will be at large again tomorrow."

"We shall see." My friend's tone was one of snappy disbelief. "We shall see." But I thought I detected a trace of doubt in the look he gave me.

The judge finished his directions to the jury and they rose to their feet. As they filed out slowly, each face wearing an expression of grave perplexity, I prepared myself for a long wait. The verdict, I felt, whichever way it went, would not be arrived at easily.

There was no doubt that the dramatic production of the woman in black by the defence had shaken the court. Its impact had been felt in the breathless silence as the woman lifted the veil and bared her face. One question and one question only must have dominated the minds of all who watched her at that moment. Whose face would be uncovered by the lifting of that veil?

The moment had passed. The question had been answered, but the shadow of doubt had darkened. It was still there, casting its gloom of uncertainty over the crowded courtroom. It could plainly be seen in the ravelled faces, the urgent whisperings, the slowly shaking heads.

I glanced towards the empty dock. Only there, it seemed, had the shadow failed to reach.

An elbow nudged my side and I turned. "They are coming back," the landlord whispered.

I glanced at my watch in surprise. The jury had been out barely ten minutes. Now, as they moved quickly into their places, the shadow of doubt lifted. Each face bore the unmistakable look of unanimous decision.

Barbelin, almost dwarfing the warders on each side of him, stepped briskly into the dock. Turning to face the court, he acknowledged the staring faces with a sardonic smile and an impudent wave of his hand.

The judge entered and the stir in

the courtroom ceased. In silence the clerk of the court rose and faced the jury. The question was put, and at once the foreman stood up, his body erect, his manner confident. In a clear, ringing voice he announced the verdict.

"Guilty."

* * *

It was not until I met the landlord's son at his house that evening that I was able to ask the question which had been uppermost in my mind all day.

"What made you reach a verdict so quickly?" I asked. "With so much doubt in the case I expected you to take much longer."

The landlord's son smiled. "There was no doubt, m'sieur," he said. "It was really very simple. That trick with the woman gave us the answer we needed. It sealed Barbelin's fate. You see, m'sieur, when she walked into court another juryman and myself watched the farmer. Every head turned except his. It was clear enough then. He did not bother to look, because he *knew* that not one of those women would walk again. He had killed them."

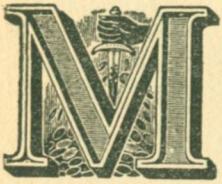
Barbelin's guilt was confirmed by his own mouth a few days before his execution, when he confessed to the murder of his four housekeepers. He had burnt their bodies, crushed their bones to dust and dug in the remains over various parts of his land.

Why did he kill them? *Je ne sais quoi*, as they say in France.

THE TRAGIC BRIDEGROOM

AUSTIN LEE

Illustrated by Buster



ISS FAWCETT, retired from teaching at the age of sixty, was almost a period piece. As you contemplated her, you found your eye straying over her neat black dress to look for bugles, and her hands, as she crotcheted industriously, seemed designed for mittens. But her eye, if you happened to catch it, flashed a signal which warned you not to underestimate the intelligence of Miss Fawcett.

She was sitting in the lounge of the Royal Bay Hotel at Clinton-on-Sea one afternoon towards the end of October. She preferred nowadays to take her holiday out of the season, as she called it, when the cold gusts coming from the North Sea and the shortening days had driven away all the trippers. She referred, when chatting with the manageress, to the North winds as bracing.

There were very few other people in the hotel, but it was warm and comfortable, and there was a certain pleasure to be derived from observing the pools of water on the promenade, wrinkled every now and then by the wind, from the secure vantage point of the Royal Bay Hotel's bow window.

Miss Fawcett was no misanthropist. She just did not care for people in the mass, and one of the greatest pleasures of retirement had been that she was able to take a holiday when the great majority of her fellows were back at work. So when a lady about her own age appeared at the door of the lounge and peered a little short-sightedly around her, she waved a hand to the chair opposite her own and called out in her gruff, good-natured voice:

"Come and talk to an old woman."

"Old," said the other, accepting her invitation. "Why, you're no older than I am. And do you know," she added, flopping into the chair opposite Miss Fawcett, and extracting some knitting from a very large bag she was carrying. "I'm on my honeymoon."

"Indeed," said Miss Fawcett. "How interesting."

The other was simpering so idiotically that Miss Fawcett only with difficulty restrained herself from leaning forward and giving her a slap.

"Of course I'd been married before, but he died five years ago. Men just can't stand the pace today, can they?"

"The weaker sex," Miss Fawcett agreed. "I've always understood it's harder to rear a boy than a girl, and women nearly always seem to outlive their husbands."

"That's just what Henry said." She

simpered again. "My name's Harland, by the way. It's difficult changing your name when you've been called Mrs. Mooney for nearly forty years."

Miss Fawcett acknowledged the introduction by disclosing her own name.

"It was a whirlwind romance," Mrs. Harland went on. "I can hardly believe that up to a month ago I'd never set eyes on Henry. We met at a Bingo session in the town hall. It was for charity," she hastened to assure Miss Fawcett, whose lips had pursed a little at the word Bingo. "For the British Honduras Hurricane Relief Fund."

"I've never played the game," said Miss Fawcett. "But I believe it is based on the same principles as Lotto, a game we had in the nursery when I was a child, though I don't remember ever playing it."

"I've never won anything," said Mrs. Harland, as if this exonerated her from any incipient moral contamination. "Henry was in the next seat to me. Ever so attentive he was. And when it was over, we had tea at the 'Copper Kettle'. And the very next day he called with some flowers."

Miss Fawcett was exploring for a thread which had gone astray.

"Men need someone to look after them," she said.

"But Henry is so thoughtful. You were saying only a minute ago how wives always seem to outlive their husbands. 'We must put everything in order,' he said, the very day we were married. 'I must make a will in your favour.' And we went straight away to a solicitor, and the wills were drawn up there and then."

"Wills?" queried Miss Fawcett. She felt it would be unkind to point out to Mrs. Harland that if a married man died intestate his widow would be legally entitled to the bulk of his estate.

"We both made them," said Mrs. Harland. "Bequeathing everything to the other in the event of death."

Just like brides-in-the-bath Smith, Miss Fawcett reflected. What fools some women were.

"And Henry is so sweet, and so deeply religious. He asked me if I'd mind if he left a hundred pounds to the N.S.P.C.C. He said he hadn't had a very happy childhood, and he'd always wanted to do something for the kiddies. 'It won't keep you short,' he said. Actually my first husband left me very comfortably off. He had a high class drapery store in Swansea, and apart from the money he left, I got a very good price for it when he died."

They were interrupted by the arrival of a rather common looking little man, with a smooth pink face, black hair and a black waxed moustache.

"Henry, dear," said Mrs. Harland, "this is Miss Fawcett."

"You chumming up with the little woman?" asked Mr. Harland, extending a damp hand. He gave a wink at Miss Fawcett. "You wouldn't think she'd have eyes for anyone but her husband the first day of her honeymoon, would you?"

Miss Fawcett barely repressed a shudder.

She excused herself a few moments later, and went out to scan the notices

in the hall. She was not an ardent cinema-goer—she referred to the cinema as "the pictures"—but there just might be something she would like to see. There wasn't, and she went up to her room to write a letter.

At dinner she only saw the Harlands in a distant corner. They had on their table, she noticed, a bottle of champagne in an ice bucket. Perhaps it was this which made the waiter so attentive, or perhaps it was because he had heard they were on their honeymoon. Miss Fawcett was glad to be abandoned to the ministrations of the elderly waitress.

At nine o'clock Miss Fawcett went to bed with a book. There was a beautiful moon rising above the sea, and she stepped out of the french window on to the balcony for a moment to gaze at the silvery track it made across the sea. But it was not warm enough to linger. She read for half an hour, then switched off her bed-light, and was almost instantly asleep.

She was awakened by confused noises in the corridor, and shouting from below in the street. Turning on the light, she saw from her watch that there was still more than an hour to go to midnight. Far away a woman's voice began screaming.

Irritated and a little apprehensive, she got out of bed, put on her old woollen dressing-gown, which was quite thirty years old, and went to the door. Putting her head out she was surprised to see a policeman. Behind him was Mr. Harland, still fully dressed, and behind him again the night porter.

"Is the place on fire?" asked Miss Fawcett.

The policeman came down the corridor towards her.

"Did you hear any noise, ma'am?" he asked.

"I heard you all rushing about," said Miss Fawcett rather crossly. "It's what woke me up. And a woman seems to be having hysterics downstairs."

"It's one of the waitresses," said the policeman stolidly. "A lady has fallen off one of the balconies."

"Not Mrs. Harland?"

"Did you know the lady?"

"I met her for the first time between tea and dinner today," said Miss Fawcett. "Is she badly hurt?"

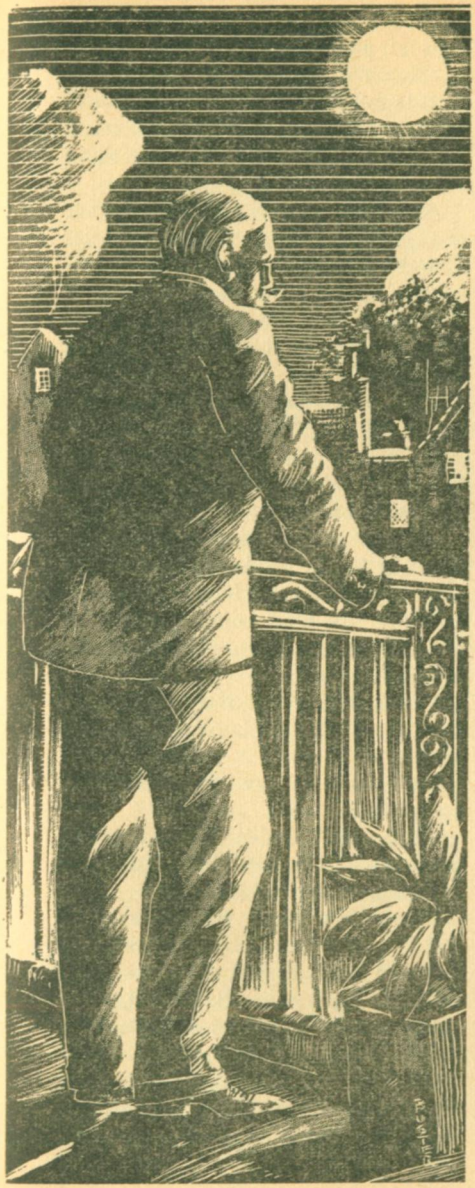
"She's dead," said the policeman. "The inspector would like to have a word with you in a few minutes."

But there was nothing very much Miss Fawcett could tell him. She was interviewed in a small lounge which contained a television set, and which she had not previously entered.

Mrs. Harland, according to her husband, had insisted on having champagne at dinner to celebrate the first day of their honeymoon, although she was not, he said, accustomed to it. Miss Fawcett acknowledged she had seen the champagne on the table, but was unable to say what effect, if any, it had had on Mrs. Harland.

"They were still at table when I left the dining-room," she said. "I did not see them again before I retired to bed."

According to Mr. Harland, his wife had exclaimed at the beauty of the



moon when they had gone up to bed. For some reason the curtains had not been drawn. The chambermaid asserted that she had certainly drawn them when she had turned down the bed during the dinner hour, but it was a point the inspector did not feel it necessary to pursue. Mrs. Harland had opened the window and stepped out on to the balcony. A moment later her husband had heard her cry out, but he had got to the window too late to see her fall. It appeared she must have been overcome by the cold air, had staggered against the balcony railing, which was rather low, and fallen to the street, some twenty feet below. She had sustained multiple injuries, and must have died almost instantly.

The inquest was held the following afternoon. Miss Fawcett was not required to attend, but she carefully read the account in the local paper. The verdict had been accidental death, and Mr. Harland had received the condolences of the Coroner. His portrait, looking suitably lugubrious, was captioned "The Tragic Bridegroom". Miss Fawcett cut the whole column out with her nail scissors, and folded it away in her handbag. She did not see him again, at least for a considerable time.

It was, in fact, just after Whitsuntide the following year. The Whitsun visitors had gone, and the summer holiday rush was still a good month away. Miss Fawcett went for a week-end to the Grand Hotel at Lymchurch on the Kent coast. It was very like the Royal Bay at Clinton, except that whereas the latter had faced south-

east across the North Sea, the Grand faced due south across the Channel.

From the beginning it was like a remembered nightmare.

Miss Fawcett arrived in the late afternoon, having had tea on the train. She was shown to her room, which was on the second floor and had a balcony, though she did not remark on this at the time. She unpacked her things, secured her crotcheting, and went down to the lounge.

There was only one difference from her experience at the Royal Bay Hotel. It was she who opened, just a little uncertainly, the door of the lounge, and a comfortable-looking middle-aged woman sitting in one of the windows who gave her a welcome.

"I'm Mrs. Fisher," she said, as Miss Fawcett accepted the invitation to come and sit by her. Miss Fawcett bowed, and murmured her own name. "And you may find it hard to believe, but I'm on my honeymoon."

"Oh, dear," said Miss Fawcett. Mrs. Fisher did not appear to have heard.

"I'd been a widow for over three years," Mrs. Fisher went on, beaming at Miss Fawcett through her gold-rimmed spectacles. "And I'd quite made up my mind to remain one until the end of the chapter. It's nice to have a man about the house for some things," she added, "but there's also something to be said for having nobody to please but yourself. And then I went to a concert in the Worksop town hall, not a month ago, in aid of the Tristan da Cunha relief fund, and I met my fate. His name is Henry, and he's one of nature's gentlemen."

"Did you say Henry?" Miss Fawcett asked faintly.

"Henry Fisher. He was sitting right next to me. We went to the 'Blue Bird' café for a cup of tea after the concert, and the next day he called with some lovely flowers."

At this moment Mrs. Fisher dropped her ball of wool, so that Miss Fawcett was able to recover her composure as she retrieved it for her, or she might have said something foolish. As it was she regained her seat in silence.

"We were married by licence this very morning," said Mrs. Fisher. "And you've no idea how kind and thoughtful Henry is. As soon as we were married he insisted on going to a solicitor and making a will in my favour. As he said, women nearly always outlive their husbands."

"And you made one, too?" Miss Fawcett knew the answer before she asked.

"Well, it was only right, wasn't it? Besides, my first husband left me very comfortably off. He was an undertaker, with a very good class of business."

"Tell me," said Miss Fawcett earnestly. "Did your husband leave anything to the N.S.P.C.C.?"

"Now, it's funny you should ask that," said Mrs. Fisher, beaming at Miss Fawcett as if it were the most natural inquiry in the world. "He asked me if I would mind his leaving a hundred pounds to the S.P.G.—the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, you know. He said he always felt we didn't do enough for missions."

It was at this moment that Mr. Fisher came into the lounge.

"This is Henry," said Mrs. Fisher. It was the man Miss Fawcett had known less than a year before as Mr. Harland. She gave a distant bow.

In her handbag she still had the cutting she had tucked into one of the pockets at Clinton-on-Sea. She remembered waking up, the noises in the corridor, the sound of a woman screaming. What was she to do?

Mr. Fisher had shown no sign of recognizing her. He told his wife that he was going out to get some cigarettes, as the hotel was out of the brand he liked, and then he left them.

Miss Fawcett extracted the newspaper cutting from her handbag, as Mrs. Fisher went on telling her of Henry's kindness and thought for others. And then when Mrs. Fisher inevitably dropped her ball of wool, Miss Fawcett stooped down and pushed it into the outside pocket of Mrs. Fisher's bag, which was at the side of her chair. She left just half an inch showing.

"Oh, thank you so much," said Mrs. Fisher, as Miss Fawcett retrieved the ball of wool. "I'm getting too fat." She gave a jolly laugh. "Things just won't stop on my knee."

Miss Fawcett got a little unsteadily to her feet.

"I think I shall go to the pictures," she said.

"You look a bit peaky," said Mrs. Fisher solicitously. "I should have a lie down, and I'll bring you some aspirin."

"Oh, no," said Miss Fawcett. "No thank you. I'm quite all right."

But in the end she did go and lie on her bed, and, not being able to face the dining-room, she got the chambermaid to bring her up some soup and toast.

Had she done enough? That was the problem which was exercising her. Mrs. Fisher might not find the cutting for days if, thought Miss Fawcett fearfully, she lived so long. And yet, what more could she do?

Her room had a balcony looking out across the sea front, sickeningly like the balcony from which she had viewed the rising moon at the Royal Bay Hotel. Only this time there was no moon. She did not open the window, but gazed for a time at the curving line of lights which marked the promenade. Then, quite early, she went to bed. She found herself wondering whether Mr. and Mrs. Fisher were celebrating their honeymoon by having a bottle of champagne.

The sea air had made her sleepy. She read for half an hour, then turned out the light, and almost immediately was asleep.

An hour later she woke suddenly. The nightmare had her in its grip. She heard a scurrying in the corridor, a sound of agitated voices and, far away, a woman screaming hysterically.

"Oh no!" exclaimed Miss Fawcett, and jumped out of bed. She wrapped her old dressing-gown around her, and opened her door.

In the corridor was a uniformed policeman. He turned as he heard her door open and came towards her.

"Poor, poor Mrs. Fisher," said

Miss Fawcett. "It's all my fault. I should have done something more definite."

"Are you a friend of Mrs. Fisher's, Miss?"

"Yes—no. I only met her this afternoon." Miss Fawcett drew her dressing-gown tighter across her meagre bosom. "But I always knew that man was going to murder her."

"Steady, Miss. Who's talking of murder?"

And at that moment, Mrs. Fisher emerged from a door a little farther down the corridor.

Miss Fawcett did something she had never done before in her life. She fainted.

When she came round a few minutes later, she was lying on her bed, and someone who looked like a housekeeper was dabbing at her forehead with a wet towel. Standing at the side of her bed was a police constable.

"Take it easy," he said.

"I'm all right," said Miss Fawcett, trying to get up, but finding herself pushed back by the motherly person with a towel. "What has happened?"

"There's been an accident," said the policeman.

"But it wasn't Mrs. Fisher?" said Miss Fawcett stupidly.

The policeman gave her a curious look.

"It was her husband," he said.

Miss Fawcett was not summoned to the inquest, and she did not even stay at Lymchurch until it was over. Her holidays had not been very propitious during the last year.

It was a week later that the postman rang the bell. Usually the letters fell with a thump through the letter-box, and she could hear the whistled strains of Gilbert and Sullivan as the postman went on down the street. But this time there was a letter that had been registered.

Inside it were a hundred pound notes. And a letter which ran:

Dear Miss Fawcett,

I remember your expressing a hope that my late husband had left a donation to the N.S.P.C.C. I am sure he would have wished to if he had been aware of your kindness to me, and your interest in the Society, so I am enclosing £100 for you to send to them. You will forgive me for getting your address from the hotel register. With many thanks and kind regards, I am,

Yours very truly,
Emily Fisher.

THE SLAVE DETECTIVE

THE CASE OF THE UNFINISHED VILLA

WALLACE NICHOLS

Illustrated by Juliette Palmer

OLLIUS, THE SLAVE Detective, had been a victim to the low fever which was always so prevalent in Rome, and his master, Titius Sabinus the Senator, who was secretly proud of him, had sent him to one of his farms in the country to recuperate. Here he was looked after during his convalescence by Arrius the farm-bailiff and Timandra his wife.

Arrius was a taciturn man in late middle-age, and somewhat dour in temper, though friendly enough to his visitor. Timandra was much younger and singularly handsome, but, in spite of her physical attractiveness, showed little gaiety and was, thought Sollius amusedly, well under her husband's thumb. She made in any case a most kind hostess. The farm itself was a tranquil place of poplars, holm-oaks, docile cattle and pigs, and rich in nightingales. Sollius sighed in contentment and gratitude to his master: a good rest and idleness would soon restore him for his normally active life.

From the window of his low-tiled bedroom he took stock of his surroundings: the calm pastures, the little stream watering the meadows, the well-kept byre. Farther afield, about a mile away, stood a somewhat pretentious villa on a rise, and, some distance below it, what appeared to be a smaller villa still under construction. But though he glanced at it day after day he never saw any workmen engaged upon it.

He raised the point one evening at their meal. The bailiff laughed, while his wife made the sign against the Evil Eye.

"There's a story?" he asked sharply, all his instincts awake.

"Twice," replied Arrius in a low voice, "it has reached the stage where you see it now, and then been . . . burnt down with only a few columns left standing."

"Arson?" suggested Sollius.

"By some god!" mumbled Timandra, rocking herself to and fro.

"Were no inquiries made?" asked Sollius.

"It was a god," affirmed the bailiff himself.

"What, by a thunderbolt?" said Sollius derisively.

"You may smile, Sollius," answered Arrius, "but fear has stalked our fields ever since."

"I think you had better tell me all you know," murmured Sollius.

It made a simple story. A young debauchee from Rome, wearied of a wild life and considering himself a poet, had bought the land from Titius

Sabinus and had begun to build a small villa upon it, there to devote himself, he had said, to writing.

"An accursed plan by a wicked young man," said the bailiff harshly. "That land was once a grove sacred to one of the Etruscan gods, and he cut half of it down to level the space. This wicked Apulianus began his building without a sacrifice! Then, a quarter done, it was burnt down one night."

"Poor Apulianus," sighed Timandra. "Perhaps he didn't know where he was building."

"You've no call to pity him, woman!" cried Arrius harshly.

"Was no one—other than a god—suspected?" inquired the amazed Sollius.

"The god was seen!" answered the bailiff in a hushed tone.

"The god was seen?" echoed the incredulous Sollius.

Timandra abruptly threw her apron over her head and ran from the room.

"Who saw this god?"

"I—and she—and others. When Apulianus tried the second time to build, and again it was burnt down at the same stage; we saw the god!"

"Had he a torch in his hand?"

"Would a god need a torch?"

"What followed?"

"Apulianus returned to Rome, ruined. He has not been seen in these parts since—nor the god either."

"Who," asked Sollius after a pause, "lives in the villa on the hill?"

"One of our master's friends, the noble Junius Lutatius."

"Was there any communication between him and Apulianus?"

"The noble Lutatius keeps to himself—a man of high pride—but his son, Publius, walked down to the site when he heard that Apulianus was a poet. He fancies himself, too, as a poet. The two of them conversed at times and seemed friendly enough."

"And really did no one investigate?" asked the astonished Sollius.

"Apulianus fled. Who else was interested? Besides, all our neighbours knew it was the god's vengeance for the desecration of his grove. No one will now pass by the place at night."

Sollius twiddled his thumbs for a while in silence; then with an exasperated sigh—for he hated to be puzzled—he went up to his little bedroom for the night.

His unsatisfied thoughts made him restless. Instead of lying on his pallet he took a stool to the window and unlatched the shutters, and sat looking out. It was a moonlit night. He sat perfectly still, his eyes taking in the landscape as a whole rather than focusing themselves upon any particular spot, and yet presently, instinctively, they turned towards the ruins of the burnt, unfinished villa. Without warning his senses began to alert themselves; even before it happened he seemed aware that something was about to happen.

A hazy mist was rising from the stream and a space of badly drained marshland beyond it. Raising his eyes still farther beyond to where the moonlit landscape folded the ruined villa as in a nest of pale light, he started, and grew cold. A figure was moving among the broken columns; an enormous figure, at least nine feet

tall, arrayed in a shimmering garment and wearing a huge, mask-like headdress. Almost as soon as he saw it the figure began moving away, lumberingly, heavily, striding, thought Sollius, as might one of the old Greek tragic actors in his high-soled buskins and stiff, ritualistic raiment as a god at a play's end. He watched it disappear stumblingly up the rise and melt away in the moonlight and the distance.

He said nothing next morning about his experience, but as soon as the bailiff was at his usual tasks about the farm, he walked out alone and made for the scene of the supposed theophany. His temperament was the opposite of superstitious, and of all men he was the least likely to feel awe, and certainly not in the face of a local and bucolic cult. It was therefore no religious sense which had been aroused but his detective instinct.

Yet, if he was not superstitious, he was deeply sensitive to atmosphere, and as soon as he stepped into the shadow of the blackened columns and charred wood he felt a curious emotion, as if he were suddenly in immediate contact with madness or evil. He shook the thought from him: it was probably the lingering result of his fever and subsequent weakness. He busied himself with poking about, looking in particular for footprints. A supernatural being would not leave any, so if footprints there were he would know what to think. With his experience he soon found them, but strange footprints they seemed, passing over a patch of damp gravel: the marks not of sandals but as though indented gashes. Again he thought of stilt-like buskins.

"You are a very curious person," cried a voice behind him.

Sollius swung round, his imperturbable self again. It was no god who had stepped out from behind one of the broken columns but a young man in the prime of life, tall, handsome and self-assured. Sollius knew at once who he must be: Publius, the son of the old aristocrat, Lutatius.

"I have been watching you. You came from the noble Sabinus's farm over yonder, I think."

"I am one of his slaves," Sollius replied meekly.

"A bad sight, this," pursued the young man condescendingly.

"Very, lord," agreed Sollius. "Did you know the unfortunate gentleman? Of a good family, I believe?"

"Oh, yes," replied the other. "We discovered a common liking for the Muses, and had a number of discussions. We even exchanged poems and gave each other friendly criticism. Poor fellow, his gods were not kind to him!"

"Was he a good poet?" Sollius inquired innocently.

"A lyric poet of the Ovidian order —so old-fashioned now!" answered Publius. "For my own part I have a different mission: to bring to the present Roman stage, so terribly given over to boxers and dancing mimes, the old austerity of the great Greek drama. We must go back to Sophocles if Rome is to rival Athens in her national duty."

"Could you bring back the old

Greek conditions, lord?" Sollius asked.

Publius raised his brows at hearing a slave so speak.

"Why not?" he replied. "It is the only way to produce the authentic beauty."

"Even," asked Sollius, "to the old . . . costumes?"

"In replaying the old plays," asserted Publius, and then added, "but not the masks. A modern audience might not accept the masks."

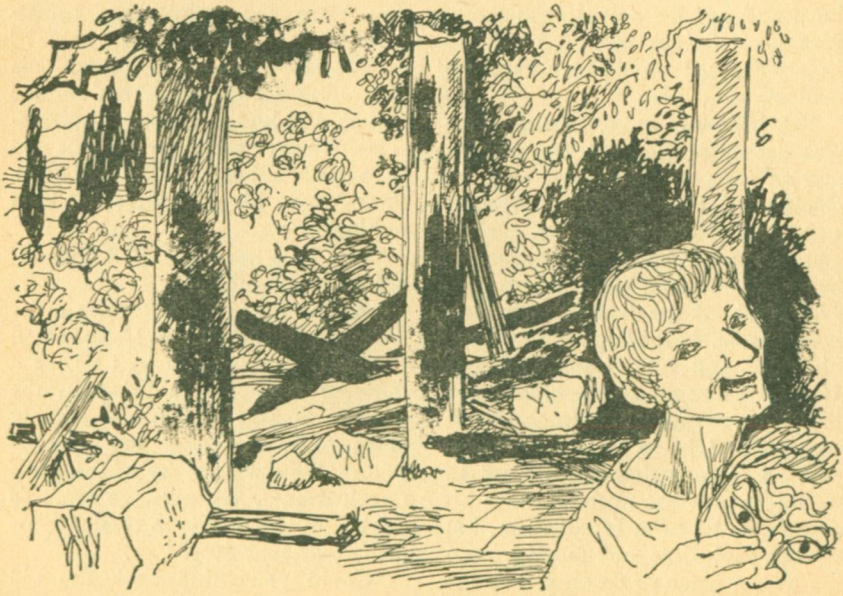
"Both masks and buskins, lord, are now but relics," murmured Sollius, and though his eyes appeared to be roving over the columns and burnt beams he had given a narrow glance at his companion's face.

"I love relics; I have a houseful," said Publius with a whinnying laugh, and he suddenly turned away and moved swiftly up the rise towards his father's villa.

At the next evening meal Sollius asked questions about the young son of Lutatius.

"Mad—quite mad!" growled Arrius. "Everyone knows he is mad."

"His mother," said Timandra, "was also a strange one, and perhaps the madder of the two. She would have herself driven out in a two-horsed chariot, dressed like a queen, with vine-leaves in her hair—and she then forty if a day!—and bow to right and left as though to a crowd of clapping subjects, and she but in a country lane



with no one there. But before she died the old man stopped her."

"Proud old tyrant!" muttered Arrius. "I am glad I serve a finer master."

It was not in nature that the farm-slaves should not gossip about their famous visitor and that the slaves at the great villa should not hear of him. He did not think it by accident that, a day or so later, he should be met in one of his ambles by Junius Lutatius and his son.

"I did not know," said Publius, "who you were when I saw you before."

"The solver of mysteries!" added his father, his tone high and contemptuous.

"Of some mysteries, lord," answered Sollius with a seething meekness. "I've not always succeeded."

"Rumour says other," smiled Publius, and then tittered, and Sollius noted that his eyes were never still but flickered from object to object with a butterfly's inconsequence. He had noted it at their previous meeting, but it had not then been so marked: Publius had been interested in Greek costumes; but was not in his father's conversation.

"Have you tried to crack our local mystery?" pursued Lutatius. "Can you tell us who set fire to Apulianus's villa twice over?"

"I have not tried to collect evidence, lord."

"A god, they say, has been seen? Is not that evidence—of something to be explained?"

"Peasants, lord, can see a god in every bush."

"An Epicurean, eh?"

"So many gods," replied Sollius, glancing at Publius as he spoke, "are only 'from the machine'!"

"Well," went on Lutatius, preparing to move on, "I was sorry for Apulianus, very sorry, though I admit to feeling relieved at his giving up, for his villa would have hatefully spoilt our view. I did suggest a different situation, but he was not inclined to pleasure me. The young men of his age can be very insolent to their betters. But I think that you, Publius, liked him?"

"His poems amused me," replied his son lightly, and without a salute he and his father turned back towards their villa.

Sollius stayed for quite a while in the vicinity of the unfinished house of Apulianus, then shrugged his shoulders and returned to the farm. It was not his case. Why concern himself with it? But a puzzle was always a challenge to him.

He found the bailiff at the pig pens.

"Tell me," he asked, "did Apulianus make any enemy while he was here?"

"Not that I know," was the curt answer. "I hope this isn't a case of swine fever," went on Arrius to himself, his brow puckered.

"He wooed no other man's girl?"

But Arrius was too immersed in his veterinary problem to do more than shake his head. Then abruptly he looked up.

"What did you say?" he asked, and Sollius repeated his question.

"Not that I know," repeated Arrius. "His flute-girls were in the City."

Sollius grunted, and retired indoors.

Three days later, completely restored to health, he departed for Rome. To his great astonishment, Timandra, so contained during his visit, clung to his hand as he bade her farewell, and burst into tears.

"It has been good to have you in the house, so kind as you are," she blubbered. "No prison walls hold you faster than open fields," she added, and was about to say more when she saw her husband approaching with the farm-cart in which he was to drive Sollius away. She gave the Slave Detective a single glance, and ran blindly indoors.

"How well you look, Sollius," was the greeting of his younger fellow slave, Lucius. "What a little rest—and no mysteries—can do for a man!"

"No mysteries!" darkly muttered Sollius, and Lucius pricked up his ears.

"What! A mystery among pigs and cows?"

"Even among pigs and cows!" returned Sollius in an injured tone. "I cannot escape mystery."

"I am sure you solved it."

"It was not my case—I let it lie."

"What! Your restless mind sought no conclusion?" said Lucius, and his voice was mocking.

"Listen," replied Sollius, and he gave a full account of what he had seen and heard while away.

"Surely," murmured Lucius, "you have some guess as to the truth."

"You have the same knowledge as I," returned the Slave Detective. "Make your own guess, Lucius."

"There are, of course," answered Lucius after a short pause, "just the two possible suspects: the lord Lutatius and his son."

"Continue," smiled Sollius.

"Both wanted Apulianus away, especially Publius, who recognised, perhaps, that he was a better poet than himself, and desired no rival cock on his own midden. Poets can be very jealous of one another."

"A true observation! Add to it that he'd a sufficient touch of madness to ape, on moonlit nights, a Greek actor playing a god. And Lutatius?"

"Too proud an aristocrat. And did he not tell you himself that Apulianus's villa would have spoilt the view from his own? What right had anyone—he would think—to withstand his wishes?"

"True again," agreed Sollius.

"It must lie between them," muttered Lucius, frowning. "I can see no other clues."

"Look for them," said Sollius, "in the character of Apulianus."

"I've never met him."

"Nor I. But did not Arrius call him 'a young debauchee'?"

"Had Lutatius a daughter?" asked Lucius immediately.

"A good question," replied Sollius, "but he has no daughter that I know of. On the other hand . . ."

"On the other hand?" Lucius prompted.

"Arrius has a young and very handsome wife."

"Arrius!"

"I have avoided thought," answered Sollius slowly. "He is a fine bailiff for our master—and it was not my case."

BOTANY BAY

THOMAS PHILIPS

Illustrated by Roy Jackson

HEN THE Rodneys returned from their holiday to discover that their next - door neighbours, the friendly Melvilles, had vanished leaving no trace of their occupancy, Mrs. Rodney was both surprised and disappointed. Surprised because no word had been left for her; disappointed because she knew she was going to miss her daily chats over the hedge that divided the back gardens.

Mr. Rodney, Australian born and proud of his background, was inclined to be more philosophical. Bullock-shouldered and shaggy-maned, with a large face and huge hands, he had always made point of trying to fit into the surroundings in which he found himself. A lifetime in England had smoothed away his accent but had failed to bring a complete understanding of the people with whom he came in contact.

"If they like to go without saying a word," he said generously, "then that's their concern. All the same, with you and Mrs. Melville being so friendly it does seem a little strange."

"But they were always so happy here," Mrs. Rodney said plaintively. Small, fragile and fluttery in a pink and white way she was openly upset.

"You'd have thought Gladys would have said something. I mean, she must have known——

"I'm going to miss her," she said after a while.

"There's always the Neighbours," Rodney suggested, giving the word a capital letter as was their usage when speaking of the people who lived in the only other house in the lane.

Two miles from the nearest village the three detached houses enjoyed complete rural seclusion. The Melvilles, who had lived in the centre house, had been in residence when the Rodneys had moved in a year earlier. At that time the third and end house had been occupied by the Jacksons. Three houses had each contained a middle-aged, childless couple. It was only natural that they should discover common interests.

Mrs. Rodney puckered her brow prettily and shook her head at the mention of the Neighbours and said: "George, do you remember when the Jackson's moved out?"

He nodded. That had only been two months ago.

"They went without saying a word," she recalled. "We'd been spending a day in town with the Melvilles and when we came back the house was empty. It's funny that the Melvilles should have gone the same way."

"Folk sometimes like to be secretive," he reasoned.

"And less than a week after they'd gone the Neighbours moved in."

"Houses like this are usually snaffled pretty quickly," he said.

"They've been here two months," Mrs. Rodney said, "and we don't even know what their names are."

In the past few weeks they had discussed the queer behaviour of the Neighbours many times, but now, with the bulwark of the Melvilles removed, that same behaviour suddenly seemed more important. Mrs. Rodney tapped out the points on a small pink palm.

"We don't know their names; they look more like brother and sister than man and wife; they never seem to go out. They don't have any mail delivered, they don't take a morning paper and none of the village shopkeepers know them."

"Emily," Rodney accused, "you've been trying to pry."

"I did ask," she said defensively. "I thought I might find something I could use to break the ice. Gladys tried to get into conversation with them but they seemed stand-offish. So she gave up. They're queer, all right; you could write a book about them."

Which very ordinary expression he first accepted absently, saying "Yes," and then thought about it and being a free-lance journalist as well as an insurance agent, said "Yes," again, but in a different tone.

"Come to think of it," he said. "I've only seen them once or twice, and then only from a distance——"

His unspoken invitation produced a detailed description of their appearance. Both, it seemed, were tall and slender; both had the same long oval face, upward-slanting dark eyes and close mat of shining black curls. And they both had small pointed ears set tight against hollowed temples.

"I didn't realize that you'd been close enough to notice the shape of their ears," Rodney remarked.

She flushed, admitting that she had been using the binoculars.

"They usually take a walk in the garden after tea," she told him.

Picking up the binoculars, Rodney went upstairs. From his vantage point at one of the back bedroom windows he could see all of his own garden, most of the Melvilles' and perhaps half of that belonging to the end house.

In sharp contrast with the other two the end garden was brightly neat and tidy. And that—Rodney frowned—despite the fact that he had never seen either of the Neighbours working in it.

It was empty now—on a warm August evening made for gardening. He rested his elbows on the sill and swept the garden with his glasses. There was a fine crop of dwarf beans. Untouched, by the look of the heavily podded rows. By rights they should have been gathered in. He wondered where the Neighbours got their food from. Emily had said that she had never seen a tradesman's van standing outside their door.

He assembled his facts. The Neighbours had appeared almost overnight; they were strange in both appearance and habits; they lived a life of complete seclusion. He shifted words and

phrases, seeking a provocative opening for his article. "What do you know of your neighbours? What do you know about the people who live next door? It is strange in this little, over-crowded country of ours, how little we sometimes know of the men and women who rub shoulders . . ."

Then his eye caught a movement and he swung the glasses.

It was the woman who had come to stand by the lawn, her face turned away and partly in profile. His glasses picked up the black curls and then moved down the graceful line of cheek and neck, past the unbelted, unadorned white dress, down slim bare legs to sandalled feet.

Then he retraced his inspection, coming this time upon a bare brown arm. He found two marks on the arm, a little above the elbow. He braced his elbows, trying to stop the trembling of his hands. Two parallel hollows that might have been laid on the smooth flesh with a hot iron.

While he studied them, puzzling over their origin, his field of vision suddenly emptied and he swung the glasses to follow movement, overshot, and found himself looking into the man's face. He duplicated his inspection, moving down a white shirt —silk? he wondered—and along another bare arm. And just above the elbow were two more marks, exactly the same as those he had seen on the woman's arm.

Then he brought his glasses back to the faces and was comparing them, seeing how they were almost identical, the same heavy-lidded slanting eyes, the same smooth stretch of brow, when Emily called, "Tea ready, dear," and he laid the glasses aside and went downstairs.

After tea, instead of starting work on his own neglected garden, he went to his study and uncovered the typewriter.

The article was written in his mind before he started to put it on paper. The words flowed smoothly. When he had finished, and had found a title, because he intended sending it to an editor who regularly used his work, he added a foot-note in longhand: "Mr. Loveday. This is a little different from my usual contributions but I thought I'd give it a try."

As he addressed the envelope he was conscious of a feeling of tightness at each side of his temples. He explored with cautious fingers, finding the flesh puffy and slightly painful to the touch.

The stiffness was still there the next day. With his morning coffee at the office he swallowed a couple of aspirins. Engrossed in catching up with the arrears of work he forgot all about the Neighbours.

Shaving, the following morning, disclosed even more unusual contours to his face. The swelling had hardened and had moved downwards, giving a semi-rigidity to his cheeks. Emily remarked on it.

"A rash?" she wondered. "Perhaps something you picked up at the hotel? I remember seeing a kiddie with its face swollen. Does it hurt, dear?"

He shook his head. "It's just uncomfortable."

There was a letter from the editor in his morning mail. An unusual letter

in its way, being neither an acceptance nor a rejection of his article. It was an invitation.

"—if you could manage seven o'clock. I realize that this is short notice but there is something I would like to discuss with you. If the time and date are unsuitable perhaps you would ring me. . . ."

The address given was that of a private house and not of the editorial offices. Intrigued, Rodney tried to read meanings between the lines. The invitation had to have some connection with his article for the letter started by thanking him for submitting it. But why should he be asked to visit the editor's home rather than the more conveniently sited city office?

It was the first time he had met Mr. Loveday. Rodney had entertained ideas that the editor would be tall, with stooping shoulders and a worried, scholarly expression. He was rather startled to discover that Mr. Loveday was small and sturdy and had a round red face made all the more rotund by huge horn-rimmed spectacles.

The house was one of two, set back from the main road in an almost hidden cul-de-sac and surrounded by trees. Mrs. Loveday was a tall, colourless woman who disappeared as soon as introductions had been made.

Loveday spoke absently and politely about the weather, thanked Rodney for the visit and then took him into the garden.

"There's something I want you to see," he explained. "But we may have to wait for a while." Then: "I liked that article of yours, Rodney. You have a nice gift of making your characters come alive. I am assuming that the couple you described so vividly are actual living people. A provocative article and well written...."

There was more in the same vein. Rodney listened, gratified, wondering where it was all leading. Then Loveday, who had been watching the hedge that divided his garden from that next door, suddenly gripped his arm, motioned him to silence and then pointed.

Rodney followed the pointing finger and was unable to believe the evidence of his eyes.

Two people had come to walk in the next-door garden. A man and a woman who had smooth, brown ageless faces, tight black curls and small pointed ears.

Loveday's warning grip stifled an exclamation.

They went back indoors.

"Those are my neighbours," Rodney said, knowing that he wasn't making sense but too dazed to think of an alternative explanation. "But they can't be in two places at the same time...."

Loveday reached for a decanter. "I think we both deserve a drink. No. I almost expected you to say something like that. But they can't be the same. So my two must be as like yours as two peas—or should it be four?—in a pod. And they first showed up about a couple of months ago. And like yours they don't speak and they don't seem to eat...."

"I don't understand," Rodney said.

"I've had longer to think about this than you have. The answer, or part of it, might lie in what I could call the Chinese puzzle."

And when Rodney looked his puzzlement,

"At least it is a possible explanation. I mean, it is generally known that to most white people, all Chinese look the same. And vice versa. There are exceptions, of course, but I'm only generalizing. But you see what I'm driving at?"

"They're not Chinese," Rodney said dully.

"No." The other was heavily significant. "They're even more foreign than that. I don't think that they come from any country we know. And another thing. For all we know there are more of them. Living in selected, quiet suburbs...."

Rodney broke the long, pregnant silence.

"I see what you're driving at," he said slowly. "But——"

For a while they threw ideas back and to.

"Flying Saucers," Loveday said. "That's one explanation. I mean, they're white, but they have none of the characteristics of any race I know. And they're certainly not English."

Rodney dropped into the past. "Too right," he said with feeling.

Loveday looked up at the expression. "And neither are you," he offered with an attempt at a smile.

"Australian born," Rodney said, and went automatically into his social

routine. "And proud of it. From Sidney, originally. My family moved up from Botany Bay. One of my ancestors was a branded felon."

And then he stopped, and thought, and shook his head while the other watched and waited.

"I may be on to something," he said at last. "I don't know how close a look you've had at your couple, but I used the binoculars on mine. And mine have both got marks on their arms. Just like they'd been branded. Just like some of the criminals were in the old days."

Loveday became excited.

"I get the connection. A new civilization dumping its unwanted criminal element on another, older race. Colonizing at the same time. For all we know, these . . . these intruders may be the first of an invading race. The parallel is clear. I mean, the Saucers have been seen over many years. Just like the French and the Portuguese travelled round the Australian coasts without landing. Afraid probably of the natural hazards. Typhus amongst others. Then Cook came along and later the transportations started. At first the natives didn't resist, almost seeming to accept the invaders. Until they saw how things were going. But by then it was too late. That is what may be happening here, now. These are the expendable types, the branded criminals. The others will follow once they have satisfied themselves there is no danger."

He took off his spectacles and rubbed his eyes. "I know that all this must sound like the ravings of a lunatic, but the facts all fit together. I had an inkling of it before you came. Your discovery of the branding marks settled it."

"What shall we do?" Rodney wanted to know. "Who do we tell?"

"Do? Tell?" Loveday closed his eyes. "Nobody would believe us. They would laugh at us. I have a position of sorts to keep up. You are probably the same. I can't even risk publishing that article of yours. Apart from anything else, we don't know if the aliens read our papers. If they do, and I publish, then they would only be warned."

"We can't just sit back and wait," Rodney protested.

"No. We have to find proof of our suspicions. Something concrete that we can lay before authority. As I see it, we shall have to try and make contact with our . . . neighbours. That's the only thing we can do. There's got to be something we can pick on."

On his way back home Rodney planned his moves. There was no point in alarming the easily frightened Emily by telling her of their suspicions. But he could enlist her help by asking her to keep an even closer watch on the occupants of the end house. And so far as he himself was concerned——

When he reached the house, instead of going indoors, he walked along the lane to rap quickly on the front door of the Neighbours' house. It took all his courage to stand, waiting for the knock to be answered.

But nobody came to answer the door.

He retraced his steps conscious of both relief and apprehension.

Emily wanted to know if his face was better. He had forgotten about it but now he touched his cheeks again. The swelling was still there and there was a feeling of tension when he opened his mouth. When she suggested that he see a doctor he waved her anxiety aside.

Lying in bed that night he stared at the ceiling. There had to be some way of finding out more about the Neighbours. There were such things as rates and taxes; so there had to be records. They had bought a house. They may have had dealings with an estate agent, certainly with a solicitor. But he couldn't tramp the city streets from office to office. It would take months, years. And he didn't know how long it would be before the rest of the invaders would start to arrive. He fell asleep, conscious both of his inadequacy and the fact that his face was becoming even more stiff.

When he reached his office the next morning his first job was to phone Loveday and tell him of his initial failure to make contact.

The editor sounded worried. "I'd expected something like that. It's been the same at my place. They ignored me when I tried speaking to them. And there's a feeling. It's hard to describe. I know the wife is worried——." He fell silent and then rang off.

Because his head had started to ache and it had become an effort to speak, Rodney finished work before his usual time. Emily didn't comment on his early arrival home, fluttering instead, aimlessly picking up a cushion and setting it down.

"It's lonely without Gladys to talk to," she said. "The place doesn't seem the same." She went to look through the window. "I don't like living here any more. I think I'd like to move. . . ."

Rodney went into the garden because he didn't feel well enough to argue. Emily had once said that she would be perfectly happy living here for the rest of her life. This new fad was only a passing fancy.

He looked at his watch. This was about the time the Neighbours walked in their garden. He wondered if they were out now. Watching them through the binoculars was all right in its way. But it wasn't enough. He'd never find out any more about them unless he could get really close to them.

Towards the bottom of the hedge there was a thinning in the privet. Pushing his way through he came out into the Melville's garden. He avoided the gravel path, keeping on the edge of the lawn so that his footsteps were deadened. When he reached the opposite hedge he peered cautiously over the top.

The Neighbours were there, their faces as always turned away as if they were reluctant to even look in the direction of the other houses. By reaching out a hand he could have touched the twin heads of tight curls. There was a smell, sweet and cloying, and he sought unsuccessfully to identify it.

And as he watched, his breath held for fear of making the slightest

sound, a thought came probing into his mind. Emily had the right idea when she said she wanted to move. Now he came to think about it it would be the best thing to do.

He ducked, and stooping, made his way back to his own garden. Then a wave of anger came. He liked living here. It was everything he had ever wanted.

His face was no better the following morning and Emily was more concerned than ever, urging him to visit the doctor. But because he felt a little better in himself after an unexpected good night's sleep he decided not to worry the local doctor. He had always felt a certain satisfaction in that while, in his capacity as insurance agent, he had sent countless clients to Doctor Livesey, he had never yet had cause to visit the surgery himself.

As soon as he reached his office he dialled Loveday. A secretary told him that he hadn't come in. She didn't know why; there had been no message. Rodney stroked his swollen face and dialled the number of the private house. There was no reply. After a while he replaced the receiver.

Worry slowed his work, keeping him later than usual at the office. It was well past his usual time when he left the city. But instead of driving home he first pointed the car in the direction of the suburb where the editor lived.

The house was deserted. The curtains had gone from the windows;

and when, after knocking fruitlessly on the front door, he pressed his face to the glass, he saw that the rooms were empty of furniture. His head was throbbing again and his face was made of board as he drove home through the gathering dusk. He drove automatically, his eyes narrowed painfully in concentration.

Loveday and his family were part of the pattern. First the Jacksons, then the Melvilles. And now another family. Being pushed back by the settlers.

He wondered how it was done. And then he remembered how Emily was already talking about moving and how the idea had even come into his own mind for a while.

They did it by suggestion.

They implanted the idea in the minds of their victims. A form of brainwashing. . . . An evil thing; a terrifying weapon. A weapon with boundless possibilities.

Anger and fear fought for supremacy in his thoughts.

When he reached home he sat for a while in the car, staring through the windscreen at the dark shape of the house where the Neighbours lived. He wondered how long it would be before more of them arrived to occupy the empty house. And how long after that it would be before they needed the third house.

He went indoors. Emily was in the lounge, kneeling on the floor, the contents of the sideboard spread about her. She looked up.

"I was just starting to pack some of the glassware away. Ready for when the removal men come. I've been in touch with an agent and there's a little house out Murton way. I went out to see it this afternoon. It's not so big as this and it's near a factory. And the garden is rather small. But it should be all right. . . ."

Rodney turned and went without saying a word. Fear had suddenly become swamped by a fierce anger. They had been working on Emily but they hadn't got round to him yet. But his turn would come. Probably very soon. Tonight. . . .

He didn't know if there was anything he could do, but he had to try. Now, while he was still in his right mind. Jackson and Melville and Loveday had taken it without raising a finger. But he was made of sterner stuff. His own ancestors were of the same materials as these intruders. Branded criminals. . . .

And if they wouldn't answer the front door to him then he'd break it down. Or smash a window. Somehow he was going to confront them; show them that at least there was one man who would stand up to them.

His head was one huge sullen throb of pain; his face set as if glue had been poured over it and left to harden. He wondered if that was yet another of their weapons. A physical rather than mental attack.

The door of the end house stood open; the hall was in darkness. A trap? Come into my parlour? He flung himself on a tide of rage up the drive and up the three steps into the hall.

He almost fell over something that lay across the floor. When he found the switch and flooded the place

with light he saw that it was the man, lying face upwards, eyes staring sightlessly, the chest heaving with the effort of breathing. As he watched, the mouth fell open and the chest sank to rest.

Rodney stared at the distorted face. The eyes were sunken craters in the tight, swollen flesh that almost obscured the features. The cheeks were hard, shining plateaux; the chin had become part of the rigid neck. The Neighbour was patently dead and, dying, had been in agony.

He turned, looking for the telephone. When he failed to find it in the hall he opened the door of the lounge, feeling for the switch as he went in. Another flood of light revealed the woman's body, her face even more distorted than the man's had been, sprawled in the middle of the floor. He didn't have to touch her to know that she was dead. He found the phone on a corner table.

While he waited for the doctor he stood by the drive gates with his back to the house, touching his own face with wondering fingers, seeking some connection between its rigidity and the tortured faces of the dead Neighbours.

When the car nosed along the lane and drew up at the gates he turned and led the way indoors. Livesey, usually unperturbed, was openly shocked at the sight of the two bodies, bending over each, puzzlement and even consternation on his swarthy face.

He asked: "Have they been ill at all?"

Rodney shook his head. "I don't know a thing about them. I've never spoken with them; I don't even know their names. I saw the door standing open—you know?"

"An infection of sorts." Livesey laid delicate fingers on the distorted features of the woman. "But I've never seen anything like it before." He shook his head. "It'll mean post-mortems. I can't do anything now apart from stating that they are both dead."

"You can't even guess at the cause?" Rodney wondered.

But the other, puzzling now over the small pointed ears didn't seem to hear him.

"The other—the man's—are the same," Rodney said, and leant over, fighting his repugnance to point to the marks on the arm. "They've both got these. What do you make of them?"

"Those?" The doctor spared a brief glance. "Vaccination marks by the look of them. And fairly recent——" He came to his feet, dusting his knees. Rodney was standing directly under the light. Livesey looked at him for the first time.

"And what's the matter with your face?"

Rodney had forgotten the stiffness. Now it was there, fighting each jaw movement. And his neck was tight against his collar.

"I don't know," he said. "It started —what—three, four days ago."

The doctor's fingers gently explored. "Open," he ordered, and Rodney forced his mouth open with an effort.

"Well, now," Livesey said almost

cheerfully. "This is more in my line. Straight away to bed with you and I'll come and take a closer look at you as soon as this lot has been cleared up." He noded generally to the body at his feet. Then he smiled. "I take it you've never had mumps before?"

Rodney stared at him. "Mumps? No. Not so far as I know."

Suddenly he thought: A post-mortem. They'll find out that the Neighbours are different. We don't have to worry about trying to explain.

He looked at the distorted features of the woman. He remembered how he had stood watching the two of them, hidden behind the hedge, so near that he could have touched them.

He had never thought of the marks as being vaccination scars. But it made no difference whether the Neighbours were criminals or not. They were still uninvited invaders. Come to a new world, protected by all the resources of their own medicine. Vaccination, inoculation. All the potential dangers counteracted. All the obvious infections neutralized.

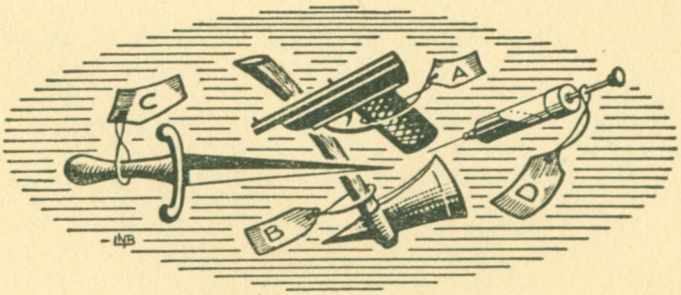
"Can people be innoculated against mumps?" he wondered aloud.

Livesey laughed at that.

"There's nothing to get worried about, Rodney," he said. "It's a very ordinary, harmless complaint. A little uncomfortable perhaps, in adults. There's nothing you could have done to prevent it. I mean, there's no innoculation against mumps. And there's only a very slender chance that you'll pass it on to someone else. Most people have had it at one time or another. You were thinking about the wife?"

Rodney averted his face from the swollen features.

"Yes," he said. "I was thinking about the wife."



TIME, GENTLEMEN

ARTHUR HOWES

Illustrated by Woodward

CHARLIE YAWNED NOISILY as he checked change into the till. It was a morning when he had to admit there were snags to a publican's life. Up late at night and still the doors had to be opened on time in the morning. He had slept badly, too. Good beer and food had blown him up to seventeen stone and he suffered now and then.

He glanced at his reflection in the bar mirror and was pleased with what he saw. A landlord of the old school, a walking advertisement for the beer sold in the "Live and Let Live". The little hair he had left was parted low on one side and carried across his head until it met the other ear. Smarmed down, he made the most of it. Beneath a purple, pitted nose there bristled a magnificent waxed moustache, the ends pointing like the arms of a signpost.

He wrenched a watch from his well-filled waistcoat and checked it against the clock. It was just ten. There would be few customers in before noon but it was time to open.

He lifted the bar flap and waddled across the room. At the door he turned to satisfy himself that all was in order. He was a meticulous landlord and smiled as he looked around the saloon bar. The room would have done credit to a houseproud woman, all shining and bright. The oak bar gleamed at him and the bottles on the shelves stood in neat rows as if daring him to disturb their ranks. Pumps and brass foot-rail were polished to perfection and he gave his moustache a satisfied twirl. Then he turned and unbolted the door.

As he had expected there was no horde of thirsty customers waiting to come in. In that small country town most drinking was done in the evening. He grunted as he made his way back behind the bar. If the missus hadn't gone shopping he could have had an extra hour in bed to make up for lost sleep. Still, he had a chance to look at the paper. He believed in keeping up with the news in case of sudden argument. He was about to fetch it when the door opened.

He turned to face the customer, podgy hands spread palm down on the bar in a welcoming attitude. The man who entered was a stranger. He moved slowly to the bar, looking straight ahead. For a moment Charlie thought the man was blind until he saw the eyes move and fix on him.

"'Morning, sir. What'll it be?"

There was no answer. Charlie was puzzled and looked hard at his customer. The man was tall and thin and dressed in an unseasonable overcoat. What could be seen of his suit was sombre and his face was pale beneath his dark hat. As to his age he might

have been anything between forty and sixty.

As though having fully turned the question over in his mind the stranger spoke. His voice was soft yet penetrating.

"I'll drink the same as James Howlett."

A half smile played at the corner of Charlie's mouth. Was the man joking or serious? He cleared his throat.

"Jimmy Howlett did you say, sir? We never see him in the morning. Evening's his time."

The stranger gave no sign that he had heard. He gazed at Charlie with deep-set eyes that were as black as coals against the white of his face.

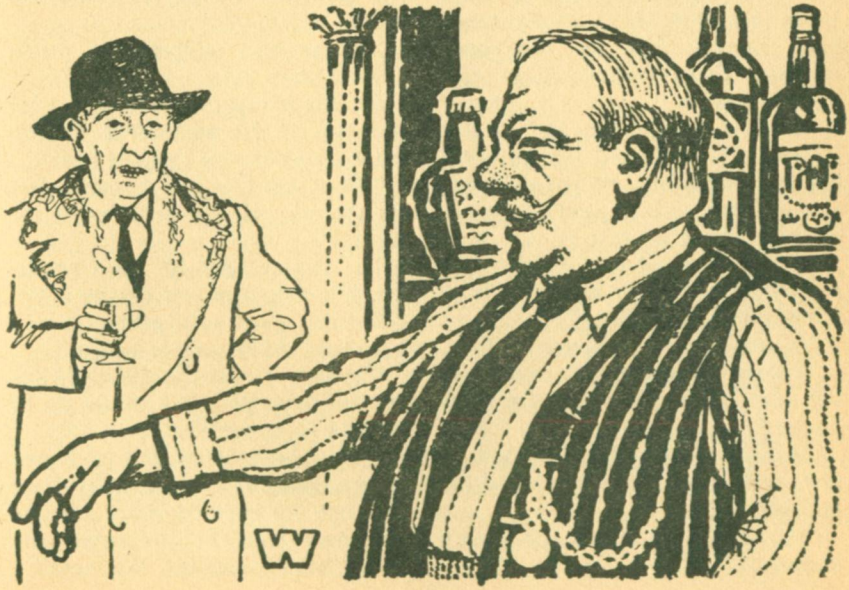
"I'll drink the same as James Howlett."

Charlie shrugged and turned away. If the man wanted to talk in riddles it was all the same to him. He placed a glass of whisky before the man and pushed the syphon along the bar. It was ignored.

"There you are, sir. The same as Jimmy Howlett. There's the soda if you want it."

There was a pound note in the stranger's hand. When he put the change on the bar Charlie saw the man had not moved. He pointed to the pile of silver but his customer took no notice.

"Friend of Jimmy's?" asked Charlie by way of starting up a friendly conversation. The man nodded and sipped his drink. Charlie breathed heavily in annoyance. He never liked being frozen off. He



turned and fiddled with the regiment of bottles behind the bar and watched the man in the mirror.

There was something odd about him. He seemed to be waiting and in no hurry, either. He lifted the glass slowly to his thin lips and put it down as casually. It was as though he had all the time in the world. Then it dawned on Charlie. Most people were in a hurry but this man took his time, moving almost in slow motion. Perhaps he had just come out of prison. Or lived in hot places where they took things easy. He dismissed the notion straight away. The man was too pale for that.

He was so engrossed that he was staring at the reflection in the mirror and flushed as he saw the stranger's black eyes on him. When he turned the man was looking at his drink, From his attitude he might never have known that he had been watched. Charlie chattered in embarrassment.

"Old Jimmy Howlett, eh? He's a lad, he is." He waited for comment but there was none. He jerked up his shirt sleeves and wagged his head, clucking like a fat hen.

"So you're a pal of old Jimmy's. I can tell you a yarn or two about him. I remember one night—"

The stranger cut in across the flow.

"I don't pass judgment on Howlett. Or on anyone else for that matter."

Charlie's florid face flushed a deeper shade of red as he shoved his bulk off the bar.

"All right, no offence. It wasn't important."

For a while there was a silence that made him feel uncomfortable. The stranger seemed to be unaffected by it. Charlie felt bound to say more if only to hear the sound of his own voice.

"Been in these parts often, sir?"

"Often enough."

"I can't place your face, that's why I ask."

The stranger looked up. "I don't suppose you can. You weren't here the last time I called."

Charlie grabbed at the chance. "Well, we've only been here eight years. We had a place in Bow, me and the missus. Then after the war we thought we'd like a bit of a change. The old boy who kept this place had just died so we took it. We'd stayed in Bow all through the bombing but the old place wasn't the same. Do you know it at all?"

The stranger sipped his drink. "Yes, I know it."

Charlie waited for him to elaborate and twirled his moustache expectantly. The talk was flagging again.

"Were you living in London during the war, if you don't mind me asking?"

The stranger put his glass on the bar. His pale face was drawn.

"I don't mind your asking. Yes, I was there. Among other places."

Charlie's moustache bristled like the antennae of a fat beetle as he sensed a touchy subject.

"Now don't think I'm a Nosey Parker, because I'm not. Only I see the same old faces day after day and it does you good to have a chat with someone a bit different, that's all."

At the word "different" the stranger raised his black eyes and looked at Charlie.

"You must excuse me," he said. "I never talk of my travels during the war—or at any other time."

Charlie laughed. "I get you. A bit of the old M.I.5 lark, eh?" He winked at the man and belched with relief. "Beg pardon. It's my stomach. I eat what I like and like what I eat. But it doesn't always like me." He guffawed at his joke. "Still, it don't do no harm after all's said and done." He gave the stranger a cunning look and smirked.

"How old would you say I am?"

The stranger was staring at his thin hands as they rested on the bar and answered without looking up.

"Sixty-four."

Charlie's face fell. It was a stock question and he expected the answer "late fifties." He swelled with injured pride. The man was quite correct.

"Well, that's right enough. Most people say I don't look it, that's all."

The stranger raised his head. "I never said you looked it. You asked me how old you are. I told you."

Charlie was pacified but puzzled. Then he guessed the answer. Jimmy Howlett must have told him. He was about to say as much when the stranger drew himself up. He seemed to fill the room.

"Serve Howlett's drink now."

Charlie looked at the door. "Serve his drink? But he isn't here."

The man repeated his order. "Serve his drink."

A second glass was placed on the bar and the wondering landlord said nothing. He helped himself from the change which was still untouched.

As he went to the till the door opened. Howlett came in, his usually sallow face flushed. He breathed heavily. The stranger faced him, arm outstretched holding the filled glass.

Howlett saw the man and looked relieved. Without a word he took the glass and drained it. There was a tender expression on the stranger's face as he took Howlett by the arm and led him through the door.

Charlie scratched his head as he watched them go Old Jimmy hadn't looked too good and neither of them had said so much as "cheerio". He wagged his head, bemused, and went to move the glasses from the bar. Then he saw the change the stranger had left. He crossed the room quickly, bent on calling the man back. Before he could reach the door there was the sound of a scuffle outside. Bill Doyle and Bob Jones burst in, staggering under the weight of the man they carried. It was Howlett.

"Give us a hand," panted Doyle, and Charlie moved to help. Between them they got Howlett in and laid him gently on the mat before the fireplace.

"I'll get a cushion," said Charlie. He felt a hand on his arm. Doyle was staring down at the man on the floor.

"Don't bother about that, Charlie. Get the ambulance."

He went to the 'phone and made the call. He could hear the two men talking in undertones. When he reached them again they were no longer bending over Howlett.

"Too late," murmured Jones.

Charlie looked down. "What happened?" he asked.

Doyle acted as spokesman. "Why, me and Bob here were just coming in for a quick one when Jimmy came out of the door and went down. So we brought him in here."

Charlie frowned. "What happened to the other bloke?"

"Other bloke?" said Doyle, looking from Charlie to Jones and back again. "What other bloke?"

"The man who was with him," replied Charlie deliberately. "The one he was in here with. They went out together. Where did he go?"

The two men stared at him. Doyle answered.

"Look, Charlie, we aren't daft. He fell down in your doorway, almost on top of us. There was nobody else with him. Ask Bob here—that's right, isn't it?"

Charlie's face flushed. "Now listen, you two. There was another man in here. He waited for Jimmy and they left together. I'm not blind; they stood over there and had a Scotch each. The man even left his change behind."

He pointed to the bar where the stranger had stood and the others followed the direction of his finger. Neither said a word. They glanced at each other and back to Charlie.

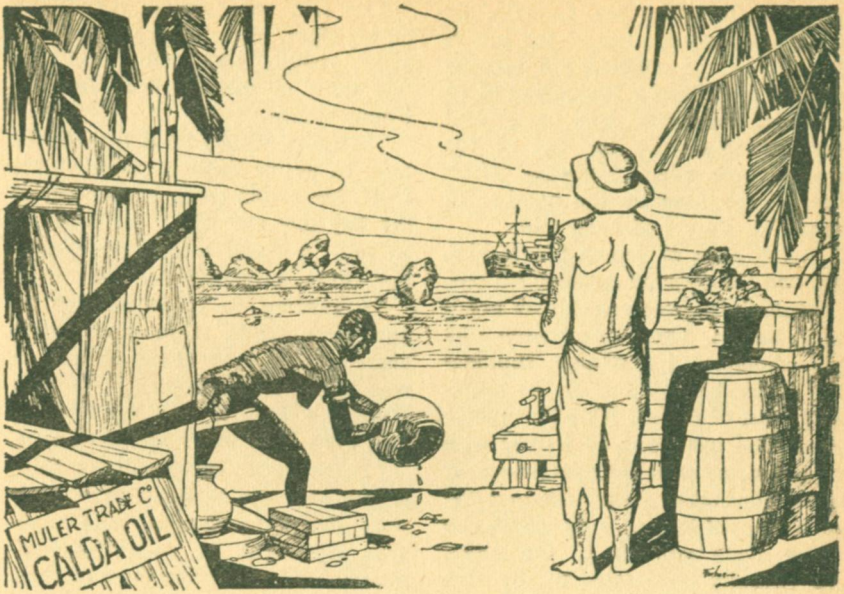
"Now what's the matter?" he blurted angrily.

It was Doyle who spoke. "If they both had a drink where's the other glass?"

Charlie looked across the bar and the blood drained from his face. His mouth opened and he looked very old, The bar was clear except for one glass glinting like a solitary eye.

Through the silence Doyle and Jones watched him. Then he muttered something and moved across the room. He was at the bar flap, forcing himself through the narrow opening.

He wrenched at the till drawer and looked down on the compartments of silver and copper. There was no pound note.



SAFE PASSAGE

PETER LONERGAN

Illustrated by D. C. Forbes

THE OLD SEA CAPTAIN was not the conventional pipe-smoking individual that so often characterizes a retired man of the sea. He was a roly-poly, slightly balding man in his middle sixties with beetling brows and an infectious twinkle in his eyes. Instead of the pipe he smoked a cigar. As he warmed to his story it would move agitatedly from one side of his mouth to the other, during pauses in the narrative, as if under its own power.

His audience this evening, for a tale already told countless times, was two Canadian couples vacationing in England. They had come to "The Dolphin" on the advice of the blue-jerseyed old fisherman who spent most of his time sitting on the sea wall of the harbour when he wasn't out in his fishing ketch. An accom-

plice of the Old Sea Captain, he always guided tourists to the inn at the top of the cobbled hill because the old man liked a few drinks of an evening; especially free ones. And the fisherman got his cut of the week's take every Saturday afternoon, depending on the number of times the story had been told.

A full glass of Scotch before him, the Old Sea Captain resumed his tale.

"I don't suppose you've ever heard of Jadetown. There's no reason why you should. It's a steamy, stinking-hot place. A small port on the south-east coast of Africa. It's a Portuguese possession just north of Bambe with no real commercial prospects because no one has taken the trouble to dynamite the reef barrier. And unless you know every contour of the rocks, it's virtually impassable to any ship larger than a rowing boat. It is possible for a skilled pilot, or someone who knows the waters thereabouts, to get a vessel of maybe one thousand three hundred tons through the inlet, and once inside it is one of the best natural harbours any skipper could have the good fortune to sail into.

"Jadetown itself is nothing more than a collection of dirty little shacks inhabited by a bunch of Africans, Indians and no-good whites. About the only thing it can boast is a first-class hospital built by the Portuguese more to study diseases peculiar to the continent than to care for the sick.

"In the harbour lived a dolphin: or at least that is where he spent most of his time."

The Old Sea Captain, chomping on his cigar, glanced across the table at his visitors, who were spending a few days in this small Devonshire fishing village.

"Bachcha—that's what they called him. In native lingo it means 'Little One'. He would swim in and out of the bay day and night, fair weather or foul, skilfully missing the rocks, but never wandering too far.

"According to local rumour he had been living there some three years when I first heard of him. It was home and playground to him. He didn't seem to have the wanderlust, even if he was a sea-going type.

"There wasn't much call for ships to put into the harbour unless they were delivering supplies and mail. This big event for Jadetown happened about once every three months. Bachcha probably got the biggest kick of all, because he used to swim out between the reefs to meet it, where he would be showered with many a tempting morsel of tasty, if slightly decayed, food from the ship's galley. He seemed to sense the arrival of the ship—usually the *Vamba*—long before anyone else. Probably he could feel the thudding of the engines in the water.

"A dirty, rusty old tramp of some one thousand two hundred and fifty tons, the *Vamba* had plied these waters for years, scraping a living shipping anything from scrap mining machinery to ground nuts and copra, and probably some illicit merchandise to offset any decline in trade. If the pilot was delayed—and he usually was by the a previous engagement

at some bar—the *Vamba*'s skipper would follow Bachcha through the inlet with every confidence that his ship was in good hands. The dolphin's knowledge of the waters was uncanny. So much so that the natives believed he was some sort of a god.

"He would leap and dive, swimming under the ship, appearing first on one side then on the other. But at the critical moment he would swim up ahead to guide it to safe anchorage in the deeper waters.

"A successful entry always heralded more food from a grateful crew. And he had the belly on him to accommodate two meals in half an hour. He could swallow a loaf of mouldy bread followed by a bunch of overripe bananas by way of desert without batting an eyelid.

"When he first began this sort of routine, Bachcha frequently lost the ship because he couldn't understand that it had to keep to deep water. He'd end up dashing off into the shallows among the rocks, showing off his diving ability to all who cared to watch.

"The regular traders knew Bachcha well. Never once did that fish let them down. I never knew of a ship that lost so much as a barnacle on those rocks. He soon became a local legend and the port prospered a little because of it; what with visitors who came to see for themselves."

The Old Sea Captain reached for his glass and wetted his lips.

* * *

One day, sometime in early May of last year, the *Vamba* was scheduled to drop food, medical supplies and mail off at Jadetown, but didn't turn up when expected. This was no great surprise: she'd been late before. And especially with the mercury in the high 90's and the humidity breaking all records, nothing in that sink-hole was going according to schedule. No one worried very much. They just sat out on their verandahs hopelessly trying to catch a breath of wind, and watching the heavy lowering monsoon clouds rolling in from the sea, heralding the approach of a storm.

Two lascars were seated on a couple of rum kegs, long since empty, and perched on the edge of the jetty that served as part of Jadetown harbour. They gazed, absently, out towards the narrow, rocky entrance.

They didn't say very much. But when they spoke at all it was in an odd dialect born of all the countries in which they had served as longshoremen.

Removing the dead cigarette butt from the corner of his mouth, one of them pursed his lips and spat reflectively into the turgid waters lapping against the pilings.

"That *Vamba* they talking of. She got very little chance to make port *ce soir*, you think, eh?"

His companion remained silent. Just sat and gazed out towards the spindrift lashing itself to a frenzy against the rocky barrier that sheltered Jadetown and its miserable inhabitants from the rising storm.

"*Très peu de chance*," he replied, at last.

"What she bring but mail and medical supplies, and mebbe some food.

But I theenk mebbe she don' make eet. Ever' time she come somet'ing happen to delay her. She got a jinx, I sure."

And so they sat. One gazing at the rocks and occasionally spitting into the sea. The other staring at the rotten planking between his feet.

Back in the town, where makeshift shutters were being nailed into place or propped up by a handy plank ripped from a neighbour's fence while he was similarly engaged round the back, the people became a little more concerned with the approaching storm. They had precious little to save from it, but what they had, they wanted to preserve.

It was odd the way these people who owned nothing, because they owed more than they had to spend to the company store, wanted so desperately to hold on to something that they could legally be deprived of without redress. Yet they took all the precautions they knew of to defend what appeared to be theirs from the onslaughts of nature.

Shortly after dark, lightning began to streak across the sky. The flashes became more frequent and the thunder claps louder. A few large drops of rain splattered down on to the dusty streets. Then there was a pause, as if Nature was taking a deep breath before unleashing her full fury and violence.

Suddenly there was a giant thunder clap and the heavens opened up. Out at sea the wind had risen to gale force and the gleaming white crests of the breakers could be plainly seen as their luminescence pierced the approaching darkness.

By now the rain was coming down in torrents and the dirt floor of the main street was little better than a river. Outside a dingy old lean-to store stood an indeterminate figure huddled in a tattered plastic raincoat, without sense enough either to go in out of the rain, nor even to move out from under the bent and rusted Coca-Cola sign that poured water down his neck in a steady stream.

Perhaps he had nowhere to go. There were many like him who lived and slept under the stars. The climate was never intemperate enough to force a man to seek more than the barest shelter, except in the monsoon season. Some of them would catch a fever at these times, and if not taken into the hospital would probably die. Some did; some didn't. But that was the way of their life. They really didn't care enough to work or even to live.

A rattle-trap car, one of the few in town, made its uncertain way past the figure, who neither looked up nor gave any indication of recognition.

It turned out of sight and headed down towards the quay. Crouched behind the wheel and giving occasional glances out of the side window was the pilot; several sheets to the wind but still—or so he thought—competent enough to guide the *Vamba* into port. The windshield wiper had long since ceased to function, even before the car had seen the miserable shores of Jadetown, and every time he stuck his head out he cursed Henry Ford in a good rounded

mixture of Swahili, Italian and English.

With springs a little more reproachful than usual, because of the damp weather, the smoky vehicle ground to a halt on brakes that were only metal on metal. Adolf, an Alsatian-Frenchman by birth, reached under the sea for a little fortification.

"It was never like this on the Suez. The pilots there had comfortable quarters and it hardly ever rained," he reflected. "Why in hell did I ever come to this stinking place?"

And then he remembered. The fellow he had punched on the jaw and who had fallen into the Canal, breaking his neck on a lock gate as he went. That was a good enough reason. Adolf was a gentle man at heart, which was one of the reasons he turned to the bottle for a little consolation. And he found it. He drank no more, no less, than he ever had. He had found his Nirvana and it corresponded well with his income. Made up as it was of his basic pay from the Portuguese government and a small income on the side: a sort of bribe money which didn't give his conscience too much trouble.

He pulled a battered cheroot out of his breast pocket and lit it up to await the *Vamba*. The rain beat steadily on the leaky tonneau of the car. A pleasant sound interrupted only by the storm as the lightning crackled to earth, hell-bent on destruction, but generally falling harmlessly into the sea.

He looked out past the two figures still sitting on the upturned rum kegs, obviously enjoying the soaking cool of the rain after the long heat. There was, as yet, no sign of the *Vamba*.

"Oh well," he reminisced, "she never is on time. No reason why she should show up early tonight."

He looked at his watch in the dwindling light. Only just able to make out the figures and hands through the cracked glass. Seven-o-two he noticed with the precision of a man of the sea.

Jadetown boasted only one intermittently reliable radio set, kept in condition by an Indian operator who had learnt his trade in better days while working for a rich colonial in his native country. Shortly after nine o'clock a message was received from the *Vamba* stating that she had been delayed by storms all the way up the coast. She asked for the harbour pilot to be at her disposal and for permission to enter harbour that night as one of the crew was sick with suspected acute appendicitis. Few ships the size of the *Vamba* carried a doctor and she boasted little more than a first-aid kit by way of medical supplies.

The harbour pilot had misgivings about letting the ship come in that night with the high sea that was running. He knew for sure that his tiny launch wouldn't last the length of the inlet, let alone reach the *Vamba*. He realized, too, that it might go hard with the man who had appendicitis, but he instructed the operator to radio back to the ship with instructions to heave-to until day-break and try to ride out the storm.

Meanwhile the *Vamba* had reached the channel marker that heralded the

nearby rocks. When the reply from shore was received the skipper cursed the pilot roundly for a drunken coward, had a brief consultation with the mate, and decided to take *Vamba* through, pilot or no damned pilot. Once in the bay he intended to steam as close to the quay as possible, have the sick man rowed ashore, and return to the middle of the bay to drop hook for the night. It was a risky business, but the skipper saw the gamble and liked the idea enough to accept the odds.

A few yards in from the channel mouth, a particularly vicious looking rock reared its ugly head from the depths, the breakers dashing themselves into spindrift against it. Half submerged, it would rip out any ship's bottom that touched it. In good weather it happened to be Bachcha's favourite haunt. Although at times like this he knew better than to hang around such a formidable opponent. But he wasn't too far away. He knew a ship was approaching, and with the uncanny sense that dolphins have, he probably knew that it was the *Vamba*. To him storms were a part of life, and he set out to meet the oncoming vessel.

Vamba was fighting her way unsteadily up the channel, buffeted by the wildly lashing seas from all sides, when an extra heavy patch of cloud obscured what little light remained. In the utter darkness of the moment the skipper lost his only landmark; a tall, exposed patch of rock that had been silhouetted against the sky.

The ship had a small searchlight on the bridge which he ordered turned on. Steadying himself against the heaving deck, the operator searched desperately for a familiar landmark that would help the captain fix his position. Suddenly he shouted words that were lost in the teeth of the howling gale. The skipper handed the wheel to the helmsman and rushed towards the light, realizing the urgency of the message. There, plainly reflected in the piercing white beam, was the familiar shiny black body leaping around in the crashing waves and apparently enjoying the whole performance. It was Bachcha, who completed his customary half-circle of the ship and then set off hard to port.

The skipper, who no longer had any idea of his position, hastily gave the helmsman orders to follow the fish and then commended himself to God's mercy. In the same breath he threatened the searchlight operator with a flogging if he lost sight of the dolphin.

The helmsman swung the wheel hard round. But as *Vamba* answered her helm, the stern grated against a rock. The ship shuddered from stem to stern and hesitated. But not for long. The next second she freed herself, and propeller thrashing the water she once again gained headway.

By now every man who could be spared had been ordered on deck to keep watch on the dolphin. Some came sleepy-eyed from their bunks, but soon awakened to the fact that their lives depended on it, while the skipper clung to the heaving bridge, alternately cursing and praying to all the gods of his wide acquaintance.

Slowly they edged their way through the treacherous narrows, every crew-man straining his nerves to keep in sight the sleek, black body of the big fish that swam before them.

Unexpectedly, the water grew calmer, and the wind seemed to abate. This was it. They were in the bay at last.

The townspeople still swear, when they speak of the incident, that they heard the crew cheer roundly above all the noise of the storm as the *Vamba* steamed cautiously across the bay to within a few cables length of the quay.

One of the ship's boats was quickly lowered, but the heavy swell made it impossible to manhandle the sick man into it. He was in great pain, and could no longer stand. After three attempts, a line was thrown to the waiting crowd on shore and made fast. A hastily constructed bosun's chair was rigged and the sick man transported to shore, where eager and willing hands transferred him to a stretcher.

With no anchor down, and not enough headway from her engines, the *Vamba* was drifting dangerously near to the shore. The captain gave orders to return to the middle of the bay. The engine telegraph rang "Half-ahead" and the ship swung round.

Bachcha began his customary scavenger hunt. He swam in close to the side of the ship in search of food, plunging and soaring with the waves. Needless to say, the overjoyed crew were all on deck emptying most of the expendable food supplies into the water in appreciation of the miraculance guidance to safety.

Happily splashing around, Bachcha took a dive under the stern. At this moment the ship gave a shudder and the already nerve-wracked skipper thought that they had hit a rock. He ran to the end of the bridge and yelled to the searchlight operator to train the beam round the length of the ship.

Anxious eyes peered into the heavy swell as the light played over the water, but there was nothing to be seen.

Because it seemed useless to continue, the skipper ordered the light switched off and the crew back to their stations, and returned to his cabin to await a report on the extent of the damage to the ship.

As he sat writing up the ship's log he heard the engine telegraph ring for the engines to stop. Within seconds the hook rattled through the hawsepipe and splashed into the sea. He felt a surge of relief, knowing that at last they were swinging at anchor safe for the night with the promise of some rest.

The first mate and the ship's carpenter came together. The first mate informed him that the ship was riding comfortably at anchor in twelve and a half fathoms of water, and the ship's carpenter informed him that there was, as far as he could tell, no serious damage to the hull. In a better humour the captain invited them both to stay and have a stiff rum with him.

The following morning dawned dull and overcast, but the rain had

slackened and the wind had dropped. There was still a heavy swell in the bay, so the skipper decided to ride at anchor where he was. A radio message was sent to the harbour-master informing him of the decision and requesting news of the sick man.

He had been oprated upon and was doing as well as could be expected. Then came the curt demand from the harbour-master to know what the hell he thought he had been doing when he entered the harbour without benefit of skilled guidance.

The use of the word "skilled" rankled with the skipper. And being no gentleman, told him what the hell he had been doing with language that should have caused a short-circuit in the transmitter. And I guess he made his point. To this day you'll hear it repeated in many tongues in any heathen dive on the East Coast.

Bachcha was never seen again after that night; and what happened to him still remains something of a mystery. However, it is told that the body of a dolphin was washed ashore at Jadetown about a week after the *Vamba* left. They say the fish had been killed by a severe blow on the neck which had almost severed the head from the body. But the carcass of a dolphin rotting on the beach of Jadetown was no novelty. And the natives said it couldn't be Bachcha since he was a god; and gods don't die. Many of them still scan the waters of the bay awaiting the return of the big fish.

* * *

The Old Sea Captain sat back and lit a fresh cigar. "Well, it's getting late," he said, addressing his audience. "I guess I'll be on my way home. Good night, everybody. See you tomorrow night, George."

He buttoned his duffle-coat and walked slowly towards the door.

George, the innkeeper, stopped polishing his glasses and looked up.

"Good night, skipper," he said, as he watched the retreating figure. "It's a pretty dark night, so mind how you go."

As the door closed behind the Old Sea Captain, one of his listeners stepped quietly up to the bar.

"You know the old boy pretty well, don't you, George?" he said.

"I guess so," George answered. "Me and the skipper was shipmates for all of two years."

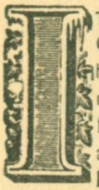
"What ship were you on?"

"Why, the *Vamba*," said George, with a grin. "The old man likes to tell that story, you know. Because he says it sort of eases his conscience. He thinks he killed Bachcha when he started up his engines that night in the bay!"

THE FATAL POWER

VIC NEAL



T WAS WITH A SHOCK that Graham Long realized he had a quality other men had not. He was hurrying home from his work in an insurance office after a trying day. It was a Monday and the weather was wet and miserable. All this was bad enough without the practice by the local bus drivers of dashing off just as one was almost close enough to board the vehicle.

On this particular evening his Number One hate-driver was waiting and, sure enough, as soon as he got within yards of the bus, it shot away, leaving Graham standing wet and furious.

"If only I could stop him," he thought, then his temper getting the better of him, he suddenly concentrated all his bitterness on this bus and its driver and he fumed "Stop! Stop!"

Whether he really did it or whether it was just coincidence he didn't know at the time, all he did know was that the bus came to a grinding halt.

Graham walked over to the bus driver—the rain didn't mean anything to him now—and he said, "Now *you* can get out in the rain. Perhaps this will teach you not to shoot off when passengers are almost in the bus, and every time you try it on me I'll stop you." Of course he was only kidding and so the driver thought. "You get to hell out of it, mister," he snarled, and then he clambered down from his driving seat and opened up the bonnet over the engine.

Graham watched from a doorway. He felt a pang of regret for the passengers in the bus, but he was still seething with temper and intended to see the matter through.

After checking all the usual causes of engine failure without success and getting wet and most annoyed, the driver glared at Graham in the doorway and said, "I suppose you can let the ruddy thing start again now?"

"Certainly," Graham replied. "Just let me get aboard and you can go." He was enjoying himself now because he thought this coincidence had taught the driver a lesson. So he climbed on to the bus and jokingly said to the conductor: "All right, full speed ahead." The engine started up savagely and they roared off on their way.

Graham became very thoughtful now. "Of course it was only a coincidence," he thought, "how *could* I stop the thing?" He shook open his paper and tried to read. "It isn't as if I had some strange power . . . is it?"

He spent a busy evening and the matter went out of his mind, but next morning as he set out for his office he couldn't help thinking "I wonder?"

He soon had the opportunity to put to the test any strange power he might have, because through thinking about it, he was a few seconds adrift and before he could reach the bus stop the

bus was off again. Although it was his own fault this time, he was annoyed and shouted sharply, "Stop! Stop!" And breathlessly he watched the bus halt. The driver was pushing away at the starter switch, and as Graham jumped on to the bus, he murmured, "O.K., full speed ahead," and the engine burst into a roar and they were off.

He was a little concerned now, could it be that he *had* got something? Suppose he *could* stop engines at will? The thought was sobering and a bit frightening to him. Just suppose he could do this, what power he would have. Perhaps he could stop accidents, he might even become a "Secret Weapon". What nonsense he was thinking, but he decided that he must know for sure.

The neighbouring town of Leehead gave him the opportunity. He tried it on a bus, a lorry and a couple of cars. In every case it worked. Also he found it was just as easy to release them and let them go on their way. This, then, was serious. If he could turn the fluence on unconsciously, in a fit of annoyance even, he would cause accidents and casualties. This worried him considerably, but of course he couldn't stop now. He had to go on using this power—it was like a new toy—but he must go slowly. Already he was outside the realm of getting even with awkward bus drivers.

He had to put this thing to a further test, and, with some leave due to him, knew that he would have the opportunity to do so.

How should he start? Where should he go? These two questions kept burning into his brain. At last he decided it must be London. There he would find all forms of transport and if this power was to be of any use to him it had to be able to deal with all kinds of engines.

He soon had his first chance. As he got out of the train in London and whilst he was still on the platform, another train was coming in to the adjacent platform, approaching at high speed. The driver sounded his whistle. A porter shouted, "Look out, she's going to crash!" This was a real test. "Stop! Stop!" he willed in a concentrated effort. The train slowed down and eventually stopped just a couple of feet from the buffers. Graham was perspiring heavily, but he had saved a disaster. It was a crowded suburban train and the casualties would have been heavy. He followed the porter and other officials to the driving cab whilst the horde of city workers scampered by apparently unaware of the danger they had so narrowly missed.

The engine driver seemed puzzled. "I don't rightly know what happened," he said. "I couldn't shut off the steam and the brakes wouldn't work, then when I was prepared for a crash, suddenly everything worked all right. What a bit of luck." "Luck!" Graham muttered, half-convinced.

He wandered over one of the bridges spanning the Thames and leant on the parapet looking down on to the river, still thinking of the train incident. A tug approached pulling four empty barges. Just before it disappeared under the bridge he com-

manded the tug to stop, then crossed the bridge to see what would happen. At first he thought he had failed in this case as the tug still sailed on, then it slowed and he realized that the current had kept it moving as well as its own volition through the water. At last it was obvious that only the current kept it moving, then he "released" it and watched it pick up speed and proceed on its way. He could not see any of the crew, but he could imagine the skipper scratching his head and wondering what the H— had happened. Amused at this thought, he went on his way grinning. For the first time he relaxed and realized it was not all going to be serious.

He walked into the Strand and numerous opportunities occurred to test his power, but he was not inclined to take the risk of causing accidents. He soon realized that this part of London was too congested really to try it out.

An aeroplane roared overhead. He looked up. "Could he stop aircraft? If so, then there was no limit to what he could do and he began to see the great possibilities. He could go to the Government and offer his services. He might reap honours and riches, but until then he must keep this thing to himself. If the wrong people hear of it he might find himself in severe trouble.

He took a bus to London Airport and looked around for a possible approach. It would be far too dangerous to tackle the plane after it took off or before it landed; one undergoing tests would be ideal as he had no wish to interfere with the passengers.

It wouldn't be easy, but eventually he spotted a large four-engined plane being serviced and presently it taxied to a runway and its engines were opened up. Here was a real test—could he silence the vast power of those four engines? The plane moved forward. He concentrated everything on stopping it. . . . The engines spluttered and stopped. At last he was convinced that his power could stop anything mechanical. Releasing the plane and not stopping to see the effect, he went to the main building to think out his next move. This was not easy, so he decided to return home and make his plans. Whatever he decided, he knew he was in a position to make a lot of money. The point was how?

On his way back to the station he carried out a few more experiments, all of which were successful. In the train he decided that he must get in touch with the Government somehow. Surely they would be able to use his powers. It was no use, however, trying to make a direct approach, because he would probably get no nearer than the doorkeeper. He was not prepared to release the information to anybody but the top officials. Once the news got out, he would be a marked man—a prey to unscrupulous agents.

He made his approach through his M.P. in a letter stating that he had vital information for the Government. If this could be presented by the M.P. it would be of great value to him too. The reply came promptly, Graham was invited to meet the

M.P. This was more than he'd dared hope.

The M.P. greeted him courteously, "I must admit I was intrigued by your letter. It conveyed a sense of urgency. What exactly is your problem?"

Graham explained his project stressing that he thought it of such value that he wanted it to go direct to the Prime Minister. The M.P. looked at him strangely.

"Just so my friend," he said. "Of course, the Prime Minister is a very busy man. I will see what can be done and let you know. I hope you will enjoy your day in London." He rose and opened the door.

"Look here," said Graham hurriedly, "I've come a long way and this is the real thing, you'll feel pretty bad about it later if you let it go. Give me a chance. Let me try it out on you."

After a moment's hesitation the M.P. nodded. They went out into the courtyard, got into his car, and drove to the Horse Guards Parade. There Graham asked him to drive to the far side of the Parade and then turn back coming full speed towards him.

"Stop!" ordered Graham.

The car stopped. A moment later he released it. They did this a couple of times, then Graham slipped back into the car.

"Good heavens, you're right," said the M.P. "I'll see that the right people know about this as soon as possible. In the meantime keep it to yourself. I'll contact you as soon as I can—it's sensational!"

On his way back in the train Graham's thoughts were in a whirl. What had he landed himself in for now, he wondered. Had he done the right thing or should he pull out; perhaps this thing *was* too big for him. But he didn't want to work in an office all his life and be a nobody; this thing could bring him plenty of money and influence. He would be somebody big—yes, this was the thing all right.

Two days later the M.P. called on Graham and told him that he was to do a series of tests on a secret range somewhere in Scotland. All the big people would be there, including the Prime Minister. The tests were to include heavy armoured vehicles and aircraft, also something else which the M.P. said he really did not know about. They were both excited and Graham was already experiencing a feeling of importance; a Member of Parliament calling on him, and the top brass in the country to witness his tests.

They travelled north together. Sleep was almost out of the question, but Graham did manage to doze intermittently. In Scotland they were met by a car and taken to their destination, where Graham was introduced to some of the boffins who were interested in the tests.

On the way to the testing ground, to the amazement of the scientists, Graham stopped a couple of cars.

At the site he discussed with the Ministers and Officials already waiting there, details of the project.

The Prime Minister joined them. Graham was nervous now and tension was mounting. For a moment he

wished he could drop everything. Then he thought of the prize, and the sensation he would cause, and the big noise he would be in a short time now.

The tests began. Cars, heavy vehicles, tanks, single and in groups, all of which he found he could stop easily. Then a jet aircraft was set to take off straight at him. By this time he was sweating and had to use all his powers of concentration. Again the test was successful.

The Prime Minister congratulated him and so did many others, and he felt big. Then the final test was explained to him. He was to stop in motion a captive rocket mounted on a trolley set on a narrow railway track. This, then, was to be the culmination of all his efforts. To prove his faith in his own powers, he stood on the track facing the rocket.

Feeling strained and weak after his concentrated efforts coupled with his lack of sleep, he took up his position and signalled that he was ready. He felt sick and dizzy, wanting to get it all over quickly. He stood for a moment, directing his will at the distant rocket. With a burst of flame and a whining scream it hurtled towards him.

"Stop! Stop!" he screamed, alarmed at last. He stood mesmerized like a rabbit caught in the glare of a car's headlights on a country road at night. The rocket tore towards him.

"Stop!" he shouted again.

The rocket's motors cut out and he went suddenly limp. But, hurled along by its own velocity, the rocket suddenly slithered off the rails and tore forward broadside on.

The dark mass loomed at Graham Long, then crashed over him. He was killed instantly, and the wrecked rocket piled up with a mass of twisted rails.

The Prime Minister turned to his colleagues.

"What a terrible thing. This chap really had something hadn't he?"

Then they all turned sadly away.

There's nothing certain in man's life but this:
That he must lose it.

OWEN MEREDITH.

THE YELLOW MAN

MAX F. HARRIS

Illustrated by Norman Battershill

MRS. CLARA Hawkins shoved the door open and reeled into Detective Bronson Travis's office, her light blue eyes swimming, her thin face pale. Detective Travis hopped out of his chair, raced around the desk and took her trembling arm. He slammed the door shut with his heel and led her to a steel-frame chair in front of the desk.

She plopped in the chair, the hem of her blue skirt rising to her chubby knee knuckles. Her shoulders, shaking in her blue suitcoat, fell back against the back of the chair. She gasped, her eyes on the floor.

"This is the first time I've been out of the house in a week, Detective Travis," she said.

The detective nodded, his slender face showing concern.

Her eyes, widening as they darted up to his, burned with fright. "I was afraid to phone you or any of the police! The yellow man might have found out before you got to me!"

The detective's trim black eyebrows shot skyward. "The yellow man?"

"He follows me everywhere!" Mrs. Hawkins cried. "I want police protection!" Suddenly, her arms shaking violently, she reached into a red clutch bag, yanked a handkerchief to her eyes and bawled.

"Here, Mrs. Hawkins," Detective Travis said. "That's not going to help matters." He twisted from the arm of her chair, circled the side of his desk and sat down. His dark brown eyes glistened. The detective's nose lay high over firm lips. His cheeks dipped into a dimple on a close-shaved chin. His hair was gleaming black, matching the tie that sliced down his slender chest between the flaps of a grey coat. "Mrs. Hawkins, suppose you tell me about the yellow man."

Mrs. Hawkins straightened up in her chair, her narrow shoulders trembling. She dropped her hand and handkerchief to her lap. Her fortieth year had lined her face but not her neck. She cringed. "I first saw him about three weeks ago, right after you said the case was closed. I got a glimpse of the yellow raincoat at the supermarket but thought nothing of it till the next day—when I got the eerie feeling that someone was following me. I was going to my hairdresser's. I looked back over my shoulder and saw the yellow raincoat, the green gloves and the black umbrella."

"Did you see his face?"

"He keeps his head hid so well that I'm not sure he has a face." Mrs. Hawkins eyes widened. "The closest he's gotten to me, I saw no face! One night as I came home from a bridge party, riding with a group of the girls, I saw him standing beside the house swinging the black umbrella, his face and head hidden in the leaves of a rosebush."

The detective nodded. "Did the other girls see him?"

"They had let me out and were driving off when I saw him."

The detective knitted his eyebrows. "Does this yellow man remind you of anyone you've ever seen?"

Mrs. Hawkins dropped her eyes. "He looks a lot like Craig, just taller. And Craig had a yellow raincoat. But it's still in the house."

The detective toyed with a fountain-pen. "Are you sure it's not your conscience, Mrs. Hawkins?"

Her lips trembled. "Of course, I'm sure," she cried, darting her eyes over her shoulder towards the door and swinging them back. "You said yourself that I didn't kill my husband."

"I said that there was no evidence that you killed Craig Hawkins."

"That's saying the same thing, Detective Travis."

He nodded. "Almost." He looked at her. "Why did you come to me, Mrs. Hawkins, and not Heltenbauer or Recks?"

Mrs. Hawkins smiled. "Because you were the only one that seemed to understand. The other two detectives were so harsh. They blared at me so, especially Detective Recks. They would never help me. I was glad when you stepped into the case."

Travis nodded. "I like to see justice done. We cops get carried away sometimes and it seemed to me that Heltenbauer and Recks were guilty of just that. They turned up nothing."

"It was an accident, Detective Travis," Mrs. Hawkins said, wide-eyed. "I swear it! I don't care what Detective Recks and Sarah Deveneux say. I didn't know that Craig was seeing that Deveneux woman. And how that Recks got the idea that maybe I pulled the trigger I don't know."

"You had powder—"

"I had powder burns on my hand only because I was sitting so close to my husband when the pistol exploded. He made me nervous every time he cleaned that ·38 in the house and I was pleading that he go out into the garage. You said yourself that lab reports showed that the pistol was in his hand, that none of my fingerprints were on the pistol. That's the way it was, too, Detective Travis." Mrs. Hawkins shuddered. "I don't like to think about it."

"I understand," the detective said. "About the yellow man?"

"I saw him every day for two weeks —in a car behind me, in stores downtown, outside friends' houses waiting for me . . . everywhere. The yellow coat always facing me, the green gloves shining even in the dark, the black umbrella swinging."

"Many people have a feeling that they're being followed," the detective said, "when, in reality, it's only an illusion."

Mrs. Hawkins' fingers trembled. Her face grew pale. "I see him in my sleep now, a great headless man swooping down at me flapping the raincoat and umbrella, the gloves shining. When he gets close, the head of a skeleton pops up from the collar of the raincoat, grinning." She cringed, her cheeks bloodless. "One time Craig's head jumped up and the skin peeled off his face, blew away and left the grinning skeleton. I can't take it any longer!" She blew out her breath. Her chest slumped. "Detective Travis, I want police protection."

The detective frowned. "That's not up to me, Mrs. Hawkins."

Her eyes started. "You've got to do something!"

"I'll phone the chief," he said. He picked up the receiver of his phone and dialed, waited for the connection. "Chief, this is Travis. Mrs. Craig Hawkins is here and says that a man is following her all the time. She wants police protection."

A pause.

"Yeah, chief. She's broken up."

A pause.

The detective frowned. "Okay, chief, if that's the way it's got to be." Detective Travis dumped the receiver in its cradle, lifted his eyes. "The chief says nothing doing, Mrs. Hawkins."

Mrs. Hawkins gasped.

"We get requests like yours everyday from cranks, Mrs. Hawkins. Now, I don't think you are a crank, and the chief probably doesn't either. But he says your imagination may be playing tricks on you. There's no reason for anyone to harm you, Mrs. Hawkins."

Mrs. Hawkins bit her lips.

"Do you have a picture of the man?"

Mrs. Hawkins' eyes blazed with fright. "No! No!"

"Then my hands are tied," the detective said.

She cringed, looked at him help-

lessly. "Isn't there anything you can do?"

The detective studied. "I'll get the squad car on that patrol to keep an eye on your yard for a couple of nights."

Mrs. Hawkins looked at the floor.

"Is that all, Mrs. Hawkins?" the detective asked.

Mrs. Hawkins pinched her lips, snatched up her clutch bag and rose, her legs wobbly. She reeled to the door, opened it slowly, craned her neck round the jamb and looked down the hall. Suddenly her back quivered and she slammed the door, twisted round and plopped back against the door, her face white. She breathed jerkily, her eyelids fluttering.

"Did you see the yellow man?" the detective said, his mouth gaping.

"No," she gasped. "But he's about somewhere." Her voice trembled. "I can't leave, Detective Travis. I can't face that monster ever again. Sometimes his green gloves turn to long claws. I hear them scratching at the back door every night now!"

"I told you what the chief said," the detective said. "I'll take it on my own responsibility that the squad car checks by your house the next two or three nights."

The paleness of Mrs. Hawkins' face shot to her ears. She shook in every limb. "I'm not going to listen to the flapping raincoat and umbrella outside my window another night—knowing that it's just a matter of time before the yellow man crashes his skeleton head through the panes and swoops down on me."

The detective kneaded his brow, extended his arms to his sides. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Hawkins. There's nothing else I can do."

"Oh, yes there is," she cried. She wobbled to the chair in front of the desk and sat down, her eyes wide.

"What?"

"You can lock me up!"

"Why?"

"I killed my husband!"

The detective's mouth popped open. "But, Mrs. Hawkins. The lab reports . . ."

"I guess Detective Rocks was closer to the truth than any other," she said. Her shoulders slumped. "That night, I got Craig's pistol out, acted like I was cleaning it. I had planned what I was going to do for weeks. Craig'd asked me for a divorce. I'd have given him a divorce if he'd had any money to keep me up. But Sarah Deveneux had taken all his money. But, at least, he had a $50,000 insurance policy which I could collect in case he died from an accident, and I'd get the house, too. I could live comfortably till I found some way to make a living—open a dress shop or something. He came into the living-room and I said let's play Russian roulette. He said I was crazy and jerked the pistol out of my hands. I told him I didn't really know how to play Russian roulette. He sat down by my side, pointed the pistol at his temple and started explaining. I held my hankerchief in my fingers. I darted my hand over his hand and pushed his finger down on the trigger before he knew what happened. He was dead in seconds."

Detective Travis grimaced.

Mrs. Hawkins, her face sweating,

looked at the floor and blew out her breath. She was obviously relieved. "Now you can lock me up," she said.

"Yes, but first we'll have to get your statement down on paper," the detective said. "I'll get my things and we'll go down the hall."

He hopped out of his chair and went around to the closet behind Mrs. Hawkins' back.

Mrs. Hawkins breathed easier. Her face looked composed for the first time since she'd shoved back the detective's door. She placed her hands on the arm of her chair, preparing to get to her feet.

She glanced over the back of the chair toward the closet. Her arms shot out from under her and her head fell back against the top of the chair. She screamed and her eyes walled up white as marble towards the ceiling and her breathing almost stopped.

Looking at her from the closet door, Detective Travis stood in the yellow raincoat, his green-gloved hands swinging the black umbrella—a satanic grin on his face.

THE SILVER SWAN

JOAN FORMAN

Illustrated by Juliette Palmer

THE TUMULT HAD died down, and it was quiet again now. Piers lay very still under his chestnut tree, watching the fat little clouds float across the sky between the leaf spaces. The leaves rocked gently in the wind, green fingers interlaced, white candles nodding; all was cool and green and secluded here under the chestnut, and the grass beneath his cheek smelt clean and fresh. There was no sound of voices now, and the village street was empty of the sound of the mourners' footsteps. Piers strained his ears. All was quiet save for the hiccupping of a cuckoo, sleepy in the afternoon sun.

It had all begun the day before yesterday. So much had happened that Piers's small brain could hardly comprehend it. It had started like any other day. He had got up at half-past four with his father and gone to milk the cows; then after breakfast he had slipped away on his own—a silent, small shadow, trying to make himself as inconspicuous as possible, in case his mother found some jobs for him. He had slipped away to the village rubbish dump, a favourite playground, to see if there were anything fresh to take home. Sometimes there were broken ornaments or old leather bottles; once he had even found an old pistol, but his father had taken it away from him and hidden it.

As he walked, Piers had scuffed his bare feet disconsolately in the dust, and pulled crossly at his kerchief which had begun to chafe his neck. It was going to be hot. And there would be nothing on the rubbish heap this morning. But he was wrong.

At first he had thought it was just an old glass bottle, with a battered cork, and very dirty, but he had picked it up and looked at it, and something about its shape attracted him. He had taken it to the village pond and washed it, rubbing the grime off its bulging sides with a dirty finger. And when at last it was revealed in its blue-green glory of glass, he had gasped; for there inside the bottle lay a tiny ship, with spars and masts and delicate rigging gleaming, like spiderwebs on an autumn morning. It lay on a bed of white sand, its poop high and arrogant like the galleons the Spanish sailed two hundred years ago.

Piers's eyes were round with admiration. A real ship, of his very own. He clutched it jealously to his shirt, and ran with it to the top of the cliff, where he had lain all morning, dreaming. He had rolled on his stomach, and looked at the sea, and as he watched its changing turquoise lights, he saw himself sailing away to the horizon in his ship—his great, white, beautiful ship, which breasted the

waves like a silver swan. "The Silver Swan"—that should be her name—it would be written round the prow in fine lettering: she would carry spices from the East and gold from the West: she would be chased by pirates; and there would be an island, low on the horizon, palm-crested, where the waves ran like little white horses towards the shore: there would be . . . Piers's head dropped forward on to his arms, and he went to sleep.

He had been late for dinner and his mother had scolded him. He had sat silent through the meal, almost too excited to eat. The bottle and its contents lay hidden under the table, and he could feel its round bulging shape with his foot. After dinner he had slipped off again, afraid of his mother's interrogation, and reluctant to reveal his treasure to anyone.

He had come down quietly to the village green, and sat in the warm tangle of bushes at one side, half-concealed from view of the road by the foliage. The bottle lay on his lap, and he twisted it this way and that to catch the sunlight in the tiny sails: when he held it at a certain angle, the ship gleamed like mother of pearl. Piers sighed with happiness.

Then the children had come into the street: Marian Robins, in a red stuff petticoat; lanky Tom Thwaite; Dickon Moore and his little sister, Anna; blonde Marjory Baines. Piers shrank farther into his bushes, clutching his bottle. He played with the children sometimes, when he wanted

to. Dickon and Anna Moore lived next door and sometimes came in to see him. But he wouldn't play with them today. He didn't mean to show them his ship. He clutched the bottle tightly round the neck in case they should take it away from him. He watched from the undergrowth. Marjory Baines was jumping over heaps of refuse in the gutter, her long fair hair bouncing on her shoulders; Tom Thwaite was idly punching Dickon Moore, for it was too hot to fight seriously; Marian Robins was chalking patterns on the wall, and rubbing grimy hands down her flounced stuff petticoat. Little Anna Moore was . . . Piers looked at Anna Moore, and sat up with a sudden jerk. Her small bright face was turned towards him, and her short red hair stood on end like a brush; then as he watched, the face grew paler and paler until he couldn't see it at all: it had completely disappeared. Anna Moore had a body but no face. He screamed, and leapt to his feet. The short sharp sound cut through the air; for a moment there was silence—the children stood, transfixed in their play, rigid, like statues; then they turned to look at Piers, mouths agape.

He opened his mouth and pointed. "Her . . ." he said. His finger quivered at Anna Moore. "She's going to die." The children stared, with blank faces, uncomprehending. They looked from Piers to little Anna and back again. Then Tom Thwaite threw back his head and laughed.

"He's crazy!" he said. The solid, normal voice reassured them, and they laughed and resumed their play, the golden air closing round them again. The incident was forgotten and Piers Bollen ignored. But Dickon Moore had fallen silent, and presently he took Anna's hand, and trudged away homeward up the hill.

That night, Anna Moore died.

Piers lay now and thought of it, his body rigid with horror. Next morning his mother had said, "Little Anna Moore died last night—it may be the plague." And he had trembled—not from fear of the plague, but because he had known that she would die: her face had disappeared, and he had suddenly known that she would die. He had told neither his parents nor the other children what he had seen. How could he explain it? They wouldn't believe him; his mother would say he was ill and dose him with herbs and liquorice, and his father would say it was imagination and beat him. And yet—his mind stumbled as he tried to apprehend the thought—he had met Marjory Baines this morning in the street, and she had looked at him, goggle-eyed, then turned and bolted into the house. He had passed Mrs. Robins with Marian, and her youngest child, William, and she had pulled her skirts away and looked at him askance then hurriedly crossed the road, urging her reluctant children ahead of her. Piers pondered over these facts and could not understand them.

Did they know that he could tell when people were going to die? And were they afraid of him because of it? That must be it. He sat up. Suddenly he no longer felt safe; the kind, friendly security of the village seemed

to have disappeared, and he seemed to be walking in a strange place where there were many enemies. He fondled his bottle, and it gave him some comfort to see "The Silver Swan" still sailing on her sandy bed for her unknown destination. On a sudden impulse, he got up and ran all the way home to his mother, clutching the bottle nervously to his chest.

For a week Piers rarely ventured out of doors. He felt, unaccountably, that eyes were watching him from all the windows, and certainly it was remarkable how empty the village street became when he entered it. Once when passing the inn, he had overheard fat Joe Porter speak his name. Piers looked round. They had not seen him go by. There was Joe Porter, almost bursting out of his clothes, fair Jim Sullivan and Damon Saunders, the lean, dyspeptic apothecary. Piers slipped round the corner of "The Golden Lion" to be out of sight. Yes, they were talking about him. He heard Saunders say in his rasping voice, "Yes, he'd better watch out. It is my belief he has the evil eye. Which of us will he pick out next, is what I want to know." There was a murmur of agreement, and the sound of beer being swilled round in the mugs. Then Piers heard a woman's voice, and with a shock he recognized Mrs. Moore, the mother of little Anna. "He killed my little girl. He said she was going to die. He's an evil boy, I tell you. I shall not rest easy while he lives in this village."

Piers did not wait to hear more. He took to his heels and ran, and as he ran he cried. He was not sure what they meant by all their words, but the voices were unkind, and he was afraid. The tears ran down his hot little face on to his shirt and dried there. He would tell his mother when he got home, he decided, and she would make it all right for him. But when he got home his mother wasn't in, and when at last she did arrive, she was tired and cross, and hurried him off to bed before he could say anything about his fears.

But the days passed, and the long summer drifted on. It seemed as though Anna Moore's death and Piers's prophecy had been misted over by the heat haze which rose day after day from the yellow fields. Each day Piers would go with his father to the long fields, to help with the harvest, but presently as the sun swung high over the earth, Piers would steal away to the copse at the top of the field, and there he would lie, with "The Silver Swan" by his side, idly watching the rooks wheel and dip, and listening to the lazy complaining of the wood pigeons from distant trees.

As the end of the harvest approached, the village began to prepare for the Harvest Home. Booths and side shows sprang up overnight, like mushrooms, on the village green. "The Golden Lion" hung out gay awnings and bedecked its front with huge barrels of beer; and stalls selling sticky sweet-meats and pasties appeared on the smooth grass like exotic flowers.

Piers came along from his house, idly swinging his bottle, and whistling unevenly between his teeth. He passed the pond, with its litter of duckweed

on the surface, and entered the main street of the village. The day was incredibly hot, and still, with that stillness which seems about to burst into flame.

Piers wandered round the stalls, looking at this and that, and listening to all the oddments of conversation which drifted to him. There was a man selling hot fruit pies (on such a day!), and another selling flat oaten cakes: there was a blousy woman in beribboned bodice, telling fortunes, and a man with a tall hat doing the thimble-rig trick, and collecting the yokels' money. There was a Punch and Judy show, and a performing dog. There was a dancing bear, which looked hot and tired and unhappy, plodding round and round on its heavy feet, to the accompaniment of its owner's whistle.

Piers paused beside the bear, and looked round for people he knew. All the village was there, except those too small, too old or too ill to come. He could see fat Mr. Porter, almost as round as one of his own barrels, beating his chest and making some jovial boast to a crowd of young men and girls, as they stood under the chestnut trees. And there was Mr. Saunders, as dark and dry as a liquorice stick. He was rubbing his chin with his hand, and watching the thimble-rig man, with a sardonic look in his eye. And there, by the Punch and Judy (Piers glanced round) was young Mr. Sullivan. Piers stopped quite suddenly, and his mouth fell open. He gaped at Mr. Sullivan, and then the soles of his feet began to grow cold and his clothes stuck to his skin. He was going to . . . He shut his mouth tightly, and bit his lips till they bled, but the words *would* come. They suddenly burst out of him in a high, piping cry. "He's going to die. He's going to die," he cried, and the shrill voice carried right across that crowd and froze it into silence. For a minute nobody moved. Then they turned. "He's going to . . ." began Piers, then saw their faces and stopped.

And at that second, Jim Sullivan dropped down dead. For a moment, nobody spoke or moved. The body lay huddled on the ground where it had fallen. Then there was a scream. It was Mrs. Moore. She shrieked on a high hysterical note and the spell was broken. The crowd suddenly surged, and a babble of voices arose. Over them came the apothecary's.

"Piers Bollen," it shouted. "The evil eye!"

"The evil eye. He has the evil eye." The crowd took it up and the whispers were thrown from one to another like something unclean. The whispers became a shout and the shout a roar, which beat in Piers's head like blood.

"The evil eye! The evil eye!"

Then the apothecary's voice above the rest, harsh as a ripsaw.

"What shall we do with him, then? Is he to kill us one by one? What shall we do with him?"

Then a bay from the crowd, like a pack of dogs, answering their master.

"Drown him!"

And again the howl. "Drown him! Drown him! Drown him!"

Piers turned blindly and began to

run, and as if that were a signal, the crowd broke and thundered after him. He heard the feet pounding like those of wild animals, and their screams and imprecations came to him from a great distance.

He ran on down the village street, faster than he had ever run before; ran till his feet seemed not to touch the ground; ran till he seemed to be flying—and all the while clutching his precious bottle. His lungs were almost bursting and his eyes starting from his head, when at last they caught him. He was passed roughly from hand to hand like a parcel, while they tied his feet and wrists, and fastened the heavy stone about his neck. As from a great distance, he saw his father and mother, held by force in the crowd's centre. He saw with surprise that they were both crying. And then the apothecary's arm shot out and up, and Piers felt the cold green water closing over him. The last object on which his eyes rested, was the small, green-gleaming bottle lying on the cobbles. He could not see the ship.

Many hours afterwards, the apothecary came back to the pond, drawn perhaps by some morbid desire to return to the scene of the afternoon's madness. He found the bottle, lying on its side where it had fallen. The last rays of the sun filtered through the glass and touched the tiny ship with silver. The apothecary polished it on his sleeve. "A pretty toy," he said. "It will do well for my little Margaret." And he took it home.

When he gave it to her, the little girl was wild with delight. She pranced round the table looking at it from all angles, and admiring its beauty. Then all at once she ceased dancing and fell silent; and a strange look came into her face. She said it quite quietly, with her eyes on the ground, not looking at her parents.

"I can tell when people are going to die," she said.

The bottle lay on the table, and the sun gleamed silver through the little ship's sails.

THE SLENDER CORD

ELIZABETH MARTIN

IN THE SHADOWS of the thick twisted hawthorns just beyond the bus terminus Bert waited. He watched Angela start tip-tapping, tip-tapping confidently along the country road that led to her new home. Food, carefully selected against her husband's homecoming next day, lay neatly packaged in the gay red holdall swinging so blithely from her fingers.

The dipped, swerving headlamps of an outgoing bus briefly illuminated slender tapping heels, and despite the brutal predatory instincts possessing him, Bert intuitively ducked his head, digging his chin deeper into his high upturned collar. He fingered, for reassurance, the dark glasses he had to carry, inevitably, in his pocket.

Since childhood the pattern of Bert Harriman's life had been set by an antipathy to bright, unexpected light. As a baby he had screamed involuntarily when the lights were switched on, not off.

He was six when war broke out. Once, when a questing searchlight caught and held his face inexorably for a full five minutes, Bert was reduced to pitiful frozen immobility. Afterwards, he would cringe, plucking convulsively at his mother's skirts, if even the tentative beam of a powerful torch caught his eyes. It was then that Bert's mother thought of the dark glasses.

"Keep them in your pocket, ducks. Then you can always put them on in time if the Light won't go."

To his teacher and anyone else sufficiently interested to listen she explained confidentially, "It was the measles you know. Left a sort of weakness like. My neighbour says..."

But the doctor at the clinic smiled and assured her that there was nothing really wrong with her son's eyes. "Purely a nervous reaction, Mrs. Harriman. Ignore it as much as possible. He'll outgrow it, given time."

So Bert grew up striving to hide his handicap. His mother died when he was sixteen, but with the nest-egg of Saving Certificates she had somehow left him, and his own uncanny faculty for spotting a winner, getting on to a "good thing", he was able to support himself after a fashion.

The glasses provided a screen behind which he could withdraw from reality. He retreated more and more into some Stygian world of his own.

He developed a peculiar sense of artistry, and it was the passing impact of Angela's dramatic colouring, on one drab November afternoon, that roused, for the third time in his life, the fierce familiar feeling now consuming him.

Her seal-black hair against a cool narcissus-face and carnation mouth that caused him to tail her assiduously until he knew her immediate movements by heart. . . .

Left the new pretty house eight forty-five every morning Monday to Friday and drove into town with her husband, an Assurance Inspector. Returned alone by the six p.m. bus. Husband returned between seven and eight-thirty p.m., erratic but generally within these times *except* on the first Thursday of the month. Then he didn't return until the following Saturday midday. . . .

The house also met Bert's specific requirements. Diffused recessed lights in all the principal rooms: soft-champagnes, pink-pearl, oyster-glo. Subdued, friendly colours. Nearest building a farmhouse, set at least two hundred yards from back adjoining hedge.

A nice, leisurely, indoor job for a change.

Bert was till savouring his luck as he stood at last, concealed behind the half-opened kitchen door, the one giving on to the hall. Behind him another door leading to the cloakroom and the garage.

He had circumvented his unwitting hostess by about five minutes, negotiating the garage side door as she ran, with a muffled tippety-tap, tippety-tap, up the stairs to change.

And then she came down again, quietly, in a softly clinging, nebulously flowered housecoat. Bert heard her open the lounge door at the foot of the stairs, close the front blinds and draw back the dividing doors before she crossed the small dining-room to open the other door into the kitchen. Exactly as he had foreseen.

After several weeks of prudent observation, of carefully husbanded desire, he relished the approaching moments of culmination. His fingers sought with affection the flick-knife concealed in his pocket, registered also the dimpled, empty sheath that should have contained his glasses. He must have dropped them in his agitation by the hawthorns. They'd probably still be there—later.

The significant drumming of the sliding doors was still echoing in his head, mingling with the increasing throbbing urgency of his own pulse-beats. Building up to a tremendous vital tattooing at his temples as he anticipated the soft light filtering through behind her as she crossed the floor—to feel for the switch beyond the boiler. Beside the door where he was waiting. Again, automatically, his fingers assessed the threat of the knife.

Then Angela stood on the threshold. She hesitated, just for a moment, almost as though forewarned by some feminine instinct of her own. But finally she stepped forward, tentatively raising her left hand. The whole kitchen, cool-blue and glossy-white, was immediately flooded with bright paralyzing light.

She looked up, beyond the small acorn button now bobbing gently by her shoulder, beyond the white slender cord to which it was attached, to the floodlit ceiling. She laughed a little, tolerantly, affectionately, and spoke to the small, solitary goldfish swimming in its bowl against the stark expanse of the kitchen window.

"He's gone and forgotten the shade after all, Tommy! Never mind, we've

got the nice new light to see with."

It was then that she saw Bert standing transfixed by the dazzling rays from the bulb's powerful filaments. The sinister applications of the knife, grappled now by convulsive fingers, somehow penetrated her suspended conscious thoughts. And even as she waited for the scream she found she could not utter she heard instead the splintering of glass on the opposite side of the kitchen, saw through the fissured back door the reassuring bulk of her farmer neighbour.

She watched, as though still lost in some hideous nocturnal dream, as he cautiously approached the intruder.

But Bert still stood there mutely, staring upwards, his grotesque, stone-like immobility broken only by the spasmodic throbbing of the dilated veins at his temples. No longer even conscious of the empty spectacle-case within reach of his other, empty hand.

How wonderful is Death,
Death and his brother Sleep!
One pale as yonder wan and horned moon,
With lips of lurid blue,
The other glowing like the vital morn,
When throned on ocean's wave
It breathes over the world:
Yet both so passing strange and wonderful!

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY.

Desire with loathing strangely mix'd,
On wild or hateful objects fix'd.
Fantastic passions! maddening brawl!
And shame and terror over all!

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE.

THE HOUSE THAT REMEMBERED

H. O. MANSFIELD

Illustrated by Del

WITH A SINKING heart Marta listened while Gregory made it clear that, whatever she said to the contrary, he intended buying the house. Not only was it what he had dreamed of, but now it seemed almost to beckon them across its wide lawns. Using all the attraction of its two hundred years of warm red brick it begged their approach and stretched out its arms beyond its age-old beech tree and its weeping willow beside the lake.

Marta, petite and brown-haired, her dark complexion in contrast with her close-fitting white suit giving her almost a Latin look, tried to shed her misgivings and agree with Greg. She shuddered now at the thought of that long, lonely lane, making this a world of its own, shut in. It was all right for Greg; his only thought was of escape and solitude. But she, remembering long adolescent years in the outback, ached for the heart of any city rather than this solitude.

She sighed in a resigned way, smiled faintly and murmured, "Very well, Greg, have it your own way. You usually do."

"If only the goods inside come up to the packing," Greg said more as

aside than answer, as they moved across the lawn, "I'll have it whatever the cost."

So they passed the whispering beech and sad willow and reached the porticoed entrance. The housekeeper —looking like a chunk of the original brickwork, Greg remarked later— gave a frigid welcome. Throughout the itinerary she moved before them, her long black skirts a-rustle like dry leaves. Consistently she ignored Marta and Greg had to pass on information interpreter fashion.

Yes, the house had been vacant two years—since Captain Delayne had lost his wife and gone abroad. House and furniture went together. Undoubtedly room could be found for whatever Mr. and Mrs. Verdrey liked to add. "But of course, everything here is period," the housekeeper concluded with undue emphasis.

She was willing to remain as housekeeper. In fact, when Greg put the question, her singularly remote manner relaxed a shade. "I'm sure you'll be happy here—*both* of you," she said. Marta regarded pause and emphasis as ominous and her dislike of Mrs. Pelham increased accordingly.

Conveyancing called for delays, heart-lifting to Marta, frustrating to Greg, whose heavily marked face grew darker day by day. Hotel life in half the countries of the world made him hunger for peace and quiet, which Marta knew to her cost, for it had been her life. Hourly he eulogized the house, till it became almost an obsession with him.

She remembered too well the day he at last held the deeds. Gone was the old frustrated look; his eyes danced. Only a restlessness new to him belied completely his satisfaction.

"Do we get in now?" Marta asked dully.

"We-ell—hardly—yes, I s'pose so —— You see—" his voice dragged. "There's something I don't altogether like. I don't understand it."

Her heart leapt unreasonably.

"It's just—just that in the last thirty years six people have owned the place —and—and, well, I wish I'd known before. The damn-fool lawyer didn't say a word."

Marta acted light-hearted. "Pouf! Thirty years," she exclaimed. "What's that? It's easily explained."

"I'm not so sure," he shrugged shoulders uneasily. "Just let me finish what I was saying and you'll see what's got me worried."

She saw pain in his eyes and interpreted it as frustration. "Don't, Greg," she urged, "go ahead. You want this place. It might be harder for me if I knew all. I'll adapt myself."

Greg kissed her perfunctorily, turned for the door, paused, turned again as if unable to make up his mind about something, while Marta gazed back silently, her mind alerted for the first time to see some greater presentiment she was unable to dispel.

Undoubtedly the house hid perfection behind its Georgian exterior: dignified hall and stairs, high-ceilinged rooms, pastel-coloured panelling, furniture blending elegance with comfort. It breathed an atmosphere of luxurious contentment and friendliness as though it said, "I'm charmed to have you here. Relax and be

happy, my children." So strong was the feeling that at times even Marta doubted her former fears.

Only with the housekeeper did she feel ill at ease. Mrs. Pelham never came out of her shell, never smiled, never offered the tiniest grain of intimacy, so that Marta, blood of colonials in her veins, found her approaches repelled and felt chilled and repulsed in consequence.

Summer came with long bright days and the house lulled her to a sense of false security so she hardly noticed the passage of time. Day after day Greg left early and spent long, inquisitive hours getting the feel of the countryside, often not returning till long after dark.

Only then did she feel the house become unbearable. A subtle secret resentment built up towards evening, making it, however warm the day, cold and menacing. Impossible to explain perhaps, but she had to get outside or she would have screamed. So, rather than experience the loathing the house seemed to feel towards her, she went out towards the beech and waited there till she heard Greg's step or the sound of the car along the lane.

It was midsummer. Marta had been alone all day—Mrs. Pelham was attending a funeral. She had left that morning wearing a look of anticipatory gloom and deep black. The day, perfect in itself, died slowly, leaving in its wake soft whispering warmth in which bats wheeled and darted over the lake, birds twittered and an owl hooted in the beech's topmost branches. So strong was her revulsion against going in that evening, they both remained outside till near midnight.

At last they could stay no longer. More from habit than necessity Marta switched on the lounge lights. She gasped, stiffened and stepped back hastily. A huge blood stain disfigured the carpet. There was no mistaking it. Cold shivers chased each other down her spine. Greg, hearing her sharp intake of breath, crossed over.

"Look, Greg," she hissed, pointing with trembling finger.

His eyes took on a puzzled look, his tired, heavily lined face seemed to sneer. "What is it?" he said. "What are you pointing at?"

His look, his manner, his questions even, annoyed her. "Don't be blind, Greg," she snapped. "There's a great pool of blood. Do something. Look, there, on the carpet—there—where I'm pointing—and you say 'What is it?'."

His eyes took on a peculiar dancing light and he came closer. "What is this?" he drawled. "Some sort of game? I've told you I don't see a thing."

A strange, deep anger she couldn't understand welled up in her. The blood was so real. She bent down, closer—it *was* there, red as only fresh spilt blood could be. She touched the carpet. It felt damp and sticky. The tacky feel on her fingers repulsed her nauseously. Strange thoughts—that she was momentarily someone else—thronged her brain. Greg she hardly recognized and then, as in a flood, her own thoughts came back, but the blood stayed there. Greg still wore

that pitying, half-sneering look she knew so well. At sight of it her anger flared again.

"Well?"

"Don't be a fool, Marta. I can't make out what you're ratting about."

"I can't believe you, Greg. You're being deliberately blind—and cruel—for some purpose of your own. You know I've feared this place from the first. It hates me—I know it does. Something's really happening now—but you—you'd rather drive me out of my mind to get your own way. You're lying, Greg—lying."

She was still on her knees, looking up and Greg crouched just behind her. She just couldn't believe his perplexity was real. If it was, then he'd work himself up into one of his usual rages. The thought of this sent a shiver of fear through her. The room felt suddenly so cold.

"I'm frozen," she moaned, lifted her hands as if to hold them to her, then, as if afraid to look at them, let them fall to her sides as she dropped, half-sitting, to the carpet. "The house is so chill," she repeated, "so chill—and, Greg—" her voice sank to a mere whisper, "I'm terribly afraid."

At her words, Greg seemed to brighten and suggested a stiff drink. When she refused, his concern turned to anger. "I'm sick of your blamed hoohah. Trouble with you is you've got a fit of the nerves—you're hysterical. I'll put this right somehow, tomorrow."

She watched him covertly. Could there be some underlying current to all this? To her the blood stain was as terrifyingly real as anything in her life. Why did he deny it? She felt herself in the web of two mysteries and all she could do was to play safe with one tangible thing: her knowledge of Greg and his ways.

She rubbed her eyes dramatically—and rose from her knees. "I'm tired—I must be—or p'raps it was the sudden light." She smiled innocently and shook her head, doll-like. "There, it's all O.K. now, Greg. All O.K."

He looked his relief, though lines of anger still marred his face. "My, you had me proper rattled for a moment, Marta," he said as he poured himself a drink.

Though she kept her eyes away from it all she could, she still saw the blood stain and her body ached with inward terror at its vividness and the way it seemed to be spreading. When they at last went to bed she lay staring into darkness long after Greg was asleep, every feature of the lounge etched in her mind, every word he had spoken drumming in her brain. Why had he thought of hysteria? Never in his life had he known her hysterical.

Hours passed leadenly as she tossed and rolled. The moon set, and night, no longer luminous, seemed to close in threateningly. Unable to bear suspense longer, she slipped out of bed determined once more to satisfy herself.

The stairs took an eternity. When she reached the lounge door she stood still, hand on switch, fixing in her mind a mental picture of the room. There was a chair, a chaise-longue, an occasional table, there, between the last two, the deep welling stain.

When at last light flooded the room it took all her will power to keep her from fainting. The stain now spread out arms like a blotch of ink on blotting paper. She turned towards the stairs again, calling out in insane terror and flung herself on the bed.

Greg, awakened, was sneeringly hostile. "I half-guessed you were bluffing. I said it was hysteria. Now I know it."

She beat her pillow and sobbed. "Can't you see I'm frightened to death, Greg?" she asked, and when he turned away she sank down moaning. She waited, hoping that he would show one streak of pity. At last she rose and threw herself on her knees beside his bed. "Take me away from here, Greg. It's all I ask. There's evil here—I feel it in my bones. That down there is a warning. Take me away before it's too late."

He turned and she shrank from the flashing anger in his cold eyes. "I shall not," he said with cruel emphasis. "Here I am and here I stay. You . . . you do as you like. I'm going to ask Julia here tomorrow."

"Julia!" Marta started to her feet, tense with sudden fury. "I'll not have that woman here, I tell you. She may be my half-sister but I hate her. She's always wanted to come between you and me, Greg. She detests me." She lowered her tone, her mind alert with sudden suspicion. "So—is that why you want to convince me I'm hysterical?" When he didn't answer, she wailed, "If you ever loved me, Greg, don't bring Julia here."

But Greg turned on his side. "Don't be dramatic," he snapped, "I want to get some sleep."

Thoughts of Julia burned her brain like a searing flame. She could never forget Julia's bitter envy when she first took Greg home up-country—and her almost pathetic attempts to win him away. She was a gangling girl then and Greg treated her with arrogance and amused contempt. But now Julia had come to London; Julia had pursued an art career; Julia was transformed and completely *svelte*, attractive, brittle and tigerish. Already Greg had suggested asking her for a week-end. Was he attracted—had he been seeing her? Now he was demanding her here in a different role. She would be in authority. Her old venom would have full rein.

Dawn was breaking before she fell into a deep sleep. She had no dream but a sense of awesome dread hung nightmare-like over her mind. When consciousness returned she had to make an effort to remind herself where she was. Greg was forgotten till she saw his empty bed beside her own and then, strange as the half-return of a childhood memory, she momentarily had a vision of someone unknown occupying it. Black, murderous thoughts, foreign to her, stirred her mind and wrestled with her waking awareness till she thought she was out of her mind. Vaguely she remembered sleeping tablets; they couldn't possibly be responsible.

It must have been late because Greg, fully dressed, burst into the room, red-faced and furious. "That housekeeper's back," he growled. "She says there's no stain in the

lounge and never has been. I thought it was damned tantrums—or hysteria. Well, I've phoned Julia. She's no engagements just now. I'm right keen to see her."

He looked in the glass, smirked and rearranged his tie. "I'll take the Borgward and bring her back tonight."

Marta turned her face to the pillow and said nothing. For a moment Greg stood hesitant, then with a snort turned for the door and was gone.

A knock disturbed her. Mrs. Pelham entered and stood by the bed. "Ye're not well, Mrs. Verdrey," she said in her dull, flat voice. "Your husband says ye've been seein' things." With her yellow hands folded one over the other, she looked for all the world like a wardress in some old-world Bedlam. Marta sat up, angered that the woman should speak so familiarly.

"Mr. Verdrey has taken you into his confidence," she said imperiously.

"Aye, aye," she nodded. "Ye've seen a blood stain."

"So what?"

The woman's pale face glowed with sinister triumph. "Only that the moment I saw ye, I knew ye'd see something. Most pretty women do. They come an' they go—one way or the other, ye know. It's been so since Sarah Cobbett stabbed her husband—oh, more than a hundred years ago. The house's never wanted fancy women here since. An' it never will."

Her voice reeled on with relish, repeating the phrase, "They come an' they go. Aye, they come an' they go," while her evil eyes marked Marta's every change of expression. She glanced at herself in a cheval mirror close by and the picture she saw shocked her into action. Repelling her feelings she laughed—hollowly perhaps, but it restored some of her needed composure.

"Leave the room, Mrs. Pelham—and take a month's pay in lieu of notice," she flashed. "You've set out to frighten the wrong person here. I'm Australian: too matter of fact to pay attention to rubbish about murders and houses that don't like people."

The woman became in a moment coldly malevolent and backed towards the door. She turned. "Mr. Verdrey'll be bringin' home his fancy lady now? It's usual."

"My husband is bringing my sister here—at my request," Marta answered icily. "Now go."

The door closed. Alone once more she wept to think how right the woman had been.

The day dragged to its hated climax —Greg's return with a Julia more exotic than she could have imagined. To begin with, she was inclined to handle affairs in kid gloves, lingering on her career, her flat, striving to appear sisterly, avoiding any subject likely to offend. "Marta, darling," she cooed, "we're going to enjoy ourselves together like we used to do. It's years since we had the opportunity."

Suspicious and alert, her mind seething with dark, writhing snake-like thoughts, Marta refused to be drawn. In a voice she hardly knew as her own she said aggressively, "Don't be false, Julia. I know well

why you're here. You snake, this is the opportunity you've waited for for years."

Julia bristled and her deep eyes glinted dangerously. "Really, Marta," she exploded, "you're intentionally insulting." She turned to Greg. "Is this an act she's putting on?"

"Not an act: a warning," Marta broke in above Greg's bluster. "Wait till you've seen the blood stain—or whatever it is you will see. Wait till you've felt the haunting terror of this house. You'll wish I'd frightened you away in your first hour."

Greg, ugly with passion, shouted, "Stop talking rot, Marta." He waved his hands in a hopeless sort of way and spoke to Julia. "I told you. You see—her nerves have gone to pieces. I can't stand much of this. She'll see a psychiatrist as soon as possible."

From then on he relaxed visibly and devoted his attention to Julia. "You'll love this house," he enthused. "It's good having someone appreciative about the place." He leered and leaned closer. "You dress like you're part of the place. Well, you know what I mean. That dress, now—it's stunning."

Ignoring Marta, he stood up. "Bring your drink to the lounge. You'll have to step over the blood stain—if you can see it. You can't take big strides in that gown," he joked, then remembering, frowned at Marta. "Coming?" he snapped.

It was hard to bite back the blistering retort her surging thoughts demanded. "No, Greg, I'm not. I'm hysterical. Understand? Hysterical . . . I'm feeling worse now you've returned." She sneered. "Go and enjoy yourself with Julia—she's dying to be sociable." She turned on her heel, in her ears Greg's coarse laughter, Julia's whispered darts.

It was two o'clock when she awoke, her mind still afire with turbulent thoughts to which consciousness no longer acted as a check. The night was pitch black and eerily silent. Some unusual mental probe had shaken her from sleep. She sat up, nerves tensed, drenched with perspiration, muscles constricted spasmodically.

The house might have been dead but from somewhere outside came an ominous call. It was a man's voice, harsh and rough from fear. "Julia, Julia, where are you?" it called and, a minute later, petulant and angry, "Where have you got to, you little fool?" Then from the distance came a long, low, answering wail rising to a shriek. There was the sound of a splash; and all was silent again.

Hardly aware of her actions, Marta leapt from her bed and rushed headlong to the stairs. From an adjoining room an evil chuckle told of the housekeeper's watchfulness. Below, from the open lounge, light cut a path across the dark hall.

She felt a sense of elation that carried her dulled body downstairs. The house was speaking to her, telling her why she was there. The blood stain had done its work at last. The house had become her friend. A chorus of voices shouted "Sarah Cobbett, Sarah Cobbett," and she knew that that was her name. As she passed into the light from the lounge she

saw her hands red to the wrists and laughed aloud. The voices laughed with her, driving her on to the great open door leering out into the night from beneath its portico—out to complete her revenge.

The shriek she had first heard was music in her ears, drawing her on.

The cold steps of the portico checked her pace but not her purpose. She knew where she'd find the woman—the poor, blind fool—down by the lake, waiting for him.

Heavy feet now ran, now moved stealthily across the lawn. The same voice, unknown to her, called brokenly amid sobs, "Julia, Julia, I can't find you. . . . Answer me, where are you?"

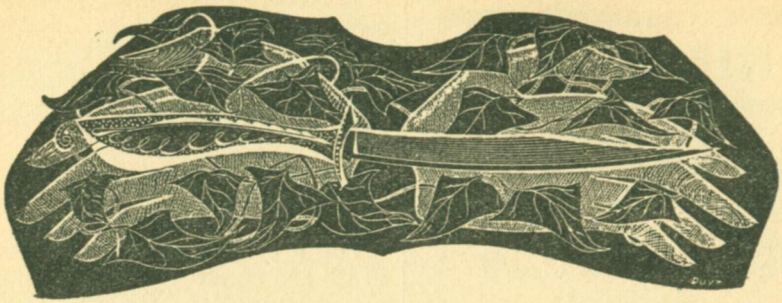
Who was the man? Who was Julia for that matter? The only man *she* knew was her husband, and him, she, Sarah Cobbett, had just stabbed to death. The thin-faced fool had been unfaithful to her for months. Now he demanded to bring his slut into the house. Well, the knife now stuck through his heart. His blood already was staining the floor for all eternity to see.

She must find the creature. Her feet flew over the wet grass; her nightgown clung cold to her ankles. She must hurry for the steps came nearer, the voice grew more insistent. Where it had called Julia it now called Marta.

She was beside the lake now. A dress floated there, half in, half out of the water. Its metallic sheen caught her eye. Like a flash she realized fate had half-fulfilled her intentions. She bent down, felt for the body's warmth through the sheath, grasped and with panting effort thrust the body under.

The calling voice was now so near she bent lower, pushing apart the overhanging willow branches to hide beneath them. Her bare feet slipped and slid on the soft muddy verge. One foot lost grip on a slimy root. She flung up her arms in a vain attempt to grasp a bough but there was none. Her hands, wet and slippery, found only weak willow twigs that bent and tore beneath her weight. She overbalanced and fell down . . . down . . . down.

As the waters closed over her, the name "Marta" rang clear in her ears. In a blinding vision of finality she now knew many things. Julia was gone beyond recall, that last call had been for her, the voice was Greg's voice. He was going to be alone with the house he loved and would grow to hate. He would have much explaining to do—and the house wouldn't help him. It would be waiting—for another woman.



CROOKS IN BOOKS

A review of some recent crime, mystery and detective books

STEVE AUSTEN

"THE BIG H", by Bryan Peters (*Boardman*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

Another secret service adventure. Brandon from Britain and Lundstrom from (U.S.) C.I.A. get together on major allied counter-espionage effort (cf. Bond?) in the States, and the balloon is going up any moment. There is plenty of action, beatings-up, thrills and a card-game gamble or two (cf. Bond), and some rather unlikely leaps into world strategy. There's also a girl, Wanda. Slick, fast and exciting, then, but not exactly convincing or memorable.

"DIE FOR BIG BETSY", by Bill Knox (*John Long*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

Big Betsy is a cracking great transformer built in Scotland by the subsidiary of an American company. There has been sabotage and there looks like being more of it. An American insurance investigator is sent over to stop it. The police (Scots) are also interested. A fast and not unexciting plot, putting Kennan, the insurance investigator, to some physical if not mental strain, plus the *de rigeur* female with body and mystery to match, add up to a slightly better than average book. The industrial background seems reasonably convincing and the gallery of well-observed minor characters spreads a layer of authenticity but, alas, not thickly enough to make me believe in the main protagonists or the plot. Nonetheless, Mr. Knox knows how to put a book together and he has the potential for better stuff.

"CRIME OMNIBUS", edited by Kurt Singer (*W. H. Allen*, 21*s.*).

This is a popularized criminological anthology with some interesting cases

in it. It covers crimes in a good many countries and of several *recherché* specialities, and inevitably throws some fascinating (if not always original) light on criminals and the people who catch them.

"PERFECT CRIME", by Henry Kane (*Boardman*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

This is another excellent amalgam of wit and murder from the polished pen of Henry Kane. Dialogue, situation, plot, characterization, all are close to masterly and are wrapped round with Mr. Kane's pervasive and, despite the mayhem and criminal intent, gentle irony. *Perfect Crime* is a thoroughly enjoyable book with a delightful hero, a Quakerish unambitious bank-teller whose diffidence is unbalanced by his attractiveness to women and his physical strength. Mr. Kane, having perfected his own smooth and satisfying blend, can keep on delivering the goods to this address. Others may have to pay for it —but it's cheap at the price.

"EVIDENCE OF THE ACCUSED," by Roderic Jefferies (*Crime Club*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

A good simple murder, ingeniously plotted and very cleverly presented. Gun-dogs, Jaguars (full-size), elegant country houses with suitably elegant wives to decorate them, well-heeled barristers and chaps who are something (profitably) in the city: these constitute the flora and fauna. The police, in contrast, are assiduously lower middle-class, intrusive and relentless as ferrets: nevertheless, they are outwitted. Mr. Jefferies' narrative

style, admittedly "in character", sometimes fails to match the ingenuity of his plan but, all in all, this is a pleasing enough story and puzzle to while away whichever go-slow you might happen to have to fancy.

"INVESTIGATIONS ARE PROCEEDING," by Jeffery Ashford (*John Long*, 12*s.* 6*d.*)

A good documentary centred on a country divisional detective inspector. An apparently senseless small shop robbery-with-violence, with convincing circumstantial evidence, leads to the conviction of a police constable. Other threads weave in and out but the main pattern is the D.I. proceeding with this investigation and others leading from it. Very workmanlike in his execution and painstaking in his homework, Mr. Ashford has produced another thoroughly good book. Certainly one of this assortment's Best Buys.

"THE RELUCTANT SLEUTH", by Frances Crane (*Hammond, Hammond*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

Love and detection amongst the ever-sunny, sea-washed smaller resorts of Florida. The hero is an amiable misfit who has come into money and is on holiday. There's a murder and he's brought in on the investigation because he was once a cop. Enter, too, not so heavily disguised, his ex-wife, but loaded. . . . And so it goes. Light-hearted but quite clever plot. The wheel of fortune spins, up one moment, down the next, and the sun shines. O.K. for Florida.

"THE FINAL STEAL", by Peter George (*Boardman*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

Good, meticulous and (ultimately) moral tale of superbly planned major crime at the mercy only of human frailty. A cross-section of criminal specialist guys and dolls is assembled around the desert stretches of Utah. Taut and economical, if not exactly uplifting, this book makes pretty compulsive reading. Highly professional but somehow, I think, not to be recommended—on grounds of sex and slaughter—but for the more vapourish aunts or the more sensitive kiddywinks.

"HOURS TO KILL", by Ursula Curtiss (*Eyre & Spottiswoode*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

Ursula Curtiss, a known mistress of the sensitive (slightly lady novelist) suspense thriller, has come up with another sensitive suspense-ful thriller. I am not altogether convinced that this is one of Miss Curtiss's strongest artefacts, although it contains almost all the right ingredients. A rented (but comfortably middle or even upper income group) house; a brother-in-law (who might well have been a husband until he took on your sister) and sister who take off on one of those meandering, unsettled touring holidays (which means, in fact, that you can't get hold of them when you want to); a difficult child, a castaway from some still continuing and unresolved matrimonial disorder (the parents having nothing to do with you or the house); mysterious circumstances such as the death on your temporary doorstep of a local trades-

man—and so on. Quite frightening, pretty effective and not—let me stress—a waste of money; and yet, I somehow feel, certainly on the evidence of some of her earlier books, Miss Curtiss can do better. There is something a little machine-made, a little too slickly professional—not, *please*, that anyone should think that I am against professionalism as such—about this latest Curtiss novel. But, when all's said and done, Ursula Curtiss is still well up in the first division.

"THE GOLDEN RENDEZVOUS", by Alistair MacLean (*Collins*, 16*s*.).

This is Ulysses (and, for that matter, Navarone) MacLean at it once more. Merits? Excitement. Narrative power. A first-rate story-teller. An improbable but capable (just) of holding water plot-line. Good and usually pukka gen about life at sea. One of the best and biggest robberies yet invented. Disadvantages? A tendency to stereotype characters; to standardize the prose style, and slightly to overdo the edge-of-chair gripping devices. Also perhaps to zoom rather too often, though never to hit, the inadequate unreality of the boys' adventure yarn. But, as you all know, this is just carping: MacLean is, deservedly so, a best-seller. And this is another rattling good best-seller. The most luxurious of luxury cruise liners gets involved in the most ruthless of high seas piratical bullion stealing. A dear little (almost-do-it-yourself) nuclear weapon also plays a part. However you look at it (the

book before the film; the book everyone else is going to be reading; how interesting to see what the *masses* like), this is good value for money. If you're really timid, you could try the local library, but I dare say there'll be a year's waiting-list ahead of you.

"MAN PINCHES BOTTOM", by Jack Trevor Story (*W. H. Allen*, 13*s.* 6*d.*).

A splendid title. And he does. In the book. I found this delectable; very funny, clever, exciting and altogether thoroughly satisfying—even if it were he that pinched and not me. Murder hovers on the fringes. The worlds of publishing and commercial art figure prominently. So do people and sex and all that jazz. Nicely observed, elegantly put together, with a nice (in its non-pejorative sense) line in dialogue, "M. Pinches B." is as good a reason as any for meeting, or renewing your acquaintance with, Mr. Story. Original.

"THE UNQUIET SLEEP", by William Haggard (*Cassell*, 15*s.*).

Mr. Haggard gets good ideas. This is the terrible and cautionary tale of a tranquillizer that goes wrong and becomes habit-forming. Whose fault is the addiction? What can be done about it? etc. But one of the ex-directors of the company that makes the happy pill is now a junior minister of the Crown. What then? As you can see, the basic cake-mix is admirable. The junior minister even had marital trouble; once an old flame turns up, he casts off sloth and gets back into fighting trim (physically,

that is: mentally he always was—all ministers are, by definition—tip-top, give or take 25 per cent). All this is encouraging, as are the glimpses of power, whether political or criminal, in operation. But Mr. Haggard overwrites, over-complicates. The *deus ex machina*, a phrase he is not averse to using, he lacks is a good sub-editor who would prune and simplify. This should be up in the realms of the pure alpha: alas, it rates a doubtful beta.

"SERGEANT CLUFF GOES FISHING", by Gil North (*Chapman & Hall*, 14s.).

Sergeant Cluff, Caleb Cluff that is, is a slow-talking, slow-moving country policeman. But he gets his man. How? Intuition plus horse-sense. I like Sergeant Cluff. I like the fact that he's a stolid, pipe-smoking, ponderous and a fishin' chap. In fact, I liked the book. If however you insist on knowing exactly what's going on, if you demand the crisp, wise-cracking sentences of the American invasion, if you can't abide the slow convolutions of country life and speech, then this is not for you. I thought it a good murder, pleasantly unorthodox in its setting and its solution, and I would award it a beta plus and advise any newcomer to Sergeant Cluff to give it a try. If ye didna like it las' time, ye'll niver like it noo.

"SWING HIGH SWEET MURDERER", by S. H. Courtier (*Hammond, Hammond*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

This clever, eerie, well-constructed murder story gives a rather nasty low-down on an—I hope fictional—

Australian lawn tennis championship machine. It is nicely done, however unpleasant the overtones, and the writing and the plot move along at a thrilling pace. The background is good, the collection of odd (and some of them are very odd) characters is skilfully rewarding and young love triumphs. What more can you ask?

"THE MURDERERS", by Frederic Brown (*Boardman*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

American; nasty; not for aunts—so ran my notes on this book. I could add that the setting is Hollywood, the Hollywood of out-of-work actors, beatniks, rich mistresses and tiresome, interfering husbands. Mr. Brown is always unflagging, effective and tough, although this is not, for me at any rate, one of his better books. In fact, ultimate dramatic irony and all, I don't think I like it very much.

"BODY BLOW", by Kenneth Hopkins (*Macdonald*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

This is another return to murder investigation by that splendid pair of gracefully aging scholars, Dr. Blow and Professor Manciple. The plot is original, the narrative good and the learned nonsense is as excellent as ever. This is not only a delightfully entertaining book, it is also delectably funny. Gratefully, and with recommendations to all literate lovers of murder, an alpha, pure, untrammelled and deserved, for Mr. Hopkins.

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