

LONDON MYSTERY



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QUARTERLY

No.
54

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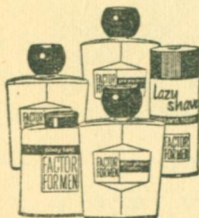
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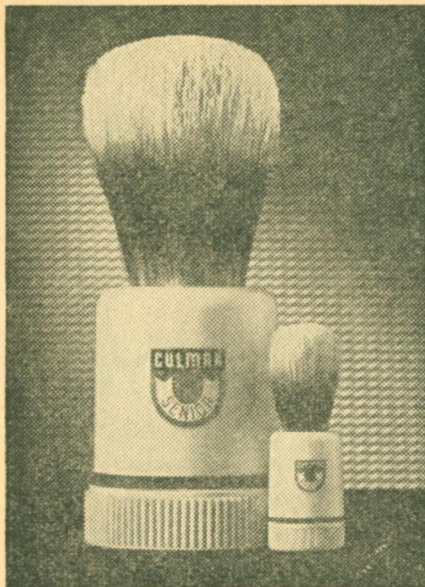
THE LONDON MYSTERY SELECTION

A fondness for mysterious and gruesome stories is by no means a modern taste. In very early days our Anglo-Saxon forbears listened entranced to tales recounting the deeds of heroes, and their struggles against evil monsters who dwelt under the dark waters or in lonely fens, coming out only at night to ravage and kill. In medieval times the ballads told of murdered lovers; of women carried off by the devil, often cunningly disguised as a handsome young man; and of people returned from the dead with the dank clay of the grave still clinging to their clothes who disappeared at cockcrow as suddenly as they had come.

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EDITOR.



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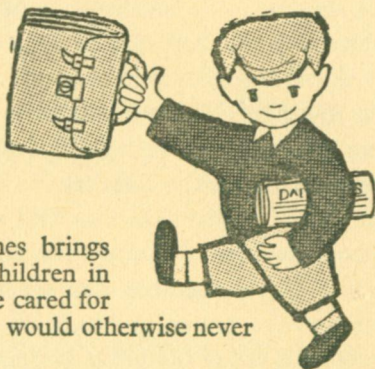
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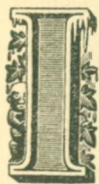
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NORMAN KARK PUBLICATIONS LTD., COURIER HOUSE, 77 BROOK ST., W.1

GILDA

L. P. DAVIES

Illustrated by Jennifer Gordon



IT WAS RAINING and the cold wind lashed at my face. But there had been the scream and I couldn't forget it, and so, instead of going back up the hill to where my fireside waited, I went into the darkness and desolation of the garden. I found what I was looking for curled under a bush. It was dead. And in the house behind, Reynolds played and laughed with his daughter, their faces bright with newly-found happiness. They played together in the nursery as if the thing under the bushes had never existed.

When I did go back home, Jill was waiting, her face pale and anxious. I brought the colour back to it by telling only part of the truth. What I had found in the garden was too incredible and horrifying for her to believe, even though she had known what was happening. Instead I told her how Reynolds had changed, how his experiments were at an end, and how he and Gilda had become just an ordinary father and daughter.

She believed me and she was relieved and happy. Reynolds took his daughter away from the house a short while later and we have never seen them since. Perhaps he spared the time to bury the body. Not that it makes much difference whether he hid it or not. The old house has stood

empty ever since, and now it is beginning to crumble. And nobody will ever come searching for a body when nobody has died or is missing.

Sometimes, when I am alone, I sit and think and wonder where they are and what they are doing. And after a while I go over it all again, right from the beginning when Reynolds had been living in the house for a little over half a year and a letter addressed to him had been delivered to my house by mistake.

Jill gave it to me when I got home from work.

"I could have taken it down myself," she said with obtuse feminine logic, "but it doesn't look very important—a circular I should say—and I thought it would be an opportunity for you to get to know him. I mean, we know there's no wife, only the little girl, and the woman who comes up from the village every morning. Men always get on better with other men. He'll talk better to you than he would to me. . . ."

Still wearing my overcoat, for it was October and cold, I went down the hill.

Reynolds opened the door to me. There were sharp ridges of colour across the lard-white globe of his face, and his thick lips were moist and loose. He had a glass in one hand and swayed on his feet. The letter



was tossed aside without thanks being offered. But he invited me inside. He said that he'd been celebrating.

"An experiment," he said, his speech slightly blurred. "The first signs of success after months of hard work. Perhaps the next time—" He

raised his glass. "I don't usually do this, the mind has to be clear. But I've earned it. . . ."

"Come upstairs," he invited. "Join me in a drink."

There was a fascination in the slow nodding of his head. There was something intriguing in the word "experiment". I closed the door behind me.

Before leading the way upstairs he opened one of the doors that led off from the hall and peered quickly inside. I had a fleeting glimpse of flickering fire-light and a child playing on a rug.

The room upstairs was only sparsely furnished. We sat one each side of a small and inadequate electric fire. He filled a glass for me and then leaned back, his face in the shadow. Coarse, prominent features were made all the more prominent by the glow of the fire. His grey hair was long and uncombed, his shirt open and tieless.

Drink had already loosened his tongue and he drank steadily while he talked. But while the words ran into one another the sense behind them was sharp and clear. He spoke about his experiment, looking everywhere but at my face, going over the whole horrifying thing almost as if he were alone and thinking aloud. He spoke of his daughter and the little room with the bare walls and the peephole. His face animated, he spoke of the first signs of success.

"It was there," he declared; "I couldn't be mistaken. I could see the movement, the gathering of the thought-forms. Grey, shapeless and transparent. But it was there."

My drink forgotten I listened in a cold, nightmare horror, trying to tell myself that it was the babbling of a madman and yet being forced to acknowledge the reasoning behind it all.

He had explanations for what was happening. Sensible, logical reasons.

"Think of it as a transmitter," he told his glass. "For that is what it is. The unsullied, receptive mind of a young child. Both a receiver and a transmitter, if you like. Imagination is the key-word. Accentuate that faculty by isolation and it becomes stimulated by virtue of self-defence. True loneliness will induce reaction. The overwhelming need for a companion." He refilled his glass without offering the bottle to me.

I was driven to protest. "But your own child——"

He smiled for the first time, a mirthless baring of yellow teeth. "I don't even know that she is. Her mother——" He shrugged. "A slut from some gutter."

A little girl locked in a cheerless room. No furniture, no pictures, no mats on the floor. Just the grey walls and loneliness of a prison cell. And always the watching eye.

I fought down my repugnance for the man and the horror of the picture his words evoked. I knew that he wasn't lying, that the room existed and that his daughter was the subject of inhuman experiment. I would have to do something about it. But first I would have to have time to think.

"Well," I came to my feet. "It's time I was going."

He didn't seem to hear me.

"A child's life is made up of imagination. A rag doll becomes something alive; a piece of wood a ship or a gun. And when a child is alone, really alone, with no focal point for its imagination, then a companion is made out of nothing. It lives and breathes and has a name. Perhaps there are more than one." He closed his eyes. After a few moments his head drooped and his chin rested on his breast. I set down my glass and went back down the stairs.

At the front door I hesitated and then came back to the door that he had opened on his way upstairs. I pushed it wide and went inside. The little girl was sitting on a rug in front of the fire playing with a doll. Toys were scattered about. She looked up at me and smiled. She had a mass of tight black curls and a round pink and white face.

"Hullo," I said. "And what is your name?"

"Gilda," she said. "I'm playing with my dolls. This is Janet."

I took the doll in my hands. The firelight flickered behind the grill of the guard, sending dancing figures across the walls.

"And what does Janet do?" I asked her.

"She talks to me."

I crouched on my heels. "And what does she say?"

She considered the point. "She talks to me."

"And what other toys have you got?"

Gilda put one hand to her mouth and puckered her face. "Oh, there's lots an' lots."

Upstairs a man lay in a drunken stupor while his little daughter played alone in a dream world of her own making. And sometimes all her toys were taken away and she was carried upstairs and locked in a room. . . .

"And do they all talk to you?" I asked.

She nodded gravely. "There's Timmy an' Sambo an' Jumbo. An' Janet. That's Jane." I nodded. "And Mary."

"Which one do you like best?"

"Mary, I think. . . ."

I picked up another of the dolls. "And is this Mary?"

She shook her curls vigorously. "Oh no, that's just a doll. Mary's not like that."

Despite the warmth of the fire I felt a sudden chill. "And what is Mary like?"

She picked up a rag doll with a lolling head. "This is 'Tilda.'" She watched me with careful eyes.

"And where's Mary now?" I asked quickly.

She was startled into a sudden glance over her shoulder. Then her face was back on the toys again. "Mary's only pretend," she said.

I came to my feet aware of the quick thudding of my pulse. If I stared long enough at the window drapes my eyes could turn a fold of cloth into a body, the bulge over the cord into a face.

"Goodbye, Gilda," I said. She smiled secretively. "Bye——"

The drapes seemed to stir but there was no breeze. It was only the play of the flames and my imagination. My imagination. . . .

I don't remember my walk back up the hill. Jill was in the lounge. She looked up from her knitting. "You've been gone a long time, dear. I put your dinner back in the oven. It was his letter?"

I had forgotten the excuse. "Yes. Yes, it was his."

She laid her work aside. "Something's wrong, Paul."

"Yes." I took a deep breath. She would have to be told. I would find some relief in telling.

"He's mad. No," I corrected myself. "No, it's not that. He's—I don't know what he is. There's a room in that house. A little empty room. For two or three hours a day he locks the girl—her name's Gilda—up in it. Alone. And she can't be more than five or six. . . ."

"Because she's been naughty?"

"No. Nothing like that. He calls it an experiment. He says he's developing and focusing her imagination. Until it reaches the pitch when it becomes manifest. He says he's already seen something. He locks her up and then watches through a peephole. . . ."

Jill was angry. "Paul; that's horrible! He must be mad. No sane person would do that to a child. Hasn't she a mother?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. She's—he said she was from the gutter. He didn't talk about her. He was half drunk. All he could talk about was his experiment. He said that if a child was lonely enough and had nothing about her to distract her attention, then it would use some form of defence mechanism to create companionship."



She was on her feet, now, her eyes blazing. "You mean to say that he treats a child like that just for the sake of some insane experiment? I can't believe it!"

"He believes it," I said soberly. "So much so that he was drunk because he'd been celebrating. And he'd been celebrating because the experiment had almost been a success."

"He thinks that she'll make something? He really thinks that the child will imagine so vividly that what she imagines will become visible?"

"That's what he says."

"But what does he expect her to make?"

I remembered Mary. "I don't know," I told her. It wouldn't do to tell her about my fancies. Or Gilda's. All we were concerned about was the way a child was being locked for long hours in an empty room.

Jill walked quickly across the room, almost as if she were going to rush out of the house and down the hill. At the door she stopped and swung round. "We've got to do something, Paul. We've got to. We must tell somebody what is going on in that place." She frowned. "Go to Sergeant Baxter. He knows you well. He'll listen. . . ."

It was Saturday the following morning and so I didn't have to go to the city. I got out the car straight after breakfast and drove into the village. It was frosty and a haze of mist drifted across the fields. Baxter, country-bulky in his uniform, leaned over the counter and drew circles on a piece of paper while I talked. A woman came in about a missing dog

just as I was finishing. Baxter straightened, his face red and expressionless, and signalled a constable to take over. Then he led me to his office.

"Reynolds," he said. "The house at the foot of the hill. This is the second complaint." He scratched his head. "There was a woman he used to employ, a village woman. He sacked her for some reason or another. She came in here with much the same tale that you've just told. We figured she was just out to make trouble, but for all that, we paid him a visit.

"That room, and the way he locks the child up. We look at it this way. A parent is entitled to punish his child. So long as no ill-treatment is involved. And locking her up is only a form of punishment, not one to be recommended, but not unusual.

"I spoke to the little girl—Gilda is her name?—and I examined her. A bright, cheerful little soul. No signs of ill-treatment and well-nourished. And no apparent fear of either her father or of being locked up. Then I spoke to Reynolds. I found him to be a sensible man. Intelligent. There were no grounds upon which action could be taken."

He shrugged. "What he does to her may be considered cruel, but so long as no harm comes of it, then it is entirely his own affair. The police are accused far too often of butting in when it isn't necessary. I'm sorry, but as matters stand at the moment there is no action we can take. But you come to me and tell me you've seen the child in distress, and I won't hesi-

tate. For what it's worth, I didn't take to Reynolds."

I drove back home. Jill was waiting. I think she expected to see the sergeant with me. "Well?" she asked.

I told her about the interview.

"They'll wait until the child's mind is twisted and distorted!" she cried.

"They can't do anything as the matter stands."

"And we just have to sit back and watch?" She went to the window and flung the curtain back. "And for all we know, she is locked up in that room right now, alone, with him watching through that damned hole!"

I argued mildly, trying to lessen her fury. I told her again all Baxter had said. I even went so far as to suggest that perhaps, last night, I had got the wrong idea. Perhaps, I said, the man was a crank, a crank with a distorted sense of humour. There were people like that. Perhaps the room was there, but Gilda was only locked up now and then.

I didn't convince her. I couldn't convince myself. She stood in the window and glared over the trees to the roof of the house at the foot of the hill. I went out into the garden.

Reynolds had told me that he had seen something. What had been his words? "Movement, the gathering of the thought-forms. Grey, shapeless and transparent. . . ."

His imagination? God, how I wished that word wouldn't keep cropping up. Had he seen something?

A little girl is locked all alone in a room with no furniture, nothing. A little girl who wants companionship. The answer lies in her mind. She feels

that she can create something to break the loneliness. But what would she create? A doll, perhaps, or a teddy-bear. Or would it be something much larger? Something alive? A companion. Another little girl. Mary.

I shook my head as if doing that would rid it of the thoughts. But they persisted, nagging, uncontrolled.

Thought was one of the strongest forces known. Faith could move mountains and perform miracles. Scientists used it as the basis for experiment. There were names for all the types and phases.

I was a little girl, alone in a room. If I thought hard enough, and if I believed what I was thinking, and if I wanted something very badly, then the thoughts would drift and entwine and gather together, confined in the narrow walls. And after a while they would start to crystallise. But what form would they take? Could I dictate their ultimate shape, or would they find an image in my mind and use that as the mould?

I went back in the house. Jill was still standing at the window.

"I've sometimes seen Gilda playing in the garden," she said without turning. "Now I shall watch all the time. If I think for one moment that she's been crying, then I'll go to the police station myself. And if they won't listen to me, then I'll—I'll go to the house and take the child away."

Her temper was rarely roused.

"I don't care what people say," she stormed. "If they try to take her back there I'll make such a fuss that something will have to be done about it."

It started to rain after lunch. The

wind rose, shaking the leafless branches. The clouds raced and tumbled across the leaden sky. At dusk, a light came to glow in one of the windows of the house. The sight of it gave Jill a new thought.

"In the dark?" she asked me. "When he locks her in that horrid room does he keep her in the dark?"

"I don't know," I said. "I don't suppose so. He has to watch. . . ."

Darkness fell in a tumult of wind and rain. The trees swung and creaked with sudden gusts. Jill stood at the window for a while and then found a book and sat with it unread on her lap, staring into the fire.

Her worry imparted itself to me, accentuating my own feelings of uncertainty and unrest. I felt I knew what she was thinking. Perhaps Gilda was alone in that room now; alone, the wind howling round the walls.

When there came a lull in the storm and the rain ceased for a while to lash the windows, I came to my feet and went through the darkened lounge to open the french windows. Still watching the flames, Jill didn't seem to notice my going.

The night air was cold to the point of a physical blow. I gasped at its impact, thrusting my hands into my pockets, staring into the darkness.

The silence had been made more profound by the storm that had preceded it. I heard the rustle of water from a sodden branch; the bark of a dog on some distant farm.

And then I heard the scream. More animal than human it rose to a wailing screech before being cut off as if a hand had been placed over the

gaping mouth. It came from the direction of the garden of the only other house in the locality. That at the bottom of the hill.

For a long moment I stood and stared in its direction. Then I turned and half-ran back into the house and through the lounge, leaving the windows open behind me. Jill, startled, looked up, and I flung some explanation at her, something about going to see if Gilda was all right. There would be time enough to tell her about the scream when I discovered who—or what—had caused it. Her voice called after me as I rushed out.

It started to rain again as I ran down the drive and out into the lane. Coatless, I was soaked in a matter of moments. A sudden flurry of wind drove me into the hedge; briars raked my face. I turned into the drive, panting, each breath tearing at my throat.

The front door was closed but not fastened. My first frantic knock set it moving. Fearful of what I was to find, I flung it wide and ran in.

I could sense the change immediately. A feeling of tension hung in the air. I knew that something had happened. As I turned back from the nursery door, Reynolds, his face alive with laughter, with Gilda, sitting on his shoulder and shrilling her pleasure, came down the stairs.

He stopped when he saw me, the laughter dying and being replaced by a puzzled smile. The scarlet-touched flabbiness of his cheeks had gone; his lips were no longer loose and wet. Reynolds sober, it seemed, was very different from Reynolds drunk.

He had forgotten our meeting of the previous night. Gilda had to remind him. Her arms tightly about his neck she said: "This is the man, Daddy; the one I was telling you about. The one came to talk to me last night—'member?"

"I remember, Chicken," he said heartily and offered me his free hand. We shook as if we were meeting for the first time.

"You've come to see me again?" Gilda asked prettily.

For a moment I had forgotten about the scream. Now I gave it as the reason for my visit. Reynolds frowned his puzzlement and then threw back his head and laughed.

"That must have been you, Chicken," he told her. "I said you were making too much noise. Fancy them hearing it right up yonder."

"I'm sorry," he apologized to me, his hand now resting on her dark curls, almost protectively, "very sorry indeed. But it won't happen again, will it, Chicken?"

She pressed her face against his. "No, Daddy."

"We're moving," Reynolds added. "We've made up our minds and we're going to move to some place where there'll be other children for Gilda to play with. And where there's a proper garden, not like this one. A real garden with swings and a pond."

Gilda pouted a little. "I don't want other childr'n, Daddy, only you."

They were both different people from those I had met the night before. But before going back to Jill I had to have the full story.

"Experiments?" Reynolds furrowed

his brow. Then he smiled. "Oh, those. . . They're all finished and done with. Gilda will never be locked in that room again. We won't even talk about it any more."

They were so wrapped up in each other that my very presence was an interruption. I went back into the drive, closing the front door on their happiness. My last sight of them was as they went into the nursery, etched against the leaping flames.

The rain lashed my face. Jill, and my own fireside, were waiting at the top of the hill. But there was something else I had to know. The scream I had heard had not been a child's scream of pleasure, and it had come from the garden.

And so I bent my shoulders against the driving rain and followed the drive round the side of the house. Pale beams of light from the back windows made the garden a place of shadows. I didn't know what I was looking for. An animal, perhaps.

I found the body rolled under a bush, not a dozen paces from the back door. It was curled, the face hidden in the arms. When I dragged it out, fighting the waves of repugnance, the face lolled, the neck broken, the features clear in the light.

Reynolds' face had gained nothing in death. The flabby cheeks were still streaked with scarlet; the mouth, open now, still sensuous and flaccid. His breath still carried the tang of whisky.

And inside the house, the new Reynolds, who was everything a father should be, played with the daughter who had made him.

THE HOUSE OF DUST

HERBERT DE HAMEL

Illustrated by Vera Jarman



CAPTAIN KURT VON Unserbach was bored. He was bored from the duelling scar on the top of his close-cropped head to the corns on his tightly shod feet. The ends of his wide mouth drooped; his eyes, beneath his raised brows, stared unseeingly ahead; his back maintained its pose of stiffness—more from habit than from any volition on the part of its owner. Never before had unkind fortune cast his little strutting steps in a town where the women were so plain of face and so flat of figure. Even their very virtue repelled him.

And yet a poet or an artist might have asked no happier fate than to be quartered in such surroundings. Brevolt had its history; not, perhaps, to be found in the dry pages of books, but written for all time in its own winding streets and mossy squares.

The moonlight fell upon the mouldering spires, upon high-pitched tiles pierced by dormer windows and upon glistening patchworks of leaded panes. It struggled down the quaint house-fronts with their mullioned casements till it reached the massive iron-studded doors, frowning beneath their Gothic arches. It silvered once again the old stone shields: sable shadows on a ground argent—a device older by far than the proud

hatchments in gules and azure and vert which had long since peeled from the crumbling surface.

But Kurt von Unserbach cursed savagely at the cobble stones. His cavalry boots had hurt him even on the pavements of his beloved Berlin. He cursed, too, at the impulse which had urged him to leave his overheated rooms and wander forth into the night air. It did not occur to him to turn back.

He crossed the market square, noting without a single glance of admiration the spire-decked Town Hall where the burghers had feasted Van Arteveldt on his return from Crécy. Unheeding, he passed the city wall, looming black and imposing even in its ruined state, where the women of Brevolt had beaten back the fierce assaults of Alva. After marching some fifty paces down the country road he stopped, removed his busby and gazed about him. A smile of genuine pleasure lit up his face. On either side of him an orderly row of poplars stretched away to some unseen vanishing point. Their perspective was faultless. Their tidiness and method reminded him of the Fatherland. So Brevolt had something beautiful in it after all. But those awful women! Ach! those awful women!

It was told of him, in the mess of the Blue Hussars, that on being asked by his colonel if he had found Naples

as beautiful as it was reputed, he had replied, "Beautiful! Beautiful! And eyes of so dark a brown."

In his native country such favours had been showered on him as may come only to one who is grotesquely ugly and is clad in a dashing uniform of pale blue and silver. Moreover, so highly well-born was he that his marriage was an affair of state. He could not wed, however much he might become entangled, without the consent of his Emperor. Many a fair German had sobbed, with the sentimental abandon of her race, when he had gently but very firmly shattered all hopes of a future that should redeem a too happy past with him:

"This can go no further. I am in honour bound to tell you that my marriage to you will not be permitted."

And never did the honour of Kurt von Unserbach shine forth so brightly as when the charms of white arms and red lips began to cloy.

He rubbed the middle of his right hand reflectively up and down a large outstanding ear and wrinkled his short nose. He wished that the army in front would make more progress towards Calais. He desired, above all things, to be quartered in England—as an exponent of martial law. English women had invariably laughed at him when he manufactured love for their benefit. They were treacherous, like all their race. They would trust themselves alone with him, and then box his ears when he tried to kiss them. He had many a just grievance to repay. There was a Miss Smith who had called him Dan Lenobach. And

he was tied by the leg in Brevolt! And the women of Brevolt. . . . Ach, Himmel!

Perhaps some day he would get to England. Those hysterical nuns in the convent beyond Liège had not laughed at him, except one or two who had become mad, and for this he bore them no malice.

And those women of Northern France. . . .

"Pardon, monsieur."

Von Unserbach jumped as though he had been touched with a spur. He had fancied himself to be entirely alone with his thoughts. By his side stood two women. One of them was of medium height and broad. The other was tall and graceful. Both were heavily veiled.

"Pardon, monsieur," repeated the taller of the two, in a tone so silvery and clear, and in a voice so well modulated as to convince the cavalryman that he was addressed by no Flemish peasant. "My mother and I," she continued, "have been out to see one who was wounded. We were delayed till after nightfall, and we are now afraid to pass the soldiers at the gate. They were insulting to me once, and since then we have kept indoors."

She spoke in French, a language with which he was imperfectly acquainted, and yet, to his surprise, he had understood her every word. Her voice thrilled him and held him spellbound. He was convinced, entirely without reason, that such delicate tones and inflections could only come from the most beautiful of women.

"They are Saxon Landsturm," he

replied, with a contempt that could only have been equalled by a Saxon saying, "They are Prussians."

"But you are a Prussian officer," continued the voice, "and we should be quite safe with you, if you would have the great kindness to escort us past the guard-room."

Von Unserbach hastily clapped his busby upon his head. Then, properly dressed, he clicked his heels together and bowed stiffly from his hips. "Once you are seen with me you can go anywhere in safety, at any time," he remarked gravely.

He wished that she would draw her veil aside. If the mere sound of her voice had the power to send his blood thumping through his heart, what effect might not the sight of her face have upon him? He pondered deeply

as they walked slowly back towards the ancient gateway. "The intelligence which never deserts the Prussian officer." This impartial remark—made by his favourite Prussian general—repeated itself again and again with silent persistence till they had reached the great block of masonry. Then came the inspiration—as brilliant and subtle as any that had ever been granted to him.

"Pardon," he remarked, through the elaborate machinery of another bow, "but if, upon my responsibility, you are enabled to pass the guard without examination, it is a mere formality that you should allow me to see your faces."

The elder woman at once uncovered her face. He barely glanced in her direction. He acknowledged her



action by a curt nod and turned again to her companion.

The baffling lace no longer hid her features, but lent its dark folds to outline the oval of her face. Her hair, black as the shadow of the gateway on the road, was drawn to each side over her low forehead—and threw into vivid relief the ivory gleam of her skin. Her lips were parted slightly to show the white daintiness of her teeth. But it was her eyes that held the glance of Kurt von Unserbach: eyes that shone with the strangest of lights in the full rays of the moon; eyes that gripped him and fascinated him—that drew him from himself and sent him swirling and spinning up into the clouds.

“Are you satisfied, mon Capitaine?”

His body bowed automatically—and then stood erect to receive him as he swooped back to earth.

“You know my rank?” he inquired, grasping at any conversational straw in the raging waters of his confusion.

“I have seen you so often from my window . . . and . . .

“And have—” the dark eyes wavered for a second and then looked fearlessly and steadily into his. “And have admired you so.”

“Ach, so!” Her eyes still held his own, and he was reduced almost to incoherence. “So good and so beautiful!” he murmured.

“No woman is good—who really loves,” she whispered.

He averted his eyes from a sense of physical pain—caused by the intensity of her gaze, and the curious eerie effect of the moonlight.

“Ach, yes! Yes! Yes!” he exclaimed vehemently; which was strange, since her previous remark accorded entirely with his own sentiments concerning women. “Whatever you did must be good and beautiful!”

He glanced hastily towards her. Her eyes were still fixed upon him.

“Let us be going in,” said the other woman. “It is becoming chilly.”

A sudden cold wind swept hushing through the trees and swirled the dead leaves round his feet.

He drew his cloak about him, and turned towards the gateway. A light flashed in his face, followed by the crash of rifle-butts as the guard sprang to attention. He was proud that his companions should witness this tribute to his rank.

“I will accompany you to your house,” he explained with elaborate subtlety. “Lest there might perhaps be some drunken soldiers in the street. If you are with me, then you will be quite safe.”

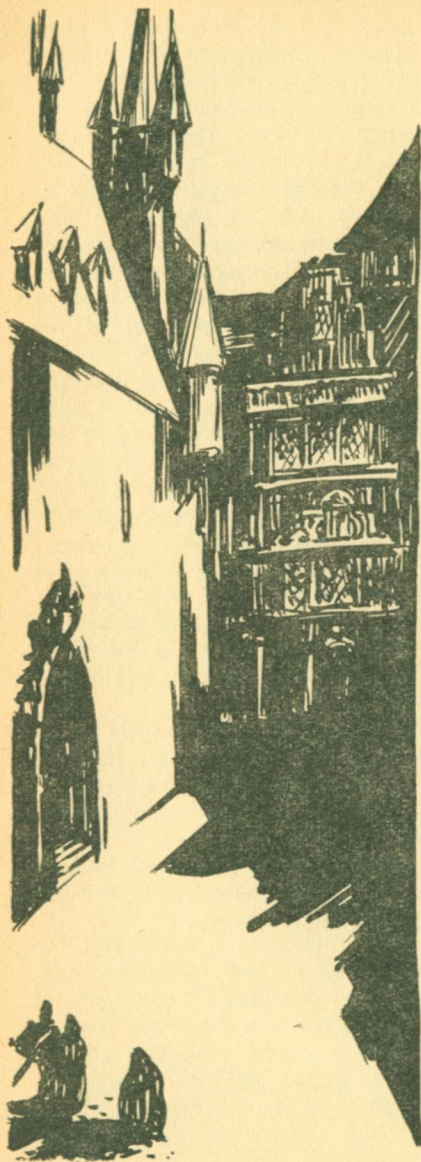
His spurs jingled joyously as he crossed the market-place, and the cobbles no longer hurt his feet.

“Is it not beautiful?” said his companion.

He looked about him with interest, as though the quaint gables and turrets were stage scenery.

“Very beautiful,” he agreed. “It would make a very beautiful background for a statue.” He regarded the square with increased favour. “There would be room for at least twenty statues.”

“Perhaps one of them would be that of Captain Kurt von Unserbach?”



There was no trace of levity in her tone, nor would it have occurred to him to seek one. "I have done nothing as yet to deserve a statue," he replied. "There is a statue of my father in our village. It is of the most costly marble and the best workmanship. But one can have only one father to honour." He walked some twenty paces in silence and then added, with genuine sadness and regret, "I have no child to raise a statue to me when I am dead."

Neither did he wonder that she should know his name. He was the only Prussian officer in that little Flemish village.

For the rest of the journey he was too occupied to make any further remarks. Carefully and methodically he noted every architectural detail that might serve as a guide on future visits to his unknown destination. Occasionally the roughness of the cobbles swayed him towards his companion, and for a brief moment their shoulders would touch—and once the filmy lace veil caressed his cheek.

Once, also, his little eyes glared and snapped arrogantly at a passing infantry man whose gaze betokened too lively admiration.

Some fifty paces farther, a gently-detaining hand was laid upon his arm and he followed his escort through a narrow passage between two overhanging buildings. This alley led them into a small square which was well known to him. On the far side stood the prefecture of police, while on his right hand he could discern the familiar outline of the late mayor's private residence.

Opposite a broad double door studded with large square-headed nails, the party halted. He noticed the details with the greatest care. The wood was dark chestnut or oak, polished with age. In the left half, as he stood facing it, was a small but heavily barred iron grid, painted black. From above the solid stone lintel projected a curiously wrought lantern-bracket. The moulding of the jambs on either side was ornamented with a series of small stone shields and bugles, arranged alternately.

The younger woman opened a narrow door that was contained in the right-hand half of the large one, and passed within.

"We are most grateful to you for the trouble which you have taken on our behalf," said her mother. "It is a pleasure to find a Prussian officer who can be courteous to two lonely and friendless women."

As she turned and went through the doorway a warm glow lit up the hall beyond. "Good night," she said, her hand upon the latch, "and again our sincere thanks. We must not detain you any longer."

Von Unserbach had no intention of allowing the matter to end there. He placed his foot in such a position that the door could not be closed. "I am not on duty tonight," he explained firmly. "There is no reason why I should hurry back."

His natural courtesy and sense of chivalry bade him wait for an invitation before attempting to force his way in.

The younger woman laughed—and his skin bristled to the bulging nape

of his neck. He pressed his foot more firmly against the woodwork.

"We could not very well ask you in at this hour, Captain von Unserbach," she explained. "But if you—as an officer of the invading army—insist on coming in, the responsibility lies with you alone."

The little gurgle of merriment which followed affected him as no laughter had ever done. He thrilled again as though a skeleton hand was playing scales up and down his spine. He appreciated the mocking note: she was laughing at herself, at the conventions, and at her mother.

"I will accept the full responsibility," he replied gravely, "but I should appreciate the mere formality of an invitation."

"Will you not come in, then, after your great kindness?" Her tone this time defied all his attempts at analysis. "Our dinner is a cold one, but I think you will agree that there is no chef living that can equal the artist who prepared it."

"Thank you extremely," he replied—and a moment later the well-oiled latch clicked behind him.

The large open hall felt pleasantly warm after the chilly draughts of the street, and he was conscious of a faint, subtle perfume which appealed to all that was sensual in his nature. He approved of the scent very strongly, and wondered whether it came from the masses of cut flowers which glowed and gleamed wherever there was a ledge on which the great glass bowls could stand. Then his eyes were attracted by the life-size frescoes which adorned the walls. He screwed

his small eyeglass into his eye and studied them with interest. They were literal translations in colour of various classical incidents which are not usually translated literally in print. The drawing and the colouring were obviously the work of a master hand—strong and vigorous, and almost alive. Yet although they were devoid of all vulgarity and indecency, they were the very incarnation of suggestiveness. They resembled those books which threaten always to be improper on the next page.

“Good!” exclaimed the visitor. “Very good. They might almost have been painted by a German artist.”

“Shall we go upstairs?” said his hostess. “We do not live in the ground floor rooms. They are too dark and dismal.”

“I will look at those pictures again by daylight, and perhaps I will photograph them,” he said, as he crossed the tiled floor, and followed her up the stairs. As he climbed he stroked the broad flat top of the old banister-rail with his hand, delighting in the smoothness of its time-worn surface.

So richly were the stairs carpeted that his spurred heels made no sound.

The dining-room was a large apartment with heavily curtained windows. Down the centre ran a massive refectory table, covered with a damask cloth and sparkling with glass and silver. Across one end of the room stood a similar table, which did duty as a sideboard. In one amazed and comprehensive glance he realized that it was laden with those delicacies most dear to a famished German heart and stomach. Among the dishes

there stood—or lay in small baskets—bottles fat and thin: bottles whose corks were covered with silver, with gilt, with red or white or green.

Captain Kurt von Unserbach moistened his lips, wrenched his unwilling glance from the end table, and turned to make a complimentary speech to his hostess. To his surprise he found that he was alone. He had not heard her leave the room.

The next five minutes he spent—to his complete satisfaction—in studying the various dishes, and in apportioning to each delicacy its relative weight in terms, not of appetite, but of capacity.

“My mother is very tired after her walk.”

Captain von Unserbach started guiltily and removed his finger from his mouth. These thick carpets were delightful to walk upon, but they were devilish inconvenient at times.

“She has retired to bed, and hopes that you will excuse her.”

Kurt von Unserbach clicked his heels and excused her with all the good will in the world. Then he raised his eyes and forgot even the good things upon the table.

Many a heart has been lost in the moonlight, to be recovered instantly in the more mellow glow of lamps. But this woman was even more bewitchingly beautiful now that he could see the full glory of her coiled black hair.

No trace of a warmer tint stained the smooth ivory of her skin. Her eyes, he realized, were not dark brown but were almost black, with a little emerald green sparkle in their depths.

He looked up at the ceiling to see if there was a green shade over any of the lamps. There was not. Wherefore he looked into her eyes again, and his glance was gripped and held till he prayed that her lids might close for one brief second. When at last they fell, he sank into a chair and breathed fast.

One thing he vowed silently: that Emperor or no Emperor, he could never love any woman but this. He no longer wished to go to England. Miss Smith. . . . He broke in upon his own thoughts with a sudden shout of laughter. What did ten thousand Misses Smith weigh in the balance against one smile of this woman?

"Come—you must be famished after your onerous duties as *chevalier aux dames*," she laughed. "See, I will wait upon you to repay the debt."

Whereupon the Captain tucked one corner of his napkin into the collar of his uniform and fell more deeply in love than ever. She served him with never too much of this, and never too little of that. He could not have helped himself with more delicate accuracy. Moreover she ate practically nothing—a novelty which appealed to his aesthetic sense.

And the wines! Were there ever such wines? Each one in its turn seemed to have gained an added delicacy of flavour from the memory of its predecessor. It would have been a pleasure even to sip them, it was paradise to swallow them by the glassful. An Englishman would have slipped silently beneath the table—but Kurt von Unserbach merely leant back on

a roseate cloud and twiddled his feet at the prosaic world below.

The banquet ended with a coffee-liqueur under a film of fresh cream—and one of his own cigars.

"You are a German," he exclaimed, ecstatically. "You must be a German. You are a Prussian of the Prussians."

"I am of no nationality," she replied. "I was once an *Alsacienne*, but now I belong to no nation."

"Then you were half a German," he exclaimed in triumph, "and I will make you entirely a Prussian."

"But your marriage is an affair of state. Your Emperor would never agree that you should marry me."

Von Unserbach settled himself more comfortably back on his roseate cloud and twiddled his feet at the Emperor. "I am *von* and *zu*," he declared haughtily, "and if he refuses his consent I will threaten to kill myself."

From the expression in her eyes he gathered that this would be an even greater blow to her than to the Emperor. He hastened to assure her that he would not carry this threat to the extreme of fulfilling it.

"And tell me," she changed the subject, "were you in that first great advance into Belgium?"

"My regiment was one of the first that rode past the fortress of Liège," he answered proudly. "But why talk of other women when I have you here with me?"

But she encouraged him to speak of his doings—and her eyes mastered his as the fumes of the wine loosened his tongue. And as he told her tale after tale of those hideous days, the

green lights in the depths of her eyes shone steadily—and coldly.

“That is from your point of view,” she said. “But supposing your army had found it a military necessity to sack this town. Supposing that your triumphant soldiers had already broken into this house before I met you?”

Von Unserbach shuddered and winced. “Ach, don’t! It is unthinkable!” He deliberately evaded her meaning. “All these beautiful things would then have been destroyed.”

“And for me? Do you care nothing then for me?”

For one second he stared back at her—and then he sprang to his feet.

His chair fell to the floor unheeded. “God in Heaven!” he shouted. “Care for you? I love you more than anything!”

He strode towards her and took her into his arms.

* * *

At five o’clock the following morning Captain Kurt von Unserbach let himself silently out by the narrow door. His face wore an expression of rapturous ecstasy. He drew his cloak tightly round him, and set out at a brisk strut for the barracks. It was certainly a cruel stroke of Fate which had torn him from paradise at such an hour; but he reflected that the same destiny which had selected him for early morning duties on that particular day had also thrown him in the path of this wonderful happiness. But for Fate he would never have met his——? “Thousand devils!” he

laughed. “Why, I don’t even know her name.”

He felt in his pocket for his cigar-case, and remembered suddenly that he had left it on the mantelshelf in the bedroom. He paused for a moment, and then turned again towards the barracks. He would not have time to go back—and it would be safe enough in her room. If her mother found it? He shrugged his shoulders. She could always be told it had been taken in there to keep it safe.

That morning was all seconds, and every second seemed an hour. Moreover, he was ravenously hungry, in spite of the heavy meal he had devoured such a short time before. His subordinates suffered even more than usual. His only other gleam of consolation was the glance of unconcealed envy cast upon him by the infantryman he had passed on the previous night.

As soon as he was off duty and had swallowed a hasty but ample lunch, he hurried to the square. At first he was unable to locate the house, which had a strangely different appearance in the light of day. The door jambs with their shields and bugles he had found easily enough, but what, in the moonlight, had appeared to be a door of polished wood with a painted grid in it, was shabby in the extreme. The grid was red with rust. Blistered and dirty paint hung in tattered strips from the woodwork. He tugged at the remains of an iron handle, and in the distance sounded the metallic bleat of a broken bell. He rang again and listened. There was an echo which resembled those to be found only in an

empty house. He stepped back into the roadway and looked up at the windows. Those which were not broken were covered with grime. He then noticed that there was no wrought-iron lantern-bracket over the door. He heaved a sigh of relief. It could not be the same house.

He crossed the square to the police station, and marched straight into the Prefect's private room. "Can you tell me where I can find a house with a pattern of shields and bugles on the supports of the stone door frame?"

"I can," replied the Prefect wearily, placing his pen carefully in the tray of his inkstand.

"A house with a door of some dark wood with a painted grid in it, and a lantern-bracket over it."

"I cannot. There is no such house in Brevolt."

"Rubbish. I dined there last night."

The Prefect bowed in silence. It is not wise to contradict Prussian officers. Otherwise he might not now have been acting as mayor in addition to his police duties.

"Well?" demanded Kurt von Unserbach.

"There is only one house in Brevolt with a pattern on its door jambs such as you describe, and that is the one at which you have just been ringing. There was once a lantern-bracket, but it fell down five years ago. The door was painted for the first and last time some forty years ago. The house is to let, but it has a bad name."

"Why?"

"Its last owners were not altogether desirable people."

"I'm not asking about its last owners. Who lives there now?"

"Nobody."

"You had better be careful as to how you tell me lies. I know perfectly well that a lady and her daughter are residing in that house. I do not know what your reasons for denying the fact may be, but you need have no fear that I intend them the slightest harm."

The Prefect crossed the room and opened a locker. He selected a bundle of documents, untied the string, and handed to Captain von Unserbach a pencil drawing. "Is that the lady you are seeking?" he asked.

"Yes!" he shouted. "Thousand devils! Why have you been wasting all my time with your lies? Empty house, you blockhead! Do you mean to tell me that the two ladies and their household and vanloads of furniture could move in under your very nose, and you not know it? You shall hear more about this!"

"And what is it you wish?"

"Wish? Why, to get in there, of course."

The Prefect held out his hand for the pencil sketch. "It belongs to the police records," he explained.

"It belongs to me," replied the Prussian.

The police officer took a large key from the locker, and returned the remainder of the documents. Von Unserbach followed him across the square, and, as soon as the narrow door had groaned and grated open, he pushed past him into the hall.

The Prefect heard the guttural oath of astonishment which followed, and

smiled drily behind his pointed grey beard.

Kurt von Unserbach stood on the threshold, staring straight ahead of him in horror and amazement.

The hall was empty. There was no trace of furniture, nor of the glass vases of flowers, nor of the rich stair-carpet. The dust lay half an inch thick over the tiled floor, over the stairs, over the banisters, over everything.

"Are you looking for the frescoes?" inquired the Prefect politely. "They were painted out over thirty years ago. They were scarcely of a nature to attract respectable tenants."

But it was not the invisibility of the frescoes, it was not the absence of the furniture, which had terrified the soldier. There were finger-marks trailing through the dust on the banister rail. There were footmarks on the floor—footmarks which led past the walls where the frescoes had been and showed upon the stairs. And the marks on the banister rail had been made by his own fingers—and the marks on the floor had been trodden out by his own cavalry boots. And besides these there were no other marks in the dust.

"Now that we are here, it is a pity that you should not see over the house once again," suggested the police officer. "The owners would sell it for a mere trifle. But it would interest me very much to know how you got in last night? The keyhole was clogged with dust."

Von Unserbach followed him up the stairs in silence. His brain was numbed. It was capable of nothing save obedience to outside suggestion.

The door to the dining-room resisted the efforts of the Prefect to open it. The bolt of the lock had rusted, and the handle refused to turn. The Prussian pushed him aside and wrenched and tugged and twisted. Then he put his shoulder to the door and burst it open.

The room was empty. The massive tables and solid chairs had vanished. There was now no carpet on the floor, save a carpet of thick dust patterned with the marks of his own boots. In the centre of the room and by the end wall, where the tables had stood, the dust lay smooth and untrodden. He saw clearly the marks where he had paced up and down beside the sumptuous dishes while waiting for—? For—? Waiting for—? With an effort he resumed control of his brain. He snatched the pencil sketch from his pocket and thrust it towards the Prefect.

"Who is she?" he demanded. "Who is that?"

"Your pardon, one moment; but is that your cigar—and cigar ash—over there in the grate?"

"Who is that—please!" He spoke civilly, almost coaxingly. He was no longer merely a Prussian officer. He was a man, striving to fight down the fear that was growing in him.

"She came from Alsace, with her mother, after the great war of 1870. A Prussian officer made their house his headquarters."

"Ach!" The tone was one of comprehension, disgust and fury.

"Ah—how she hated the Prussians! They were too vile even for her. She vowed that she would never return to

France while a single one of that breed grunted through it unharmed. She was a bad woman, but she loved her country passionately. She continued her profession here for three years."

"What profession?"

"In 1870 there was only one profession open to women," replied the Prefect drily.

"But the furniture. The furniture. How could it have been taken away in the night—and the dust not disturbed? I tell you it was here at five o'clock this morning."

"It was sold to pay off their debts. That table that was in the centre of the room has stood in the Mayor's house for the last forty years. It is the one across which you fired at him. The chairs were purchased by the late Burgomaster, and the other table"—he indicated the end wall—"was purchased by my father."

"When?" He asked the question with an effort, and scarcely dared listen for the reply.

"The great oaken bed, with the hangings of crimson velvet worked with golden fleurs-de-lis," the old man continued in a tone of professional interest, "was broken up for firewood. No one would bid for it—by reason of the murder."

"Broken up!"

"Your pardon. You asked me when they were sold. It was in August, 1874. I remember the date because it was exactly a month after the two women were executed. They cannot have been altogether bad; they loved their country and hated the——"

Von Unserbach spoke rapidly in whispers. His words were inaudible.

"Since that date the house has been closed," added the Prefect after a polite pause. "You have doubtless noticed how thick the dust is."

But Captain von Unserbach was cursing his way through a half-forgotten prayer. He turned suddenly, with military precision, and strutted down the passage to the next room. He did not dare to go slowly, lest the remnant of his courage should fail him. He threw open the door and halted with a sharp click of his heels.

On the mantelshelf lay his cigar-case, exactly as he had left it.

The thick dust on the floor was undisturbed save for the imprints of his own feet.

He stared at the bare corner where, that very morning, had stood the semblance of a great oaken bed, with hangings of crimson velvet worked with golden fleurs-de-lis. It was the space of a full minute before his eyes focused on the patch of smooth dust. He turned, clicked his heels—and fell headlong on the floor.

* * *

Captain Kurt von Unserbach is now an inmate of the great military asylum off the Koenigstrasse. He is not violent. He struts up and down in his cell, clicking his heels when he turns. He sleeps only in the daytime, and then always upon the floor. Between the hours of eleven o'clock at night and five o'clock in the morning he is subject to strange fits of terror, and it is then only that he speaks—crying out the same three words.



THE MAN WHO LOVED CATS

MARY ELLIS

Illustrated by Woodward

WE WERE VERY surprised to hear that the old half-ruined castle had been sold. The purchaser was a man called Fowler of whom nothing was known. He just turned up one day and, having inspected the place, bought it at once. Then, after having some repairs and alterations done to it, he moved in.

We nicknamed him the Laird from

his habit of walking about in a kilt. He arrived a few weeks before Gridley, who had been appointed manager of the one bank in our little town. Gridley was not sure that he would like the post, but when he saw the island he fell in love with it. He had a comfortable flat over the bank, and although his salary was not large, the cost of living here is low. He realized that in such a small community he must be sociable, and so he often looked in at the "Woodcock", which is more like a country

club than an ordinary pub, and where some of us often meet.

I liked Gridley, and we had many things in common. We both liked walking and bird-watching. We both liked dogs and disliked cats. He was an agreeable man and soon made friends, but unfortunately his sympathetic manner made him a target for the bores. Mrs. Burgess is one of them. She has an opinion on everything, and makes it quite clear to her listeners that her opinion is the right one. Three times a week she comes puffing into the "Woodcock" followed by her husband and, when she has hoisted her unwieldy body on to a stool, stands drinks all round. Captain Burgess is a bore too, but a less aggressive one. He is a man with a grievance.

"Why, if we can have a bank, can't we have a dentist?" he asks peevishly. "And why can't we have a young, efficient doctor, instead of an old, inefficient one?"

Gridley listened to them patiently, but even his patience was exhausted when he fell a victim to the worst bore of all, the writer Ernest Farewell, who, with his beard and eccentric clothes, acts the part of a second Hemingway. He took to Gridley, who was made to listen to his endless talk about himself: of his genius and the greatness of his work. He drinks heavily, too, and when drunk becomes abusive and quarrelsome.

"I think I shall have to give up going to the 'Woodcock,'" poor Gridley said one evening when he had come to supper with me. "Farewell is really sending me round the bend."

"If he goes on drinking at the rate he's doing," I said, "he'll have a bout of D.T.'s or something."

Three days later, as he was staggering home, Farewell fell down and cut his head open. He was taken to hospital, and after leaving there went away for a cure. Then Gridley found life at the "Woodcock" pleasant again.

I have said that we both liked bird-watching, and when we were out together we often saw the stocky kilted figure of the Laird striding about. We knew very little about him, except that he employed no daily help, and did his own cooking and housework. He never invited anyone to his castle and, for some time after his arrival, didn't come into the "Woodcock". Then one morning when I was having a drink there he walked in, and ordering a whisky and soda, sat down at the bar.

"How are you getting on in your castle?" asked Noble, an inquisitive little man, who is noble only in name.

"I'm getting on very well, thank you, my dear," said the Laird in a soft, low voice.

"Don't you find it rather lonely?" I asked.

"No, my dear, I don't. I have the companionship of my sweet little family."

"I didn't know you had a family. I never see them about. How old are they?" asked Noble.

"I don't encourage them to wander beyond the castle grounds, my dear, but you asked me how old they are. The Princess is five years old. The Reverend Skeffington-Skipp will be

four next month, and Pyewacket was two years old last week."

We all laughed, and the Laird flushed.

"Why do you laugh?" he asked, and his voice rose on a shrill note. "You should not make fun of them. They are not subjects for levity. Do you know anything about the beliefs of the ancient Egyptians?" And then, as no one answered, he went on, "The Egyptians, in their great wisdom, worshipped cats. They decked them out with jewels, and after death sent them for burial to the holy city of Bubastis. Their Goddess was Pasht. You should visit the British Museum," he said to Gridley, "and see the basalt statues of them there. Some of them have a disc of lunar divinity and a royal asp above their foreheads!"

"But I don't like cats," said Gridley, who had listened in amazement. "I think they're horrid slinky things. I prefer dogs."

"Dogs! Dirty dogs! My dear, how can you? They have *such* unpleasing habits. The Mahometans are quite right to consider them inferior and unclean creatures."

"I don't agree," I said. "I like them, and besides, Gridley and I are interested in birds, and we hate cats to kill them."

"Naturally, my dear! Birds are their lawful prey; and what does it matter, unless, of course, you take a bird's-eye view of it?"

He giggled.

"I think it does matter," muttered Gridley crossly. "Anyway, you'll never get me to like cats, but don't

let us argue about it. Have another drink?"

"No thank you, my dear. I must return to the castle, and attend to the needs of my family, but I will look in again soon," and the Laird got off his stool and walked out.

"Well, what do you make of him?" asked Charlesworth, a jolly, red-faced man, who had listened in silence to the conversation.

"I think his mother must have been a bit of a bitch to put him so much against dogs," I said. That is the kind of joke that goes down well in the "Woodcock", and everyone laughed.

"The poor chap's obviously a bit mental," said Noble. "All that stuff about cats!"

"He certainly seems to be mad about them," agreed Gridley, "though apart from that I should think he's quite sane, but I wish he wouldn't call us all 'My dear'."

"How old do you think he is?" I asked.

"About forty, I should say," said Gridley, "but it's time I went back for lunch." And the party broke up.

After that the Laird took to dropping in at the "Woodcock" on most mornings, and sometimes in the evening as well. Opinion was divided as to whether he was really off his head, or only very eccentric. Captain Burgess thought that he was not mad but bad, and was convinced that he had been a clergyman who had been turned out of the Church for immoral conduct. No one took this opinion seriously, as the Captain is well-known for the impish delight he takes in starting ridiculous rumours.

Mrs. Burgess thought, on the contrary, that the Laird was not a bad man, but that he undoubtedly had some bats in his belfry. I think I was one of the few people who felt that there was something sinister about him. This may have been due to the uneasy feeling his soft, silky voice gave me; I felt that behind his ingratiating manner there was something concealed.

It was difficult to find out much about him, as he seemed reluctant to talk about himself, but preferred to talk about his cats. At first we thought his stories about them rather amusing, but we soon got bored, and tried to get the Laird to tell us something about himself. After tactful questioning we found out that he had private means, and that he had travelled widely. He had been all over the world, he told us, but when he was asked in what year he had been in a particular place he evaded the question.

"I think it was in 1926 when I was in Barbados, my dear," he said to me one morning in the "Woodcock", "but I can't be sure. I've never had a good memory for dates, not even as a boy. I often failed my history examinations owing to my inability to remember the date of some tiresome battle!"

Gradually, as time went on, he was accepted as a harmless eccentric. Many people found him amusing, and some liked him, and he was generous in standing drinks, though he did not drink much himself. When he came to the "Woodcock" in the evening it was always at half-past

six, and he would leave punctually at seven.

"Why must you rush off so soon?" I asked him on one occasion. "Have one for the road."

"No thank you, my dear. I have to prepare our evening meal. We dine at eight, and we always dress for dinner."

Noble who was rather drunk, roared with laughter.

"What?" he asked; "you dress for dinner all by yourself, or do the cats dress too?"

"Of course they do," said the Laird coldly. "Cats have very civilized habits."

He finished his drink and walked out.

Two days later, in the course of a conversation, Captain Burgess asked Gridley whether, when he had been a bank manager in Nepal, he had ever done any big game shooting.

"Yes, once, when I was asked by some customers of the bank to go on a tiger shoot with them."

"Did you shoot any?" asked the Captain.

"Yes, we got three between us, and I shot one of them; a magnificent beast. I presented his skin to the club."

"What?" said the Laird, in a voice hardly above a whisper. "You murdered one of the greater cats?" He had turned very pale, and his hand shook as he put down his glass.

"You have to shoot some of them, you know," said Gridley. "They do an awful lot of damage. They raid the villages and kill the goats belonging to the natives, and sometimes

they kill the poor beggars themselves.”

“Goats! Natives!” the Laird cried shrilly. “What are their paltry lives worth compared to a beautiful tiger’s?”

“Nonsense! You surely think a man’s life more important than their’s?”

“No, I don’t.” The Laird ordered himself another drink, and turned his back on us. For the next week or two he was silent and abstracted when he came to the “Woodcock”, and would not speak to Gridley; then one morning he greeted him again in his old friendly manner.

“I see you’ve been taken back into favour,” I said.

“Yes, he seems to have forgiven me. He’s not really such a bad chap; I rather like him in spite of his odd ideas.”

Gridley and I had an arrangement that on alternate Sundays we had supper with one another, and on this particular Sunday it was his turn to come to me.

“I’ve some news for you,” he said, “and I’ll bet you ten bob that you won’t guess what it is.”

“That your Pools have come up?”

“No, worse luck; you’ve lost your bet. I’ve been invited to dine tomorrow with the Laird.”

“What? At his castle?” I asked.

“Yes, I’m curious to see what it’s like, as I think I’m the first person he’s ever asked there. It’s rather a bore having to put on a dinner jacket, but he asked me to, and I can’t afford to offend one of my customers.”

News travels fast on this island, and on Tuesday morning I heard that the

bank was shut. Thinking that Gridley might be ill, I walked round there, and found his daily woman coming out. I asked her if he was in, and she replied “No, sir. I haven’t seen him since yesterday, and I don’t think he came back last night, as his bed’s not been slept in.”

I walked to the “Woodcock”, where I hoped I should see him drop in for his usual morning pint, but he didn’t appear, and after tea, feeling uneasy about him, I decided to walk down to the castle. It was a cold, foggy evening, and I thought as I approached it how forbidding the grey granite castle looked in the swirling mist. I pushed open the gate which led into a walled courtyard, and saw Gridley’s car near the front door. I pulled the old-fashioned iron bell, and after a minute or two the Laird appeared.

“I’m sorry to burst in like this,” I said, “but I’m a bit worried about Gridley. The bank’s shut, and Joan said he had not slept there last night. He told me he was dining with . . .”

“Come in, my dear, come in,” interrupted the Laird. “What wretched weather!” He led the way through a small entrance hall, and then down a dimly lit passage, and opening a door at the end of it ushered me into an enormous room. The curtains were drawn, and it was lit only by a few flickering candles. In spite of a log fire smouldering in the great open fireplace, the room smelled damp and musty. There was some indifferent tapestry on the walls, and, on the floor, were some worn but very beautiful rugs. Painted screens

divided the room into two parts.

"Sit down by the fire, my dear," the Laird said, pulling forward a chair. "I'm afraid I can't offer you a cigarette; as you know, I don't smoke."

"Is Gridley here?" I asked. "I see his car's outside."

"Yes, he's here, and you shall see him, but first I would like you to meet my charming little family."

He left the room, but soon returned with a tray on which were three willow-pattern plates, and on them chopped raw meat. He put the plates on the floor, and then went out leaving the door half-open. Presently I heard a faint pattering, and into the room walked a strange procession. A beautiful grey Persian cat came first, with a purple mantle trailing behind it attached to a gold collar round its neck. A white ostrich feather waved above its forehead, fastened into a diamanté bandeau. Then came an enormously fat tabby, buttoned into what appeared to be a black silk soutane. It had on a clerical collar, and little black gaiters. Last of all stalked a Siamese, with a strap criss-crossed round its body, into which was stuck a tiny replica of an executioner's axe. They went to their plates and began to eat. Then the Laird came in.

"What do you think of my little family?" he cried shrilly. "Have you ever seen anything more exquisite than the Princess?" He pointed to the Persian. "So truly royal and gracious! Now permit me to introduce you to the Reverend Skeffington-Skipp." He pointed to the tabby.

"A typical parson, isn't he—a fat, greedy parish priest? And we mustn't forget Pyewacket." He waved his hand towards the Siamese. "Though I must confess I cannot feel for him quite as I feel for the others. Still, he plays his sinister rôle to the life, don't you think, or perhaps I should say to the death." He giggled. "And now, my dear, you shall see my masterpiece, the greatest cat of all."

He went out of the room, and I waited impatiently for some time. Then I saw, crawling towards me through the half-open door, a large feline form in a black cat's mask. I was reminded of the cats I had seen in pantomimes as a child, of Puss-in-Boots and of Dick Whittington's faithful companion. But this was no pantomime cat.

"Did I startle you?" asked the Laird softly. He stood up, and I saw, to my horror, that his paws ended in steel claws clotted with dried blood.

"Good God!" I cried, "What has happened?"

"I will tell you, my dear. When Gridley told me he had so foully murdered one of the greater cats I could not forget it. It preyed on my mind, and for some days, I feared that I was losing my reason. I could not sleep, but paced up and down my room"—he sighed—"such endless hours! Then one night I had a vision. I saw that tiger; he came bounding up to me, and laid his noble head in my lap. He told me that I had been chosen as the humble instrument of his vengeance. 'Strike' he snarled, 'and kill!'"

The Laird walked over to the

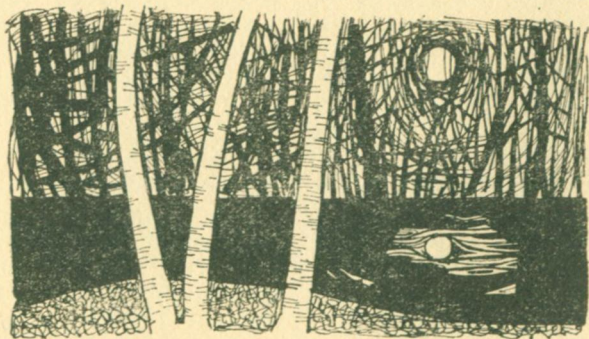
screens and folded them back, and I saw, lying on the floor, the body of a man. It was Gridley with his throat slashed open. His hands were torn and scratched, and his face twisted in an awful expression of pain and terror.

"Not a pretty sight," the Laird said; "but you are trembling, my dear! Let me get you a drink." And he laid his dreadful steel fingers on my arm. A choking noise came from the other side of the room, and the Laird turned and hurried towards the sound. It was the cat dressed as a clergyman who had got one of his paws caught in his clerical collar and seemed about to strangle, but I didn't wait to see.

I rushed headlong from the room and tore down the passage to the dark entrance hall. With shaking hands I fumbled for the door-handle, but for a minute I couldn't find it. Then I did, and ran outside. I jumped into Gridley's car and pressed the starter, but the engine was cold. I

pressed it again and again, and then some instinct made me glance round, and I saw the cat-like figure of the Laird at the front door. I leapt from the car, and raced across the courtyard into the road, and although it was uphill nearly all the way I never stopped running until, with a painful stitch in my side and a swimming head, I got back to my house, and threw myself panting into a chair. It was not until I had drunk a stiff brandy that I was able to go to the telephone and call the police.

Poor Gridley lies in the churchyard, and the castle is once again falling into ruins. Otherwise, life on the island goes on very much as it did before the tragedy. Captain Burgess and his wife have gone to the Riviera for their annual holiday, and Ernest Farewell has returned from his cure, and is writing another book. The Laird is in Broadmoor, where I think he must be very unhappy without his cats.



SLEEPING BEAUTY

LESLIE VARDRE

Illustrated by J. V. R. Davies



THE CAR BREASTED a hill and dropped into a lane shadowed by overhanging trees. Inspector Gregson leaned forward, resting large hairy hands on the back of the seat in front.

"It's along here somewhere," he said; "on the left."

The car slowed; the lane widened and swung in a gentle curve. Ahead were tall iron gates set between red-brick pillars.

"That's it," Gregson said, and the car pulled in to the grassy opening. At his side Sergeant Tiller regarded the rusty gates, the overgrown drive and the lonely house with the impatient eyes of youth.

"Desolate—" he said and took out his handkerchief to wipe his face. It was a day of bright sunshine and it was uncomfortably warm in the car.

"It wasn't always like this," Gregson said. He opened the door and stepped out into the lane. Through the rotting bars of the gate he saw how some of the windows were empty and others black stars of broken glass. Thick bushes and briars clustered about the terrace.

He spoke back over his shoulder. "Come for a walk, Peter; get some fresh country air into those city lungs of yours."

The sergeant climbed reluctantly

from the car. He grimaced at the uniformed driver who winked in return.

"Give me a hand," Gregson grunted, hands pressed against the gate.

"Hardly worth a twenty-mile detour, sir," Tiller suggested, setting long white hands alongside solid hairy ones. Rust flaked and the gate moved slowly on grating hinges.

"Your trouble," the other pointed out drily, "is that you lack the sublime gift of imagination. There is always time for a detour when there is a lesson to be learned. But if that overzealous soul of yours needs an official excuse, then this is Hanslett House and the scene of a mystery that so far as the records are concerned has never been solved."

He dusted his hands and thrust them deep into his pockets. He walked slowly up the drive, a stolid, ox-shouldered man with thinning grey hair and a face that was a mesh of fine creases.

At his side Tiller frowned. "Hanslett House——?"

"Before your time, Peter; twenty years and more before. Although you may have heard of it. Does the name Hannibal mean anything?"

The sergeant considered and then shook his head. "No." He looked through the trees. "It must have been

quite a place in its time. These would be the gardens?"

"Five acres of them. And woods behind. Used to be filled with birds. They used to keep three gardeners and a couple of gamekeepers. I was the village bobby, stationed at Bassford. That was the last village we passed through."

They had reached the terrace steps.

"You did mention that," Tiller said, following the inspector up the crumbling stone ledges. The statues that flanked the terrace were broken and armless; ivy had grown thickly, enveloping the balustrade. All the ground floor windows were broken. Gregson chose one of them, resting his hands carefully on the broken pane while he peered inside. The room was empty, the floor littered with pieces of plaster and glass, the whole covered with yellow dust.

This is the room," he said. "This is where they put her after the accident. They had the bed there, in that alcove, so that she could look out over the gardens. She could move her eyes a little but not her head."

Tiller joined him at the window. "Who, sir?"

"The wife, Hannibal's wife. Madeleine. Tall and slender; willowy. You know the type; very fair hair, almost white; deep blue eyes. Perfection." He sighed. "One of the most beautiful women I have ever seen. But I was little more than twenty at the time. Impressionable, perhaps. She was Hannibal's life. The accident and its outcome broke him. He changed."

"An accident, sir?"

"She had been out riding. The horse threw her. That's all there was to it. Something to do with the spine. She was completely paralysed. Hannibal must have spent a fortune on specialists. I remember seeing cars standing in the drive. It was on my beat. I used to work with the gamekeepers—poaching." He smiled at the memory. "That's something you don't meet in the city. Stalking your quarry through the night woods. In a way it was fun. . . ."

He straightened, rubbing the dirt from his hands and glancing sideways, surprising a smile on Tiller's long oval face.

"Come round the back," he invited. "The gardens used to be quite a sight. Although now—" He sighed. "I wonder how many other old houses are crumbling away like this? Too expensive for anyone to buy and renovate; not interesting enough to be preserved."

The countryside opened out as they followed the terrace round the side of the house. Fields and meadows spread to distant hills. There was a lake and a background of trees. There was still a memory of lawns and paths.

Gregson pointed. "Used to be a rose garden here. You'll have to use your imagination to picture how it once looked." He smiled to himself. "A valuable gift, that of imagination. Worth cultivating. When regular methods fail, imagination often finds the answer. A lesson for you, young man." He parted briars, wincing as barbs scraped his hands. "There used to be a path here, leading down to a seat. Ah—I thought I was right." He

led the way and the sergeant followed reluctantly. "This is where I met Hannibal that morning."

The broken stone seat was set in a small recess. Below, the gardens fell away, a wilderness of tangled growth.

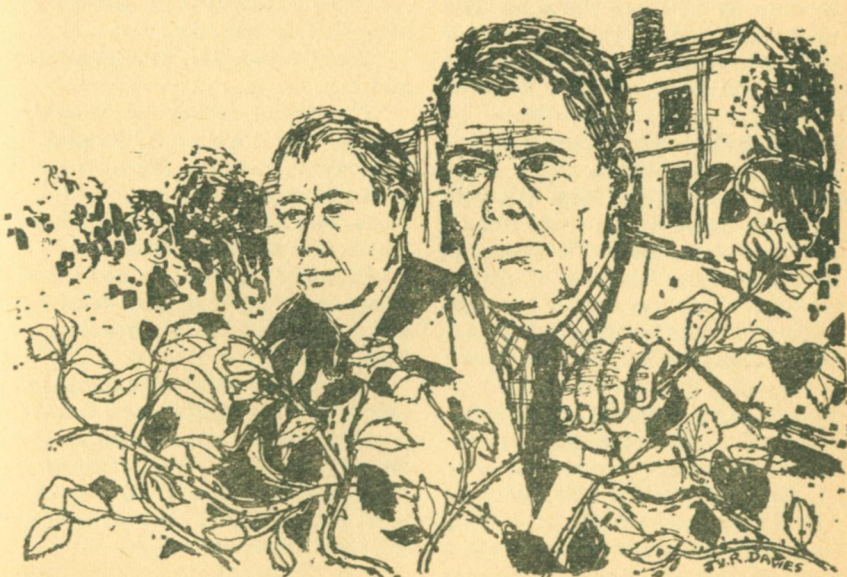
"I'd been to have a word with one of the game-keepers," Gregson said. "I took the short cut back through the gardens. Hannibal was here, stooping over the roses.

"Tall and very dark. Is saturnine the word? But his face was white and strained with deep lines running each side his nose. It was easy to see how badly he had taken the accident to his wife. Six months earlier that had been. The doctor used to come every day. He had two patients on his hands. God knows he couldn't do much for

the woman but he was helping the man. Sleeping capsules. Important, those, Peter. Hannibal hadn't been able to sleep properly since the accident and the doctor had prescribed the capsules.

"That morning he was doing something to the roses and looked up when he heard me coming. I knew that he didn't mind me taking the short cut through the gardens but I apologized for all that. He said something, I forget what, and then straightened his back wearily.

"I was just going back to the house, Gregson," he said. "I thought I heard the doctor's car. You might walk back up with me. Come and have a word with Mrs. Hannibal. A little break in the monotony for her..."



“‘Come and have a word with her,’ he said. Poor devil. She could neither speak nor move. I wasn’t all that keen on the idea but I went with him. It was the least I could do and anyway, I couldn’t very well have refused.”

Gregson paused, staring out over the gardens.

“From that point onwards,” he said carefully, “everything that happened is as clear to me now as it was then. I had to tell the tale so many times. We walked side by side up that path and on to the terrace. It was spring, but there was a bite to the air and the long french windows were closed. We went in through the kitchen, through a green baize door and along a passage. Hannibal had one hand in his jacket pocket. When we reached the door of the room where his wife lay, he took out his hand and used a handkerchief to wipe his face, just like he was trying to erase the look of worry and anxiety. When he opened the door he was smiling.

“The bed was in the alcove made by the huge bow windows. His wife lay there, motionless, a shape draped in white sheets, the whole bathed in an almost artificial glow of golden sunlight. The nurse was at her side, holding one of those white china feeding-cup affairs to her lips. The doctor was standing by one of the other windows, making notes on a small pad. They both looked up at our entrance. Hannibal ignored them at first, going straight to his wife’s side, stooping and kissing her and then smoothing the pillow. The nurse stepped back a pace, holding the feeding-cup ready

to resume the interrupted feeding.

“‘How is she this morning, doctor?’ Hannibal asked.

“‘Doing very nicely,’ the doctor replied. ‘I’m just making a few notes for nurse. A change in diet. Glucose...’

“Hannibal beckoned to me.

“‘Madeleine,’ he said to the woman on the bed, ‘here’s Gregson to have a word with you. He’s come to tell you all the village scandal.’

“I went to the side of the bed. She stared up at me. Her mouth was open a little and a thin thread of saliva came from one corner. I think, but I’m not sure, I think that she tried to smile. The nurse used a piece of lint to wipe the mouth and then brought the cup back to the pallid lips.

“‘What’s that you’re giving her, nurse?’ Hannibal asked.

“‘Only water, Mr. Hannibal,’ she told him.

“The doctor looked up from his writing. ‘Don’t overdo it,’ he said; ‘a little and often is the thing. Just sufficient to keep her mouth and lips moist. And what about you, Mr. Hannibal? Sleeping any better now?’

“Hannibal left the side of the bed. ‘Sleeping, doctor?’ he said. ‘Oh, yes; those capsules seem to be doing the trick.’

“‘Remember not to take more than one at a time,’ the doctor warned; ‘and try not to make too regular a thing of them. They’re pretty potent.’ He ripped the page from his notebook and looked at his watch. ‘Well, I’d better be on my way.’

“But Hannibal was at the side-

board. 'You'll take a glass of sherry before you go,' he said; 'and you too, Gregson. . . .' And when I started a pretence of refusal he shook his head at me and smiled a little.

"'We know that you're on duty,' he said, 'but I'm sure that the doctor won't say anything. Or nurse. . . .'"

"Like everything else in the house the sherry was of the finest quality. If that is the right expression—" Gregson smiled at his sergeant. "I've never been up in that sort of thing but even I recognized that this was a wine that had to be sipped and savoured. The doctor passed a comment about it and Hannibal said that it had been specially imported. He poured out a glass for the nurse and she put the feeding cup down on the bedside table and came over to join us. For a while, the woman on the bed was left alone, still bathed in the bright sunlight. I saw how her eyes moved a little as she tried to follow her husband's movements.

"When the doctor regretfully set his empty glass down and looked again at his watch, Hannibal had the decanter ready for the second glass, waving aside the half-hearted protest. He refilled my glass and I moved a few paces away, sensing that perhaps they wished to talk privately.

"'No change then?' I heard Hannibal say in a resigned voice.

"The doctor shook his head. 'I wish that I could say there was. I'm sorry, but we have to accept the fact that the damage is permanent. But on the other hand, her health is fine. And you have the consolation of knowing that there is no pain.'

"I moved a few more paces away then and their voices sank to a murmur. The nurse stood alone, cradling her glass. She wore a blue uniform and one of those starched white caps. I remember that she had a watch dangling from a safety-pin on her lapel.

"Apart from the low murmur of voices the room was silent. I began to feel uncomfortable and out of place. After a while I went over to the bed and looked down at the waxen face. And right away I knew that something was wrong. Instead of her eyes following my movements they stared up at the ceiling. And I could detect no stir of breath from the quiet lips. I said, 'Doctor,' only very quietly, but something in my voice brought him quickly across the room, Hannibal following and the nurse putting down her glass on the window ledge before coming to join us.

"The doctor laid his hand first on the white forehead and then reached under the sheets to draw out the thin wrist. Then he went back across the room to his bag, opening it and coming back with a stethoscope.

"It seemed an age before he looked up.

"'She's dead,' he said. Just like that. Softly and yet in amazement. 'She's dead. . . .'"

"Hannibal was turned to stone. He just stood there, looking down at the body. The nurse fluttered ineffectually, wrenched from her professional composure. It was she who finally broke the silence, saying almost reproachfully, 'But you said that she

was well, doctor; you said that she would live for years; you said that her health was all right. I did my best—' Then she started to cry.

"The doctor's face was almost as haggard as Hannibal's. He seemed to be searching for words.

" 'There is no reason for this,' he said at last; 'no reason at all. There were no indications. Nothing. I'm afraid—' He looked at Hannibal. 'The paralysis wouldn't—couldn't—have caused this. I'm afraid that there may be . . . complications. Do you understand?'

"Then I saw what he was trying to say. But Hannibal seemed past caring. 'Do what you have to do,' he said woodenly, and turned and left the room.

"The doctor looked at me as if expecting me to do something. But I didn't know what it was he expected me to do.

" 'You'd better ring your sergeant,' he said. 'Someone will have to see things as they are now. Nothing must be touched. Not until after the—' The nurse broke into renewed sobbing. The full enormity of the thing hit me with an almost physical force. The quiet sick-room had suddenly changed. I went to the phone on the table in the window and I rang the sergeant."

Gregson fell silent. Two blackbirds in a nearby bush set up a fierce chattering. Tiller asked: "And was her death natural?"

"No," Gregson said heavily; "no, it wasn't. They found nearly forty grains of some stuff called—I forget the name, these things are changing

all the time—Butonyl, I think—inside her. Enough to have killed her twice over. It was the same stuff, of course, that was in the capsules Hannibal had been taking."

Tiller spread his hands. "So he put her out of her misery. The husband, I mean."

"It wasn't so simple as that. There was a time factor involved. That stuff was potent. Potent enough to have killed her twenty minutes after it had been administered. The experts all agreed on that point. Half an hour at the outside. We had all been together in that room for well over an hour. Twenty minutes the lab. boys said; just long enough for the gelatine capsules to have dissolved and the stuff inside to take effect. She had been alive when we had left her to have that sherry. She must have died while we were grouped together. The feeding cup contained water. Plain ordinary water. Nothing else had passed her lips. And yet, while we had all been there, watching, the poison had been given to her. Must have been given to her. . . ."

Gregson turned to his sergeant. "And that's the whole story, Peter. The impossible crime. A little problem for you. But this is one that you won't solve by logical deduction. This is a case for imagination. That's why I dragged you out here. To show you the place, so that you could get the feel of it. A lesson for you to try to learn."

"You said that it is still unsolved?"

"According to the records, yes." Gregson nodded. "But there is an answer. The only answer that is

at all possible. But I'm sure it will never be proved."

Tiller pursed his lips. "It couldn't have been administered while you were in the room," he reasoned aloud. "So it must have been given before. Hannibal must have found some way of delaying the action of the drug."

"No," Gregson said; "there you go, working along the usual lines. That was the first thing they thought of. But the experts said that that was impossible. They proved their point by experiment. The stuff had been administered sometime during that hour. While we were all in the room. A nurse, a doctor, a policeman; all trained observers. Almost as if we had been assembled together just for that purpose."

He rubbed the side of his nose. "That's about the whole of the story. Hannibal lived on here for a while, alone. A man suspected by the world of having murdered his wife. Or better, perhaps, of having put her mercifully to sleep. My sympathies lay with him. But I was young enough to be a little romantic and I had used my imagination. I saw how it must have been done but there was no way of proving it. And so I kept the knowledge to myself. The war came and he joined the R.A.F. He was killed during the Battle of Britain. All that is left is a house, an overgrown garden and the memories of a young village policeman."

"It must have been the woman herself," Tiller said suddenly. "That is the only answer. She must have been able to move. Somehow, she must have got hold of those capsules. . . ."

"I expected better of you than that," the inspector said. "But at least you are starting to stir that dormant imagination of yours. Look about you, now. In a way, the answer lies here. In this crumbling old house surrounded by its hedge of briar. It is easier for you than it was for me. I only had part of the picture. I only had a woman, a beautiful woman, lying on her bed as if perpetually asleep. You have the rest of it here. Put them all together and you will have the answer."

And when the sergeant frowned his annoyance, turning to look back at the house; "Go back to your childhood, Peter. Put together a beautiful sleeping woman and a house surrounded by a tall, impenetrable hedge. A story?"

"Sleeping Beauty," Tiller discovered. "But—"

"And the story?"

"She was pricked with a needle of sorts. . . ."

"There you have your accident. And afterwards?"

"She fell asleep. There was a prince. He forced his way through the briar hedge and he found her there. And then he—"

"He brought her back to life again by kissing her," the sergeant said. "My God! Is that how Hannibal did it?"

"He must have had the capsules ready in his pocket," Gregson said; "ready for the right moment, the moment when he knew that he would have three witnesses to testify in his favour. When he wiped his face with the handkerchief he slipped them into

his mouth. Four gelatine capsules. And then he kissed her, his mouth open on hers. . . .”

He looked at his watch. “Time we were getting back, Peter.”

They walked round the terrace and down the drive. They didn’t speak until they had reached the car. Then it was the inspector who broke the silence, turning to look back at the house for the last time.

“She tried to smile at me,” he said; “I’m sure of that. She knew quite well what he had done and so she tried to smile.”

He was suddenly brisk. “All right, driver; away you go. We’ve wasted far too long here, digging up the past. You might pull up at the first pub you see on the way back. My sergeant has certainly earned himself a drink this afternoon.”



Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;
To lie in cold obstruction and to rot;
This sensible warm motion to become
A kneaded clod; and the delighted spirit
To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside
In thrilling region of thick-ribbèd ice;
To be imprisoned in the viewless winds,
And blown with restless violence round about
The pendent world!

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE.

The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me.

BLAISE PASCAL.

Oh teach me yet
Somewhat before the heavy clod
Weighs on me, and the busy fret
Of that sharp-headed worm begins
In the gross blackness underneath.

ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON.

LITTLE OLD LADY

MICHAEL DAVIS

IT WAS A DAMP, depressing foggy November evening and Henry Goldsmith stood disconsolately on the station platform. The fog had returned for the night and it was the sort of evening that gave England its reputation for foul weather and sent Colonials scurrying home.

Henry stood beneath a gaslight that was fighting a losing battle against the fog and he wondered, not for the first time, at the paradox of an age in which spacemen and Victorian gaslights existed side by side. Admittedly the station was on a small branch line which joined the main line a few miles up the track, and then it was full speed ahead for half an hour with only the stop at Worpleston before the train reached Henry's home town. That is if the fog wasn't too bad. For the second time, Henry cursed having had to come to this remote spot in order to convince old Mrs. Jackson to take out a new policy. A proper mess up he'd made of it too.

Behind him the gaslight flared suddenly and then hissed savagely. A man wearing a white scarf pulled up over his mouth sauntered silently by, and with a loud peremptory "clang" the signal nearby changed. A porter shouted to his mate across the track and in the distance the train gave a mournful whistle.

It was a pity about Mrs. Jackson.

In the old days he would never have failed. She'd have been taking out a new policy before she could have said "Bingo". But now, in his late forties, Henry seemed to have lost his touch. Insurance was no longer the sensible thing it had once seemed to him. He had lost his patience and instead of seeing clients as human beings whom he was really helping they now represented material things. One good day meant so many cigarettes, a successful week brought an electric fire, a profitable month the deposit on a washing machine—well, most people thought like that these days—except old Barchester, his Branch Manager. He was an anachronism. To him insurance was a religion and he its High Priest. He knew intuitively when to stop badgering a prospective client or if a customer would respond to either bullying or excessive courtesy. He wasn't even above introducing fear as an essential weapon.

"Well, Mrs. Sykes, of course, if you think you could bring up your family if your . . . er . . . husband unfortunately died, well that is entirely your responsibility." Or: "Naturally, Mr. Robinson, if you're prepared to risk having your house destroyed by fire and not take out any protection, that's your affair"—having just seen the old boy flick a discarded match into the waste-paper basket.

Well, what did it really all matter these days anyway. He'd certainly no

more stomach for it, and Barchester, crafty old devil, had already noticed it.

He'd been into the old boy's office only last week. Barchester had been pretty diplomatic. On the verge of retirement he could afford to be. He'd given Henry a long discourse on the glowing prospects of a retirement made easier by the perks which the Company provided for its faithful servants. Naturally, the more senior you became the better the outlook. Henry too could look forward to a pleasant retirement if he maintained his steady progress. Unfortunately, please stop him if he was wrong, it seemed that the last few months Henry seemed to have slipped a bit, his area had shown a marked decrease in the amount of premiums being paid. He was quite sure that this was merely a passing phase and he was equally certain it didn't necessitate his making a special report to Head Office . . . not yet anyway. If anything was worrying Henry, now was the time to tell him. That's what he was there for. Troubles shared. . . .

Henry said that he was feeling fine and he was sure that his work would soon be on the up-grade. Deep down though he wondered if this was really so. Not while he had these damn nerves. He could recall the exact moment when they had started three months ago. Now he was hag-ridden by them. Had he turned the gas off; what about the water-tap; was the paraffin heater all right? That was how it had all started. Now it was much worse and he was torn by the most terrifying thoughts that seldom

left his mind free from fear. What if he suddenly murdered somebody; what if he assaulted some old lady; what if he jumped out of the train while it was moving—these things did happen? He shuddered and then momentarily forgot his worries as the train pulled into the platform.

He opened the carriage door nearest him and threw himself into a corner seat and grunted at the old lady sitting opposite him. They had the carriage to themselves and as it was not a corridor train they were utterly alone. Outside the fog swirled slowly past the windows emphasizing their isolation. She looked a pleasant soul and the phrase came into his mind "just like Dresden china". Why, he could crush her with one blow. He shivered and ran his tongue over his lips. The old lady, ignorant of his thoughts, smiled at him and he noticed that she had strange, piercing blue eyes. Powerful, ruthless, relentless eyes, completely out of character with the rest of her.

She was very short and wore her grey hair drawn back into a bun at the back of her neck. Her hands were folded neatly on her lap. A rolled umbrella lay on the seat beside her. Henry yawned, rested his head on the back of the seat and closed his eyes. He felt desperately tired and soon became oblivious of the movement of the train. He felt very hot and wearily loosened his collar and took off his tie. He removed his jacket and loosened the zips on the side of his trousers. He dozed off for a few minutes. When he opened his eyes the old lady was still staring at him.

Henry started—but couldn't turn away. "Very hot in here," he muttered. Her smile broadened although the eyes didn't change, and Henry, in a flash of intuitive panic, knew that he had reached a crisis. Desperately, in a superhuman effort, he felt for his pipe, drew it slowly from his pocket and then, with a mighty effort, placed it in his mouth. The old lady watched him closely. He felt overwhelmingly tired. His head flopped back on to the cushions. The lights in the carriage became dim and then he was in total darkness. He felt utterly resigned and did not notice that the damp fog had somehow filtered into the compartment nor that a strange, sweet smell filled the carriage. All he saw was a pair of blue

eyes in a background of total darkness.

Old Tom Pritchard had been waiting half an hour on Worpleston station cursing the fog which had delayed the train and he was very pleased when the train pulled into the station. He opened the nearest carriage door and slumped into a corner seat. The other two occupants of the carriage—two dear old ladies—looked up at him and smiled. Incongruously, between them on the floor, lay a man's pipe. Old Tom laughed uproariously:

"Been having a crafty smoke, ladies?"

They both turned their deep blue eyes on him and their smiles deepened.



TIME AND AGAIN

MORGAN EVANS

Illustrated by Juliette Palmer



TIME NEVER STANDS still. No matter how he may try, man can never halt its steady progress. But perhaps, once in a while, it may become distorted, the past being gathered up and brought to the present so that for a while they may run side by side, linked by a duplication of events and an intensity of emotion.

When I was small, nine years old, and living in a dreamy village of lazy streams and thatched cottages where time indeed did seem to falter, I once spent part of a sunny morning alone on a hillside, tormented by the knowledge that I had done an evil thing.

It was a Saturday, and so there was no bus to be caught to take me to school in the nearby market town. Instead, the lanes, the fields and the hills were mine for the asking. But first I had to stand with my face pressed tight against the window of the little corner sweet shop while I wondered what to buy.

Instead of my usual sixpence I had only two pennies to spend. Father had been stern when he had explained the reason for the reduction in my pocket money. There were jobs about the house which I was supposed to have done and which I had neglected.

"It isn't a punishment," he told me gravely; "it is simply that this week

your work hasn't been worth sixpence. You have to learn to understand that money has to be earned. . . ."

A loss of fourpence was a big thing. I was angry at what I considered to be the injustice of it. It was over an hour since breakfast time and I was hungry. And all I could buy was one small chocolate bar. The bell jangled tinnily to the opening of the door. Old Mrs. Tapscott, bent-shouldered and fumbling, had boxes stacked high on the scrubbed wooden counter.

Sharp-knuckled hands trembled over the boxes when I asked for the chocolate. She had been tidying up, she said, and where had she put that new box of chocolate bars? She clicked her tongue and hobbled, mumbling, out of sight. And there, close by my hand, was a freshly opened box of shining toffee bars.

When I went into the shop I had no intention of trying to steal anything. That was something I had never done before. It was a sudden impulse that made me snatch up one of the toffee bars, thrust it into my jacket pocket and then run, my heart pounding, out into the sunshine.

I didn't stop running until I had turned off the main road and reached the little stone bridge. Then I leaned over the wall and stared down at the slow-moving water. It was a while before I could think clearly. Then the

hideous enormity of what I had done flooded through me. I had stolen something. I was a thief.

The toffee weighed heavily in my pocket. I reached for it and then took my hand away again. I didn't want it; I wasn't even hungry any more. Hot tears of self-pity burned my eyes but my handkerchief was in the same pocket as the toffee. Afraid then in case anyone should come along and see the tears and ask their cause I turned and ran still farther along the lane until the grass verges started to encroach on the gravel and there was a hill slope with trees where I could hide my misery.

The tears eased after a while but my body was shaken by fits of trembling. I reached for my handkerchief and the toffee came with it, falling to the pine-needle carpet. I let it lie there while I wiped my face as best I could.

It had come from a freshly opened box; a glaring space would shout aloud what had happened. Mrs. Taps-cott would know what I had done; she would certainly tell Mother. Misery engulfed me again when I tried to picture Mother's face. . . .

Sitting on a broken limb I huddled my unhappiness. The church clock chimed and struck the hour. Eleven o'clock. Almost an hour since I had run out of the shop. Sooner or later I would have to leave my hiding-place; I would have to go home, past the little shop. I would have to face my parents.

A lorry, clattering with empty milk-cans, rumbled along the hidden lane. There was a momentary solace in the recognition of something familiar.

The lorry was on its way to the farm to leave empty cans on the wooden platform by the gate. In a while it would come back again. I knew the driver well. Sometimes, when he was early, he would give me a lift to school. If I were to go down to the lane now and wait I could stop him and he would let me climb into the high uncomfortable seat at his side.

I would run away from home.

I could find somewhere to hide until everyone had forgotten about the stolen toffee. The lorry would give me a lift to Calston and I would find somewhere to sleep in the cattle market. The clock chimed the quarter hour as I made my way back down the hill.

The lane was still mercifully empty. To the right it narrowed and curved its way to the farm; to the left it swept out of sight behind the trees that hid the cottages.

Then a car, a small black saloon with sleek lines that were unfamiliar to me, came slowly round the corner, the driver leaning sideways through the open window, his eyes narrowed as he peered ahead.

He was young, his pale, narrow face made all the more white with the contrast of the wing of black hair that fell across his forehead. When he saw me watching he drew into the verge and stopped.

He called: "Sonny!" and when I went hesitantly towards him: "Am I still on the Calston road?"

I shook my head. Drivers using the main road were always going astray, taking the wrong turning when they reached the fork by the church.

"You should've gone to the left," I told him; "this only goes to a farm."

He nodded. "Thanks," and reached for the gear lever. Then he looked at me again. My face felt stiff with dried tears and dust and I still trembled.

"Hullo," he said; "trouble?"

I looked at him dumbly.

"Have you hurt yourself?" He leaned out of the window again.

"No," I told him.

As he opened the door and stepped out the milk lorry rumbled round the corner, slowed while it passed the car, and then speeded to vanish behind the trees. I watched it go and the tears welled again.

"Well—" said the young man and put his arm about my shoulders. Then suddenly my face was pressed tight against the smooth comfort of his jacket and I was blurting out my story. He heard me through to the end without speaking.

"But running away won't help," he said, crouching on his heels and using his handkerchief to wipe away my tears.

He straightened. "That won't solve a thing," he said, more to himself than to me. "The only thing you can do is to go back and try to sort it all out. Perhaps the toffee hasn't been missed. If it hasn't, then you can put it back without anyone being the wiser." He eyed me thoughtfully. "That might be the best way. Then no one will get hurt. And by the look of you you've been punished enough as it is. On the other hand, if it has been missed, then it's up to you to explain what happened and make them understand that you'll never do

the same thing again. I suppose you've still got it?"

I nodded miserably, pointing back up the hill. "It's up there. I didn't really want it."

"Go and get it," he ordered; "and then we'll see what we can do."

"Both of us?" I wondered hopelessly.

"Both of us," he agreed gravely.

When I got back to the lane again he had turned the car and was waiting with the door open. We drove slowly back to the village. He stopped at the fork. The road was empty. The only sign of life was Mrs. Tapscott's grey cat sunning itself on the shop step.

"That the place?" asked the young man.

And when I said that it was he looked sideways at me. "Well?" he wanted to know, "Now what? Do I come with you or do you go on your own?"

Looking back, I feel sure that his intention from the start had been to leave the final decision to me. When I wavered with uncertainty he put his hand on mine. "Well?" he asked again.

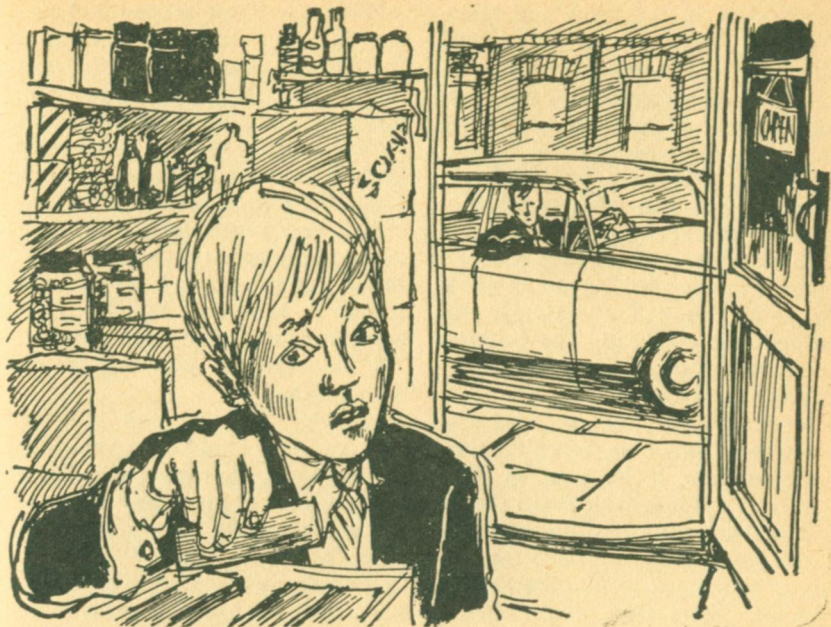
There was a reassurance in his touch that helped me make up my mind. "I'll go by myself."

"Good lad!" He pressed my hand and then leaned across to open the door.

"You won't go?" I asked anxiously; "you'll wait?"

"Don't worry," he said. "I'll wait and see how you make out."

The shop was empty and I could hear Mrs. Tapscott grumbling to herself behind a screen of sweet bottles.



It took only a moment to replace the toffee. Almost sick with relief I coughed to attract her attention.

She hobbled into view. "So it's you, Edwin. And why did you go running off after putting me to all that trouble?" Her voice was querulous and complaining.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Tapscott," I said earnestly, "truly sorry. But now I've come back and please could I have a bar of this toffee?"

She grumbled while she took my money. Gratitude taking the place of relief I raced back to the waiting car.

"It's all right!" I panted and thrust the toffee bar at him. "This is for you. I've paid for it. It's for you."

He took it silently, seeming to understand the gesture. Then he pressed the starter. "Thank you," he said, and again, "Thank you." As if I had been the one to help him instead of it being the other way about.

I stepped back so that I could point his way. "That's the Calston road."

He smiled then, for the first time.

"I've changed my mind," he told me; "I'm going back to London." He put up his hand. "Goodbye and good luck."

I stood and waved until the car had gone from sight.

By next morning the incident had already begun to fade. I was young, and the holidays lay ahead; long

sunny days in the fields and lanes. Within a month it had thrust itself almost beyond memory's reach.

We left the village when I was fourteen. Father had saved for many years to buy a newsagent's shop in surroundings that were very different from the peaceful lanes to which I had become accustomed. When the time came for me to leave school I found a job as office boy to an estate agent. Mr. Falstaff was young, ambitious and go-ahead. The business prospered through the years and I finished up as manager.

By this time I was married and had a son of my own. When the time came for him, in his turn, to leave school, it was inevitable that I should take him into the same firm as myself.

But I was disappointed at the outcome; he seemed to find the routine irksome. There were times when I had to take him to task for slackness and inefficiency. Like many other youths of his day and age he wanted to reach the top without first having to work his way up.

There came the time when he told me he wanted to leave the firm and find better-paid work elsewhere. There was an argument before I was able to make him change his mind, and a certain coldness came between us. He carried on his work with increasing dissatisfaction. Matters came to a head one Friday afternoon, shortly after his nineteenth birthday.

Although it was rare for Mr. Falstaff to put in an appearance at the office, this particular day he had an important and personal cash transaction on the agenda.

When the client arrived I showed him through to the inner office which Falstaff had borrowed for the occasion. When the business was completed he came to the door and beckoned me inside. He was pleased with himself, rubbing his hands and indicating the pile of notes on the desk.

"All very satisfactory, Edwin," he said and glanced at his watch. "You'd better put these away for the time being. A thousand exactly. You'd better bank them first thing Monday."

I unlocked the safe and set the notes on the shelf.

"Edwin," he said and I looked back over my shoulder. "About that boy of yours. He came to me before lunch and asked for a rise."

I came angrily to my feet. "I'm sorry; he had no right to—"

He held up a placating hand. "He said that he knew he was doing wrong going over your head. I think he felt he might get better results if he came directly to the fountain-head." He smiled briefly. "You can't blame him for trying. I'm sorry that I had to tell him I didn't think he was worth any more than he was getting at the moment."

"I understand," I replied with some grimness.

"Well—" he glanced round the office; "that's that." I followed him to the outer office. My son was just coming through. He held up a sheaf of papers.

"Details of the Melstrom house," he said to me.

"Put them on my desk, Max."

Falstaff turned at the tone of my voice.

"I was just going to the club," he said to me; "if you've nothing important on hand you might join me." It was a suggestion tantamount to an order. I collected hat and coat and joined him at the main entrance.

"It'll give you time to cool off," he said with the ghost of a smile. "You mustn't be too hard on the boy."

It was six o'clock when I returned to the office. My secretary was putting on her coat.

"I've put the letters on your desk, Mr. Travers," she told me.

Thanking her I went through to my office. And it was only as I closed the door behind me that I remembered the money and how I had been interrupted while putting it away. I couldn't recall locking the safe. As I remembered, I had even left the door partly open.

But now it was closed. I puzzled, absently, for a moment. Perhaps I had locked it automatically, not realizing what I was doing. It was only upon an impulse that I stooped to try the handle. The door opened at a touch. The shelf was empty.

My hands started to tremble and a cold numbness settled on my chest. I went to the office door and opened it.

"Is Max anywhere about?" I asked.

"No, Mr. Travers," my secretary said. "He left some time ago."

When she had gone I returned to my office and looked again in the safe, even though I knew I couldn't have been mistaken the first time.

It was clear what had happened. Max had seen the money when he had put the papers on my desk. He had taken it and closed the safe door,

hoping that I would assume I had locked it and that the theft wouldn't be discovered until the Monday morning. Closing the door again I reached for the phone. It took me a moment to remember my number.

"Mary," I said; "Edwin here. Is Max with you?" It was an effort to keep my voice steady.

"He's gone out," she replied. "He came in a while ago and asked if he could borrow my car. Is anything wrong? I thought he looked as if something had upset him."

"No. There's nothing wrong." I replaced the receiver.

In my own mind I felt sure that Max had only taken the money upon an impulse. Frustrated and angry, as I had once been, many years before, he had acted on the spur of the moment without thinking. The past flooded back and I was sitting on the hillside under the trees with the bar of toffee lying at my feet. I remembered how I had felt then; I knew how Max would be feeling now. He was fighting his own private battle. But he had no one to help him.

The money itself wasn't the important thing. I could draw the equivalent amount from my own account and pay it into Falstaff's account on Monday morning. What was important was that Max should work out his problem and come to the right decision. I would have given my right arm to have been standing invisible at his side, telling him what to do. . . .

When I reached home Mary wanted to know again if anything was wrong. After reassuring her as best I could

I took the evening paper to the lounge and there made a pretence of reading.

At midnight, with still no sign of his return, I went to bed. From time to time he would spend a week-end away from home, staying with friends, and so Mary found no reason to comment upon his absence.

Instead of going to the golf club the next morning I passed the long hours in a deck-chair, set on the lawn in such a position that I could watch the road without Mary becoming suspicious. If Max didn't return then she would have to be told. But until that happened I saw no reason for worrying her.

After a pretence of eating lunch I returned to my vigil. The afternoon hours dragged interminably. Worry turned the pretended headache into a throbbing reality.

At five o'clock Max came home.

I saw the car as it turned the corner. Emotion and feeling drained from my body and I sat motionless, watching. I forced a smile as he slammed the door and walked up the drive. He smiled in return, for all his face was pale and drawn and his eyes cautious, passing some comment about the weather.

Then he went indoors and I tried to put myself in his place, wondering what the next move would be. After a few minutes he came out again, frowning a little while he stood by my side.

"I've been worrying about the Melstrom house, Dad," he said. "I think I've made mistakes in the details."

"They've got to go to Falstaff first

thing Monday morning," I pointed out. "He'll take it badly if you have slipped up."

He grimaced. "I'm in his bad books already. . . ."

I tried to sound matter-of-fact. "It's your funeral, Max. I've certainly no intention of trailing all the way back to town at the week-end, just to check the details of a house." I yawned and stretched. "The office keys are in my jacket pocket, hanging behind the bedroom door. You can borrow them if you think it's worth the trouble."

"Thanks, Dad," he said.

I lay back and let the relief flood through me. When I heard him returning I strolled towards him.

"I shan't be long," he promised.

He climbed into the car, wound down the window and leaned out. A shock of black hair fell like a wing across his forehead. An air of unreality came over the evening, dropping like a gauze screen on a stage setting, blurring line and colour. I felt that this had happened once before, long ago. I almost expected him to say "Goodbye and good luck. . . ."

Instead he thrust out his hand.

"I've got a present for you," he said and smiled. "Something that was given to me earlier this afternoon. By a kiddie in a lonely village, somewhere at the back of the beyond. It's a long story. I'll tell you all about it some day."

I took the present and then watched him drive away to return the money. And then I looked at what he had given me. It was just a bar of toffee. A tuppenny bar of shining toffee.



THE SLAVE DETECTIVE

THE CASE OF THE FIRST CUP

WALLACE NICHOLS

Illustrated by Juliette Palmer

BY JUPITER, BUT it is hot!" exclaimed Titus Sabinus the Senator.

He was seated within a small, ornamental temple, remaining from the old time but still white and gleaming in the midst of the great garden of his house on the Esquiline. He had with him his adopted son, Titus Titianus. He had never had a child of his own,

and Titianus was the son of his oldest friend, long since dead, and he loved him dearly. The young man was on leave from the army on the Pannonian frontier where he held a high position on the staff.

"Yes, Father," he agreed. "Shall I fetch us some cooling drinks?"

"Call a slave," suggested Sabinus.

"I'll fetch them myself, Father. It will be quicker," laughed Titianus.

He came back with two brimming

cups of cooled wine, and handed one to his adoptive father. Sabinus drank, immediately spluttered, gasped, tore at his throat and fell squirming to the marble floor.

Titianus yelled for help. Immediately one of the gardeners, a man named Drusus, ran in.

"My father is poisoned . . ." cried Titianus. "Get help!"

"Wait, lord," answered Drusus. "I am a skilled herbalist. I know an antidote. I'll compound it at once and be back in an instant," and he disappeared at a run.

Titianus laid a cushion under the stricken man's head, shouting the while for help, but the little temple was some distance from the house. He was at the point of despair when Drusus came hurrying back with a cup of some darkish coloured liquid.

"Give him this, lord," he said, his face puckered with anxiety and sweating from the heat. "If we can get it down him it'll rid the poison of its worst power. I know my herbs!"

With great difficulty, for Sabinus by this time was almost unconscious, they got most of the potion into his mouth, and luckily he was still able to swallow.

"I'll run into the house for help," volunteered Drusus, and raced away. The first of the household to arrive was the Senator's cherished slave, named Sollius, famous for his detective gifts. He was quickly followed by a number of other slaves, including the Senator's body-slave Terentius, Lucius, the usual assistant to Sollius in his cases, and even Tuphus the cook. Their master, still alive, was

tenderly carried into the house and laid in his bed, and a physician was summoned. When he came he pronounced him as indeed sufficiently ill, but not in danger of his life: the prompt action of Drusus with his quickly compounded antidote had saved him from death.

It was the night of the same day. The silver lamp beside Sabinus's bed shone clear and still, illuminating the tense face of Sollius where he sat on a stool at the bedside.

"You have solved mysteries for others, my good Sollius," breathed Sabinus. "Now you've a mystery to solve for me. Someone sought to kill me."

"It seems so, lord."

"I fear my thoughts," murmured Sabinus, and the glance towards his slave was desperate.

"I have guessed so, lord."

"He is terribly in debt. Does he hunger already for his inheritance?"

"The lord Titianus?" whispered Sollius.

"My legal son . . . my son Titus," and there was a sob in Sabinus's voice. He clutched at his slave's arm. "I must have the truth, Sollius. Get me the truth—whatever it may be. I leave it in your hands, my faithful friend," he breathed, and sank back upon his pillow. "He gave it to me himself . . . his own hands fetched and gave it!"

"He would not know, lord," soothingly answered Sollius, "that you would call for a drink then."

"He cherished the intent—and the poison was on him—and the opportunity had come," suggested Sabinus.

"I will sieve it thoroughly, lord," Sollius promised.

"You are my only friend in this," said his master, and closed his eyes in sick weariness. "I do not wish the City Prefect brought in. It is our investigation, Sollius. Our family shame—if so it turn out—is no one else's business."

At that moment his body-slave entered, and Sollius slipped away. He sought Titianus, and at last found him ruminative by the impluvium, seated on the rim of its shallow, carp-filled pool in the atrium. A single torch in a corner hardly illuminated the heavy gloom. Sollius crossed over to the brooding young man.

"Tell me, lord . . ." he was beginning when Titianus interrupted him.

"Ah, the Slave Detective!—never a man more welcome. Discover the villain, and quickly, I beseech you. I am not such a fool as not to know that my father suspects me—and I'd give my right arm not to hurt a hair of his head."

"May I question you, lord?"

"You have, I imagine," smiled Titianus, "full authority in this matter."

He appeared frank and ingenuous. Sollius studied him as well as he could in the semi-darkness.

"How, and from where, lord, did you get the poisoned cup of wine?"

"Why, of course," replied the young man bitterly, "I had it already prepared! My father should not believe such a thing of me—but I expect you are of his mind."

"Answer, lord, my question," insisted Sollius firmly.

Titianus heaved a deep sigh and spread out his hands.

"If only you'll believe me," he muttered to the slave.

"I always believe the truth," said Sollius quietly.

"I sought the back door of the kitchen where I knew that Tuphus would give me what I wanted. I found him already setting out cups of wine on a board for the household slaves, who were due for a break in toil. In thirsty haste I took up the first two cups, and returned. That is all, Sollius, on my word as a Roman. I gave my father the first of the cups—which I had in my right hand—and drank the other and without any ill-effect. Someone, not I, had poisoned that first cup on the board."

"Did you meet anyone on your way in?"

"No; I saw only Drusus at work on a hedge—from which, as you know, he came to our help at once."

"By the favour of the gods," murmured Sollius.

"That is all I can tell you," Titianus said earnestly.

"You could," breathed Sollius softly, "have added the poison as you carried the cups to the temple."

"If you believe that of me," cried Titianus angrily, "you are not as clever in insight as my father claims."

"I believe nothing, lord . . . yet," Sollius replied, and, very troubled in mind, he limped off to his own quarters, where he found Lucius waiting for him and restlessly walking up and down the small chamber.

"This is a bad business," Sollius said to the younger slave.

"The lord Titianus at least is not guilty," declared Lucius in a strangled voice.

"Why are you so sure?" Sollius asked, sinking wearily upon the nearest stool. "He fetched the cup; he gave it; our master nearly died. Are not these facts?"

"That poison in the cup," asserted Lucius, "was not meant for our master." He paused for a moment, then added hoarsely: "It was meant for me."

"For you?" breathed Sollius aghast.

"Listen. Each morning at our break Tuphus puts out on the bench by his kitchen door a row of cups of wine for us household slaves—you are outside our group, a privileged slave who eats and drinks apart—and our cups are always arranged in the same order, so that each gets his favourite proportion of water to wine, for we have differing tastes, which Tuphus knows; and my own cup is set always first on the board. It was that cup and the next which the lord Titianus snatched up in his haste. He might just as well have drunk from the poisoned cup himself."

"Who can hate you so?" Sollius whispered.

"There is a girl . . ." began Lucius, and hesitated.

"Delia?" said Sollius, a smile in his tone.

"You have noticed?"

"Who could help it, my son? Your eyes glisten in her presence."

"So do the eyes of others!" Lucius growled.

"When a young and beautiful slave-child suddenly grows up and is more beautiful still," said Sollius, "men's eyes are apt to glisten."

"Tuphus's do," breathed Lucius, "the old goat!"

"Tuphus?" cried Sollius in a horrified voice. "I have known him all my life. You can't believe it of Tuphus."

"Love," sighed Lucius, "makes both young and old equally mad."

"I know that," answered Sollius grimly. "But Tuphus? Oh, no, no."

"It is he, and he only, who prepares and sets out the cups. And you haven't seen him look at me!"

"I always thought you were friends."

"Until . . . until Delia grew up. He has seen us—ah, Sollius!—kiss. Since then he has almost spat at me each time we crossed in the passages."

"If that poison was for you, our master will have his very heart relieved," murmured Sollius.

"What of mine?" Lucius muttered. "Tuphus—from whom all my drink and my food will come—may be mad enough to try again. O Sollius, solve this case quickly—before he gets me. Only you can!"

"You do not need to urge me," said the Slave Detective. "But I cannot believe such a villainy of my old friend Tuphus."

"I can only tell you there is hate in his eyes."

"But not in his hands, Lucius. You must not tell me that. I know Tuphus too well to think it. Do not tell me either that only you and he—among all our slaves—are conscious of a

young beauty in their midst. Have you seen no hate and jealousy in other eyes, Lucius? Think, my son."

"By the Gods, Livius!" exclaimed Lucius. "I should be glad," he added after a pause, "if it is not Tuphus."

"I, too," sighed Sollius. "Tell me of this Livius. I know him but as a young face new to me in the house."

"He is the body-slave of the lord Titianus, come with him from the army. He fell in love with Delia as soon as he saw her. Why did I not think of him before instead of letting my mind accuse Tuphus? Nevertheless, Tuphus has cast his eyes upon her and his jealousy upon *me*. We are not the easy friends we were. And he did fill the cup! Yet, by the Gods, Livius will be the man. Question him, Sollius."

"I shall question him—and Tuphus—and the lord Titianus—in the presence of our master. Truth in this is a necessity," said the Slave Detective.

Titius Sabinus more than readily agreed. Truth seemed a double necessity to him, with his adopted son—and the heir to his considerable riches—as one of the suspects. Well enough now to leave his bed, he and Sollius held the inquisition in his library. Present before them were Titianus, Tuphus, Livius and Lucius.

"This is a grave matter," said Sabinus heavily, "and you must swear by the Emperor's divinity to tell the truth."

He looked at them one by one, and one by one they so swore. He then sank back on his cushions and gave Sollius, standing beside him, the permissive glance to proceed.

"None of us here," Sollius began, "would dare to say that the poison got into the cup by accident. It was there by design. But for whom was it slipped into that particular cup? For two possible persons only: our master and the slave Lucius. It was Lucius's cup," and as Sollius explained, Sabinus gave a great sigh and looked searchingly at Titianus. "But," continued the Slave Detective, "the cup was brought to our master: so when was the poison added? Before the Lord Titianus took it up—or after? Tuphus," he snapped out dramatically, "was the cup harmless when you set it out?"

The cook, shaking in all his fattish body, swore by the upper gods and the nether gods that the cup had been filled only with pure wine and water.

"If anything got into it," he blustered, "it was not by me."

"You are jealous of Lucius over the girl Delia, are you not?"

Tuphus flushed; denied and admitted it by the same gesture.

"The motive—if Lucius was to be the victim—was jealousy over Delia, for she loves Lucius and no other. Lord?" Sollius continued, turning to Titianus, "have you yourself noticed the girl?"

"If I had laid poison for the slave Lucius," smiled Titianus, "should I have brought that same cup to my father?"

Sollius bowed, and fixed his gaze upon Livius.

"Where were you working just before the break?"

"In the atrium. I was the last," he added, "to reach the kitchen."

"That is true," asserted Tuphus. "I saw him."

"Perhaps you are in it together," flashed out Lucius.

Tuphus made as though to strike him, and then, remembering that he was in the presence of his master, drew back with a frightened mutter of apology. Sabinus frowned, but uttered no rebuke. He kept glancing from Sollius to his adopted son.

"Did you leave the atrium at all?" continued Sollius, still addressing Livius.

"No," was the sullen answer.

"Was any other slave working with you?"

The same reply came again, but Livius had paled.

"Do not push my slave too hard," cried Titianus angrily. "He is an honest man."

Suddenly Sollius clapped his hand to his head.

"Crass mule that I am!" he exclaimed, "and the true clue was before me from the beginning," and he rushed out.

An uneasy silence followed. Nobody spoke; hardly anybody moved. In quite a short space of time Sollius returned, and with him was Drusus.

"A witness!" cried the Slave Detective. "A witness I had forgotten! Stand over there, Drusus, beside the cook."

Drusus, in his gardener's earth-stained tunic, shuffled to the place indicated, and turned a dull eye upon his questioner.

"Where were you when you heard our master cry out?"

"Trimming the laurel hedge."

"Were you within sight of the kitchen door?"

"If I poked round my head."

"And did you?" smiled Sollius.

"What do you think?—I, too, was thirsty and waiting."

"Saw you anything to tell us?"

Drusus clearly hesitated. Then he said, "I saw a hand . . . hovering . . . through the kitchen door."

"Did you recognize its shape?"

"I took it to be the cook's, putting spice into Lucius's cup. Lucius likes spice in his wine."

"I ask you again: was the hand recognizable?"

"It was very hairy. Tuphus's hand is very hairy."

"Castor and Pollux," burst out Tuphus, unable to restrain himself any longer, "he lies from his belly! If I'd meant to poison any of the cups I'd have done it secretly in the kitchen before, and not after, putting it out."

"Show me your wrists, Livius," said Sollius sharply.

With a gesture of defiance Livius obeyed. They were almost as smooth as a boy's.

"Sometimes," murmured Sollius, "the eye deceives—not, however," he added with a dry laugh, "when it sees as pretty a slave-girl as Delia."

"As pretty," approved Drusus, "as one o' my own roses."

"Well," pursued Sollius, "let us leave wine-cups and pretty slave-girls. You heard our master cry out, and ran to his help?"

"I did that, O Sollius."

"And when you saw what had hap-

pened you instantly compounded an antidote?"

"I saved his life, I reckon."

"We all think so," Sollius agreed.

"I shall give you your freedom for it," promised Sabinus.

"But how," pursued the Slave Detective, "did you know what antidote to compound? There is no one antidote to all poisons alike. So how did you know what to mix so swiftly? Answer me," he challenged loudly, and Drusus's guilt was at once written across his face. "So you, too," Sollius continued, "were Delia-struck and

jealous of Lucius—and we all know you are a great compounder of herbs. We have come to the truth, lord!"

"I saved the master," Drusus blustered desperately.

"Out of my sight, wretch!" rasped Sabinus. "Keep with him, you, Terentius, and you, Livius, till I decide how to punish him. Titus, my dear boy. . . ."

His emotion as he stretched out his two hands to his adopted son was almost too painful to witness, and the Slave Detective, Lucius and Tuphus stole quietly away.



This living hand, now warm and capable
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold,
And in the icy silence of the tomb,
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
That thou would wish thine own heart dry of blood. . . .

JOHN KEATS.

The herded wolves, bold only to pursue;
The obscene ravens, clamorous o'er the dead.

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY.



JOE

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF A MURDER

G. E. FOX

Illustrated by Roy Jackson

WHAT WAS death after all but a peaceful oblivion, a freedom from all his inexplicable fears and nightmares, from tormenting thoughts and aversions? No, he did not fear death. Sometimes he felt he could welcome it. If only he could be sure it would rid him for

ever of that other—that terrifying companion in whom nobody believed.

He stared round the quiet courtroom and noted with appreciation its dark antique elegance, its smallness, its dignity, the judge and the barristers in their ancient, traditional paraphernalia and the solemn-faced jury intent on impartiality and honourable discharge of duty. It made him feel important and warmly disposed towards his fellow men who had accorded him

all this exquisite ritual. That it would reach its climax in sentence of death caused him no anxiety, for he was reconciled to death and in his heart he knew he was not guilty of the thing they had imputed to him.

The sad accusing voice rose and fell in beautiful cadences of sound. He listened to the music of it, but the significance of the words he did not hear, for he knew and understood it well enough. He wanted to applaud the long carefully constructed sentences, their stately rhythms, and he wondered if the others felt like that—the lawyer idly turning over papers on the table below him, the judge, in scarlet with half-shut eyes and bowed head, or the men and women of the jury with their intent and anxious faces.

And what did it all amount to? Simply that he, Robin Grant, had entered the village Post Office at Sitheroe, killed the aged post mistress and stolen £75 in notes and silver. A brutal, callous, wicked murder they called it. Two women, gossiping in a corner, had sworn solemnly on the Bible that they had seen him go into the Post Office alone. The technicians at the police laboratories had sworn solemnly on the Bible that the post mistress's blood had been found on his clothes, the fingerprint experts had sworn solemnly on the Bible that his fingerprints had been found on what they called the "murder weapon"—an old brass candlestick from his own home.

It was all so final and conclusive. He understood that and yet he had not done it. He had not had the

slightest part in it. He knew full well that Joe had done it—Joe that terrible, evil companion of so many years now. Joe who could not be shaken off, Joe who had done so much evil in the past.

He had tried to tell them about Joe, but nobody believed him, though inquiries had been made. Joe who? He didn't know. Just Joe. Where did he live? He didn't know. What was he like? That question he could not answer, for Joe was utterly bad and indescribably evil to look at. No! They just didn't believe in Joe, so he had passively allowed Joe to be forgotten. They had all decided Joe had been a desperate attempt on his part to put the blame on someone else.

He began to go over in his mind his long association with Joe.

The accusations, the gestures, the staring wonderment, the drowsy judge, the glory and the pomposity of justice became a mere backcloth to the drama in his mind.

He was six, possibly less, he wasn't sure, and he had been naughty. . . .

* * *

There were little green sparkles of anger in his father's eyes. Mother was crying and Timmy the big white cat was foolishly trying to lick away the ink he, Robin, had poured over his coat to make him black. Sheila next door had told him white cats were unlucky, black cats lucky. . . .

In his heart was terror. He could only stare at his father in silence for the thing that had been decreed as punishment was, to him, like the thing they called "death".

"No, Howard, please!" whispered Mother. "It's cruel. You know the child is terrified of the dark."

"He has to learn not to be!" said Father, sternly and finally. "He shall learn two things: not to be naughty and to conquer his silly fears of the dark. You have pampered him too long, what with night lights and your having to sleep with him! There's got to be an end to such nonsense some time or other, and now is the time. Come on, Robin! You're going in the cellar for half an hour. In the dark! You've done wrong and this is your punishment."

Then the frail floodgate of his horror and hysteria burst and he screamed and wept and clutched his mother's skirts in his agony, but it was useless. The decree of punishment was irrevocable, for his father was a firm man. Mother's protestations and tears were unavailing. The heavy door of the cellar closed on him, and the deep silent mystery of darkness was all around him, tormenting him with its infinite possibilities of terror. What was beyond the dark around him? What was it he could feel and not see?

He was now speechless in his terror, pressing his frail body against the rough stonework, holding on to the tangible he could feel and listening to the silence for the first advance of the unknown towards him.

Nothing! Only the terrible, dark silence. He substituted imagination for sight, in his mind's eye seeing the vaulted ceiling, the irregular, rough stonework, the pile of coal, the box of firewood, the empty bottles and jars,

the broken chair, the old marble-topped washstand removed from the front bedroom, and finally the little iron-bound door.

The door! His mind dwelt on that. It was never opened. What was beyond? Who could say, when it was never opened? He imagined steps beyond, going down and down and down to enormous caverns and great silences. He could not get the door out of his mind which also had the same dark silences in it. He clung on to the reality of the rough hewn stones of the wall and listened.

Then he heard the silence moving and he knew it was the door opening. It was like leaves falling in a dark wood—a gentle rustle of sound. Infinities of time passed and with the appalling certainty of his fear he knew the door was slowly swinging back to let into the cellar all the terrors and nightmares of the incalculable depths beyond.

He screamed, screech upon screech, filling the cellar with hideous sound. He clawed and beat upon the door in his agony. Would nobody come?

"Mummy! Mummy! Please, Daddy! Please—oh please!" he screamed until they opened the door and he tumbled out, vomiting and foaming. His mother picked him up, consoling him, crying over him, protecting him in her arms, but his father stormed out of the kitchen.

For a long time he lived in perpetual anxiety to please, to do everything that seemed to please. He must never offend again, but what was right and what was wrong? Sometimes the right thing was the wrong

thing, and there was no understanding it. To be quiet was right sometimes, but on other occasions it was sulking. To eat his porridge was right, but to eat a gooseberry from the bushes in the garden was wrong. He fought his terror of the dark when he found there was no night-light, and when the darkness triumphed he hid his head under the bedclothes and cried himself to sleep. He prayed wildly to God, who was a tall, white-robed, terrible old man, with a long beard, for relief from his agony. If he prayed for a long time, repeating over and over again his urgent prayer, God sent him sleep. But sleep was often involved with nightmare so he had to pray there would be no nightmare in his sleep. To make this prayer

more effective he visualized the words of the prayer in letters of fire: "God do not let me dream".

His second grave transgression came when he broke his father's tobacco jar. Father had asked him to pass it from the little table by the fireplace. Too anxious to please, he dropped it on the hearth, smashing it to pieces and spilling its precious contents over the ash and dust which had fallen from the fire. Only when the cellar door slammed behind him did realization penetrate the blinding dismay. Only when the silent darkness crushed down upon him did his mortification for his clumsiness flee before his terror of the dark.

He crouched in the darkness, waiting for the inevitable opening of the



iron-bound door and when he heard its slow insidious rustle and murmur he shrank even further against the wall. The terror within him at the slow opening of the door he knew was but a prelude to a greater, fiercer terror that would come when the rustle of movement stopped.

He was unconscious when his father opened the door to let him out.

When sensibility was slowly returning he heard his father say: "What is there to scare him? He must learn. He'll be a baby all his life if he doesn't. What is there in the cellar? Junk! Coal! Nothing!"

"No!" he whispered through the clouds of misunderstanding and doubt.

"Joe?" said his father incredulously.

"Yes, Joe!" he whispered back. "Joe's in there. Joe! Now I know. Yes—oh yes! Joe!"

Yes, it was Joe. Now he knew what came out of the dark beyond the little door. Joe—evil, ugly, rocking on his heels, smiling redly and unchangingly, always smiling, always terrifying.

"Howard, it's wrong to do this to the child," he heard his mother say.

"He'll learn," said his father stubbornly. "He didn't scream, did he? He's learning to overcome his fears."

"He's bottling it up inside, can't you see? It's worse that way. Oh, can't you see, Howard?" wailed Mother. "He fainted in terror!"

"Rubbish! He was only pretending, to get your sympathy," snapped Father. "Do you think I want a kid of mine to grow up scared of the dark? He'll go in there every time he

does anything that he shouldn't do!"

Robin knew Joe had gone back through the little door disappointed, but he was waiting all right. He must never let Joe come right out. Never! So he must never do wrong. And he did no wrong for ages. He prayed harder under the bedclothes and he made the telling of his prayer big and flaming in his mind. He trembled and paled at the slightest reprimand for he knew that behind reprimand was punishment, in the long run.

"The fire needs mending," said Mother, one evening when Robin was nearly seven and a half. "There's no coal, Howard. Would you go into the cellar for some?"

"Can't it wait?" asked Father irritably. He was busy writing a letter and didn't want to get up.

"No. It'll go cold. You know how quickly it goes cold in here. It's these old cellars underneath. Why they didn't fill them in when they took the old place down, I don't know," Mother grumbled. "I can't go. I can't carry coal in my state, as you know."

"Oh, all right!" said Father in a resigned sort of way. Then suddenly he said. "What about Robin? Good heavens, he's old enough to help a bit! You go, Robin, that's a good lad."

He remembered how he shrank away from the table where he was reading, his heart suddenly filled with ice and fear.

"No!" he whispered. "No! It's dark. It's horrible!"

He remembered Joe. Joe was waiting there. Waiting for him. He did not know what Joe wanted of him, but he knew it was fearsome and

loathsome—the thing Joe wanted.

This time he fought, kicking, biting, scratching, until his father's temper became a storm of unreason and his mother's pleading became incoherent sounds of distress.

"You'll stay there until you apologize," roared Father. "And when you've done that, you'll fetch that coal your mother asked you for!"

"I didn't ask him!" cried Mother. "I'll go myself, Howard. Please let me!"

"No!" yelled Father, really angry now.

He heard them quarrelling distantly through the cellar door. Then, after a time, silence.

He listened for the little door to open, but there was nothing. He groped his way slowly along the wall to the little niche in which the candle stood like a little white angel with folded wings. There was a box of matches by its side, he knew, but when he struck a light the scrape of the match was terrifying. Would it tell Joe he was in the cellar? Please God—No!

Apprehensively he turned to look at the iron-bound door in the pale still light of the candle. The heavy thumping of his heart and the dryness in his throat were physical agonies to be borne, but the lonely terror in his mind was unbearable. Had he been wise to light the candle? Was it better not to see? Sight is more terrible than hearing in the terrifying dark.

Yet he did not blow out the candle. He left it alight and with terror and despair in his heart he saw the door open—slowly and meticulously as if

whoever or *whatever* were pushing it, were determined to do it silently and impressively. Robin saw the black aperture widening and extending like an opening concertina. Yes, that was it, like a black concertina, but soundless and awful, and not with the squeaky cheerfulness of a real concertina. Then the movement stopped and in the blackness a shape appeared: indistinct, but grotesque, for it was so small at the top and so wide at the bottom, tapering in shape like a badly made pyramid. He knew it was Joe, and when the figure came out into the cellar he saw the fixed red grin he hated, the little fat figure rocking on its heels, the evil, terrible Joe who would never leave him now.

He watched, fascinated, horrified, as Joe came towards him, intent on evil things, promising vileness.

"Do not touch me! Go away! Go away!" he screeched, but Joe came slowly nearer. He ran round the cellar in the pale shadowy light, knocking over things, hurting himself on the old marble-topped wash-hand stand, smashing jars. . . . Frantically, fearfully, he watched every move Joe made. Joe moved slowly and deliberately, sure of himself. In terror, Robin threw jars at Joe, firewood, coal, a tin of paint which burst and splattered its contents all over the floor and walls, but Joe ignored it all and daintily rocked his way through the appalling mess towards him.

When his screams and the row of breaking glass brought his father into the cellar, he was beyond hysteria and verging on delirium. He saw Joe slipping very carefully and cautiously

through the little iron-bound door, but he knew he and Joe were now inseparable. Joe would come to him any time—not only in the cellar.

Now that he had seen Joe he cared less for the punishment of the cellar. He was always terrified of it, but he was reconciled to it in a dreadful accepting sort of way. Of course Joe always came. Joe did wicked things in the cellar. Once the cat unobtrusively slipped into the cellar as he was being pushed into the darkness for a misdemeanour. Joe killed the cat with the chopper. Joe did abominable things with the cat. Joe wrote abominations on the cellar wall which Father had whitewashed so carefully quite recently.

Father did not believe in Joe at all and, after one timorous half-hearted effort to explain about Joe, Robin had to give up any further attempts to explain. Father called him a "little liar", an "exaggerator", "a baby full of stupid imagination". He opened the little iron-bound door to prove there was nothing there, but Robin shut his eyes and would not look, for he knew Joe was there, grinning and evil and rocking smugly on his heels. "There!" said Father as he slammed the door shut, and Robin opened his eyes again.

In the years that passed, Joe became his companion. He did not want Joe, but Joe had an inexplicable habit of turning up at his side and it was always in the dark. Whenever this happened Joe did evil things, but not to Robin. Robin took good care of that for he always kept as far away from Joe as possible. It was easy to

do this for Joe was slow—wickedly so, but very painstaking and deliberate. He must never let Joe get too near, but he was always afraid that Joe might rock up to him on his silly little feet, delicately, cunningly, hoping always to commit atrocities on him.

Sometimes in the dark streets he would find Joe at his side. They would walk along together, Robin careful not to allow Joe to come too near. Joe understood and smiled maliciously as Robin moved away, sure that one day he would get near enough.

"Watch me!" he would say, and his cruel sibilant voice would raise the gooseflesh over Robin's body. He hated Joe's sly, evil voice. When Joe said "Watch me!" evil things were done by Joe. Once he pushed an old man into a briar hedge; on another occasion he attacked a girl in a dark lane and left her screaming with her clothes torn; he stole from gardens and darkened houses if he could find a window open; he ill-treated dogs and cats prowling in the dark; he wrote evil things on walls—and Robin stood by and watched him, powerless, terrified, fascinated, for he knew well enough Joe would do things to *him*, given half a chance.

Nobody ever saw Joe doing his evil work and until the two women on the corner saw Robin go into the little Post Office, nobody had ever linked him with Joe's depredations.

* * *

As Robin sat in the crowded courtroom, going over in his mind all the

wickedness Joe had perpetrated, he began to see clearly that Joe, in his devious twisted way, had, at last, done to him the evil that he had always meant for him from that first dreadful opening of the little door so long ago.

* * *

He drifted back into reverie.

The little Sub-Post Office was in semi-darkness, for the post mistress had just put out the main light preparatory to shutting up the shop. She was shuffling about aimlessly tidying here and there. Robin saw her quite clearly—a fussy old stick of a woman. She opened the door and pushed out a big tabby cat.

“Out you go,” she said crossly. “The likes of you need teaching a lesson. Out into the dark and learn how to behave, my boy!”

Robin felt a spasm of pain and hate. How often had he heard that hateful sentence of banishment to the darkness, pronounced by Father.

“Dear me,” said Joe softly and solemnly. “*She* needs a lesson, I reckon. Pushing a poor cat out into the dark! I think I’ll push *her* into the dark and while I’m at it there should be a nice little till-full of takings in there. . . .”

“No!” whispered Robin, but Joe could never be stopped. Joe killed the old lady with the candlestick Robin had put in his pocket as he came out that evening. Why he had put the candlestick in his pocket he could not

remember. Robin did not see Joe kill the old lady. He never saw Joe do his evil things, but he saw the results. . . .

“You’re on your own, pal,” Joe had said that night the police car had stopped alongside them in the dark street as he and Joe walked together.

* * *

He really did not take much notice of anything that was said at the trial. Odd, unusual words only penetrated the shell of his inward-turned world. Paranoia—schizophrenia—split personality—but he knew that words would never save him from Joe’s final, evil intention. Joe always had planned a hideous thing for him, working it out in his devious way, smiling fixedly, rocking on his little podgy feet.

* * *

Robin’s mother found Joe years later. He was hidden in the bottom of an old chest they kept in the hall. She looked at Joe sadly for a long time.

“Robin was only three when we bought you. Poor child, he hated you. He was very frightened of you. Perhaps he hid you here in the chest.”

She took Joe and pushed him on the fire. There were tears in her eyes.

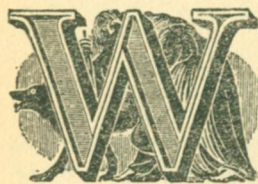
In the fire Joe crackled with evil laughter as he carefully and cheerfully rocked on his ridiculous heels amongst the glowing coals, growing more and more evil as he very slowly disintegrated.



WHILE I WAS DEAD

FERGUS JAMES

Illustrated by R. D. Farley



WHILE I WAS dead the doctors weren't half busy, I can tell you. It often happens in operating theatres . . . well not so often, but not so seldom either. There's a routine for it. I don't quite know what it is, and it makes me shiver a little to think about such things so I haven't inquired too closely, but I think they give you a jab and artificial respiration. I saw them give the jab to me, as I'll be telling you, but not the artificial respiration. However, I might as well begin at the beginning. I am being too mysterious, I suppose. I'm beginning at the beginning, then, but the odd thing is the bit that comes at the end. That really gets me.

I'm not a very good driver . . . I suppose I should say rider, because all I have so far is a scooter, and I have my doubts whether I ought to get a car or not. Some of my friends say I would be safer in a car, though other people wouldn't; that is supposed to be a joke. I got concussed one day when I came off this scooter in the High Street. When you get concussed you don't know much about anything, but I remember well enough what led up to it. Woolgathering, I was.

I was thinking that the buildings in the High Street up near the big

junction are sort of Dutch in feeling. They're made of good quality red brick, pretty tall, about five storeys, and have a curly sort of cornice, like the top of a bookcase, and they're narrow. I was thinking too that the shops down a bit must have been built out on the front gardens of the houses, because they are only one storey high, and the frontage of the houses behind are about a front garden's length back from the street frontage.

You see what I mean about not being a good driver or rider. With all the traffic about these days, nobody has any business to be pondering about buildings, he should be concentrating, and when this teenage lout shoved his pal, larking like, off the pavement it took me by surprise and I braked hard, and the road was a bit slippy and I did a skid and went on my shoulder in the road, the bike going some other way. I slid a bit and struck the kerb with my skull, I suppose. Don't ask me how I managed it, these things are over in a flash, and nobody takes a note of what exactly did happen. But funnily enough I saw (just before I passed out) the face of the lad that did the pushing and noticed that he had one of those liver-coloured birthmarks on the side of his head, coming well down the cheek and partly over the chin.

Well, they must have carted me off

to hospital because that's where I was when the concussion wore off. Light concussion it was, they said afterwards. Something else was the matter with me, though, and they were going to have to put me out again in a day or two and sew something up or put it in splints or stitch it, I don't know, and if you notice they never tell you much. It was just ordinary routine to them, nothing terribly serious. General anæsthetic.

You get this under a terribly strong light, and that is the last thing you see, usually, before you wake up in your bed. The strong light in your eyes, about two feet across, or seemingly about two feet across, but this is with all the reflectors they use. I was just trying to make out which of the electric lamps were the real cluster and which were reflections, and at the same time obediently counting, and I hadn't got up to fifty or solved the thing about the lamps, when the next bit happened. As I said, the next bit, as we all know, ought to have been me waking up in bed, but it was not.

No, I was up in the air about two or three feet above the table, and at the same time lying as before on the table, and I tell you, they didn't half get busy down there. The surgeon says, "How are things your end?" (Odd the sort of slang they use.) The anæsthetist says, "Not so hot, I'm afraid," and the surgeon says, "Let's have a look," but already the anæsthetist was swabbing at my skin with cotton-wool the way they do when they are going to give you a jab. They went into this jig to get me going

again. I felt nothing of it all. How could I when in a sense I was not on the table at all, but two or three feet above it?

You will be wondering why I didn't bump into the lights I was just talking about, and you will be asking whether I was sitting or lying or standing or what. I can't answer questions, I can only say what happened. If you say I was only dreaming about being two or three feet above the table, have it your own way. I was there, and that is all I can say.

But not for very long. The next part is hard to describe. First of all I lost the place, as we used to put it in the days when we went out boozing. It was like being dazzled by light, but there was no more light than before; it was like falling backwards, or something, I can't put it any better, I'm sorry. It only lasted a little while and then there was no more operating theatre and no more nurses and no more surgeon, and so on, and I was back in the High Street.

The chap with the liver-coloured birthmark on his face was alongside me and he gave me a shove and I said, "One of these days you'll push me under a cab with your horse play," . . . at least I sort of said it, but a funny thing happened, and what came out, and in a voice that did not sound like mine, was just, "Give over, Bert, can't you?" Bert says, "Aw come on, take a joke," and this other voice says, "Some jokes gets carried too far," and I realized that I was not Bert's companion, whoever I was. You will scarcely believe it, but what convinced me in a flash was the gram-

mar. I don't talk posh, but I know a bit more grammar than to say "Some jokes gets carried too far."

I stopped to think, right there in the street, and the two of them walked on. Bert's companion walked out of me, like you used to see in the pictures, double exposure. I turned away and went to the inside of the pavement and there was a furniture shop with a big pier-glass in the window. I looked into it, and there was no reflection of any person on the spot where I was standing. I moved about and tried everything, but I could not make myself appear.

If I were listening to this story instead of telling it, I suppose I would want to know how this experience affected the person in it. I can remember, I can never forget, how it affected the person in it. I was extra double pleased and excited and happy. I don't really know what there was to be happy about, I only know I was. But part of the happy feeling was anticipation, I felt somehow that something terribly nice was going to happen to me, and I didn't know what it was.

Of course I tumbled to it that I was on the loose, free and at large and everything like that. Looking back on it I suppose if I had liked I would have been able to jump away up in the air and swoosh about looking down on people as if I were in a dream. But I never thought of it, maybe because it is an unnatural thing to do, and I felt quite natural.

I took a look at what was in the mirror, behind my back, and for that matter through me. It was a most in-

teresting scene, and for the first time I noticed the sounds that were coming in my ears. Horses hooves. Clip clop or rather clippa cloppa, I don't know the way to represent many horses on the go together, in various places on the roadway, some going towards the big crossing and some coming the other way.

I turned round to take in the scene. I can't describe it. The best way you could form an impression of it would be to get hold of a postcard showing the High Street as it was seventy years ago. Not nearly so many people or so much traffic; sunshine, and ladies with big hats and sunshades either open or carried, and a terrible lot of top hats, some of them on very humble looking folk, clerks I suppose.

There are enough of the old shop fronts left today for you to get an idea of the style of those which stood before me, and of the odd lettering above them on the fascias, and I know for a fact, for I often go in there, that the pub with the green-tiled front is now as it was then, with the frosted glass on the windows. Come to that, the newsboy's stand on the corner at the big crossing is still there, though the corner itself is now a wireless shop, having been a pub till quite recently.

A bit farther down, just where I had been looking when I bought it in the accident that had started all this carry on, there were no shops, but front gardens, and I took a walk down to see them. A few were well kept, but some of them were deteriorating. I suppose the area was going down.



But I must try to tell you how interesting I was finding all this. I suppose it was because I still had the mind of a man of the nineteen-sixties, taking a look from close at hand at the High Street of the eighteen-nineties. Indeed, I went to the big crossing to get a paper, to see the date. It is not easy to buy a paper when you have no solid existence, but I got a look at one, and the date was August, something-or-other, I forget the day, 1892.

I was there, or thereabouts, till Christmas Eve of the same year, and I must tell you what happened. Not in any detail (who can remember the

details of the events of four mouths?), but in general terms. I knocked about examining things, and often I remember things that happened in my sight. I took a fancy to a young chap I had imagined for a moment was me, and he was a decent young fellow named Will Candlish, Irish in origin, I think. As a matter of fact, he got married during my visit to a lass called Mary Raffety, and a beautiful colleen was Mary, if that is the right Irish word for it.

Mind you, there was no possibility of communicating with him, or with her. I did manage just a word with him, though, as I shall tell you in a

minute or two. But with me as an unseen witness, they got themselves a place to live, and settled down, and there was a baby on the way, when Will met up one afternoon with Bert.

Will was a knifegrinder, a job you could make a fair living at in those days. It had been his father's business and he had inherited the machine (which I may say I loved) and also the "round". The machine was in a stable when he met Bert this day, Christmas Eve, I think I told you.

They weren't drunk or anything, but just at the same part of the road as before, this Bert gave Will a heavy shove to point some remark he was making. This time it happened. Will lost his balance, reeled into the road, and a horse's hoof caught him on the side of the head.

It was a horse ambulance, of course, that took him away, still breathing, to the same hospital as I was taken to, and as a matter of fact to the same table. But the surgeons were not as clever then as they are now, and he slipped right out of their hands. As he came out of his body he says to me, "Bert did it, you see. I said he would. Some folk . . ." and I heard no more, and woke up in my hospital bed.

A day or so after, the surgeon came to my bedside and said, "You gave us

a fright, young man." I asked him, "How long was I away?" and he answered, "About three minutes, and I tell you that is a hell of a long time."

The nurse said, "You were asking for a Mr. Candlish when you came out of the anæsthetic." I just laughed. "Mr. Candlish is a man I knew," I says. "But he never knew me."

A month or two later the really funny thing happened. We were collecting books for a church jumble sale and I was tying them up before they should be called for, and one of them fell out of my hand, and fell sort of awkwardly on its corner, and the binding came partly away from the back. I tore it right off so as to get at it to mend it with latex. Under the binding the bookbinder, as they used sometimes to do, had made use of a slip of paper across the back, sealed away from any eye till the book, as I say, was partly damaged and it was revealed. It was a piece of newspaper, and I read on it a short paragraph headed "High Street Tragedy," and it said "William Candlish, 22, described as a knife-grinder, died in St. Hilary's Hospital today, of injuries received when he fell in the path of a cab in High Street." Farther along, the date was given at the foot of another item, one of those lawyer's notices . . . December 24, 1892.



BIG SAM

ARTHUR HOWES

BIG SAM SPAT into the sea and wiped his mouth with a brawny forearm. The bristles on his chin rasped as his wrist brushed across. He stared across the waves, deep-set eyes wrinkled against the glare of the sun. He saw nothing but water reaching to the horizon.

He turned and muscles packed his tattered shirt. The other three men were perched on the lifeboat seats. Four left out of six all told, all that remained of the crew of a little ship. He wasn't sure what had happened to the others. Drowned or killed when the torpedo struck, maybe.

He had slipped his two dead mates into the water. They had made very little noise, hardly a splash. With their wounds they wouldn't have lasted long in a hospital, let alone an open boat.

He looked again at the three who were left beside himself. Cookie sat in the stern, arm crooked over the gunwale. He said he was fifty. If that was so he had aged twenty years in a week. He looked like a clown with his bulbous nose and bald head rimmed with hair.

The kid was curled up on his seat. Sleep made him like a child with his round face and curly hair. He felt sorry for the kid. Seventeen, and he ought to be hanging round the street corners whistling the girls, not drying up to death in a lifeboat.

Turning to the man opposite, his blue eyes narrowed. Trouble would come from that quarter of the compass. Blakey was the one to cause it. While the grub lasted he had been quiet. Now it was gone anything might happen. He peered at the still figure, guessing he was being watched from under half-closed lids. He had the idea that Blakey never slept.

He swivelled back to face the sea. The incessant rock of the boat was like a pendulum, backwards and forwards all the time. It never stopped. Each rock ticked a few more seconds off their lives.

He ran a huge, leathery hand over his cropped black hair. It was hot from the beat of the sun. He leaned on the gunwale and immediately his eyes closed. He blinked them open with an effort. He had to watch the water in the can. The food was gone but there was still water. The can by his side was half full—or half empty depending on how thirsty a man was.

He heard a stealthy scrape on the seat behind. Only faint but his ears were cocked. The slow slide of a rope-soled canvas shoe. He moved his right hand across to the hilt of his knife, big body concealing the movement. There was a scraping sound from the can and he knew it was made by Blakey's signet ring.

He wheeled swiftly like a hunting animal, knife-point forward. It was an inch from the man's throat.

"Arter something, Blakey?"

The eyes looking into his own were small and bright like a snake's. He knew that Blakey was as deadly. The voice was hoarse.

"Only after a swig, Sam."

He grabbed a handful of Blakey's shirt and lugged him up. He looked down on the thin face and wanted to kill the little rat. The knife pressed against the brown throat.

"Try that on again, Blakey, and I'll give you another mouth—right in the middle of your throat. You drink when I say so, not before."

He shoved the man back on the seat and saw thin lips part in a defiant grin. What teeth showed were black and broken.

"Can't blame a man for trying, Sam."

He took aim and spat, missing Blakey's shoe by an inch. "And you can't blame me for stopping you. We all drink together and then when I say so."

He knew that Cookie and the kid were watching. He had to protect them from this cunning son-of-a-bitch. Blakey was still grinning.

"Better put that sticker away, Sam. You don't want to get picked up and then hung for murder, do you?"

He put the knife away slowly without taking his eyes from the other's face. "Don't you be too sure of yourself, Blakey. You'll go over the side quick enough if you don't shut that gob o' yourn."

He turned and faced the kid, strong white teeth showing in a smile. "How's it going, lad?"

There was an answering smile but no words. He wished he could do

something for the kid. A big steak and kidney pudding and a mug of tea. With his Mum watching him eat. And the neighbours crowding in to see the young hero. That's the way it would be if only smoke would come over the horizon.

"All right up there, Cookie?" He saw the nod and tried to think of something to say. There was a hoarse voice behind him.

"What about me, Sam? Don't I count?"

He faced the sneering grin, face set hard. "I told you to shut your trap, didn't I? Do that and you'll end up alongside the rest of us. Try touching that can again and I'll pin your dirty arm to the seat."

The grin widened showing sickening stumps. "Now is that the way to talk, Sam? You made yourself skipper of this tub and I'm just as much a shipmate as the kid there. Still, I'll promise you one thing. I'll be sure to tell 'em how brave you all were when I'm picked up—alone!"

Big Sam was across the narrow gap, spade-like hands at Blakey's throat. The sweat stood out on his forehead as he squeezed and saw the popping eyes beneath him. Blakey's face had turned to the colour of cold ash.

He tossed the man to the bottom of the boat and stood watching him fight for breath. He looked up at Cookie and the kid. Their faces were expressionless. He knew they were weak but their immobility meant something else. He was their hope, their guarantee of life. Blakey would see them die of thirst unless he stood between them.

Blakey had wriggled back on to his seat like a wounded snake. He lay clutching his throat, making gurgling noises. Murder was on his face.

Big Sam tried to spit over the side but failed. His mouth seemed full of dust. He looked down at the hatred of the man below him.

"Now get this and get it straight, Blakey. Nobody's going to die, see? We don't want any talk of who'll last longest. Sooner or later there'll be smoke out there and when it comes we'll all be alive to see it."

Blakey forced words through his bruised throat. They came in a croak. "We'll see about that. When we get sighted one of us two'll be missing. And it won't be me, I promise you."

Still holding his throat he closed his eyes and stretched out on the seat. Big Sam turned to Cookie and the kid. His voice was soft in contrast to the violence of minutes before.

"Listen, lads. When we copped it we were on a sea-lane. It don't matter how far we've drifted it can't be long afore we're picked up. The grub's finished but there's still water in the can, about a gallon." He made calculations on thick fingers. "That's two pints apiece. If we have half a pint a day it'll last four more days. We'll be safe aboard a rescue ship by that time, you see if we ain't."

They were paying attention but he was not certain they understood. Their faces were blank masks of resignation. He had a sudden urge to shake them, to make them show some sign of life.

"Keep your eyes peeled, lads. Give us a shout if you see smoke."

There was no answer. They turned and gazed seawards again. He gave a last look at Blakey and took up his own position. His hand stayed on the knife hilt.

The sea was calm, as was the attitude of the watchers in the boat. The day dragged slowly until he felt the heat of the sun on his head grow less. When evening came he saw rain-clouds. They wanted all the water they could get and his hopes raised. When darkness fell he knew the chance had gone. The moon rose in a clear sky.

He ran a rough tongue over cracked lips and thought of pubs. Pubs and beer. Pints of clear, amber bitter. Big mugs of brown and mild with thin cream foam on top, running in trickles down the sides. Black porter. Long swigs of sharp, cold lager. Drinking against the clock as the landlord called time. He tried not to think of the can.

No sound came from the others. They were asleep. He shifted his body uneasily. Seventeen stone of bone and muscle cramped up for a week, and every part of him ached for violent movement. He pushed out a leg and heard the joint crack. Rising to his feet he braced himself against the slow roll of the boat and stretched. The ache spread through his body and he revelled in it.

He stopped with arms outspread and lowered them slowly to his sides. Blakey's eyes were fixed on him, unblinking. They glowed in the dark like the eyes of a rat.

For a moment he thought he was looking at a dead man. Then he heard the scrape of a rope sole as a leg slid

along the seat. The hoarse voice reached up at him.

"Tired, Sam? You'll be asleep soon, won't you?"

He bent so that his voice would not disturb the others but put force into his whisper. "Forget it, Blakey. I'll be wide awake enough to catch you by your dirty throat if you make a move to that water. Understand?"

He saw the shadowy face split into a grin.

"Suit yourself, Sam. You know as well as me that we might be adrift for days yet. If you don't sleep to-night there's tomorrow. Or the night after."

Big Sam grinned back. "Go on, keep it up. We've enough water for four days yet. You can have the can when it's empty, all for yourself. Much good may it do you."

Blakey was still smiling at him. "Oh, it ain't only the water. I ain't forgotten today." His hand went to his throat. "Knife or water, I ain't particular."

Big Sam thrust his face down, spitting the words into the other's ear. "So that's the way the wind blows, is it? Why, you murdering rat, I'll fix you."

As he whipped the knife from its sheath Blakey rolled away from him.

"Don't worry, Blakey. I'm not going to stick you. This is going to the bottom of the sea where you can't get your hands on it."

Blakey sat up. "Don't be a fool. You can't sling that knife away. It's the only one on the boat."

Big Sam slowly lowered his arm and put the knife away. He knew Blakey was right, whatever his

motive. There might be a thousand uses for it before the trip was over.

He flopped back on the hard unyielding wood of his seat. His whole body ached. The sneering, hoarse voice drifted across.

"'night, Sam. Sleep well—if you can."

He grunted as he cocked his arm over the gunwale. His unshaven face lowered on to the brown forearm and at once his eyes closed. He fought them open, shaking his head to clear the sleep away. From behind he heard a mocking laugh.

He knew the set-up well enough. If he didn't fight he would be in the deep sleep of exhaustion. The rope soles would creep across and the knife whipped from its sheath. It would raise high and plunge deep.

He could see the next move. Blakey would squat, knife in one hand and can in the other. He'd take slow sips of water, taunting Cookie and the kid. One or both would go raving mad and sling themselves on him. That's what he would be waiting for. Two stab-bings and two splashes. He would be the only one left and nobody to tell the tale.

He wondered what made Blakey the way he was. It had been the same on board ship. They hadn't been a bad bunch, all except Blakey. He'd been a rum customer all along. Always sitting apart from the others, grinning with his rotten teeth when somebody was in trouble. As long as it wasn't him who copped it. Pity a man like that went to sea in the first place. On board a man had to be willing to muck in, not forever dodging

the dirty work and sneering when his mates had to do it.

His eyelids were drooping again. He'd always liked his kip. There had been little in the past week when they had been on the watch night and day. Now the relentless rocking of the boat was sending him off.

He cocked an ear for the rope soles and leaned far over the side, splashing seawater into his face. The cold revived him but only for a moment. There was no sound from Blakey. He might be asleep or he might not. No telling. He knew he could take no chances. The cunning swine had the edge on him there. Blakey could sleep when he liked. His eyelids were drooping again and he opened them wide to stare into the dark.

He thought of things far away. Beds with blankets and cool white sheets. Beds with white sheets. Bare mattresses. His eyes were closing and he sloshed water in his face again. He had to stay awake. Cookie and the kid. The water.

Like a man hypnotized he saw the dawn break. He felt better as sunlight cleared the lines of the boat and the shapes of the men. Keeping watch was hardest when everyone else slept. His mouth was foul and sticky and there was sand in his red-rimmed eyes. His head pounded with fatigue.

He watched Cookie unroll. Then the kid sat up. Blakey stayed where he was, watching every movement.

He unscrewed the cap of the water can. At the sound the others swung their feet down, eyes watching every movement.

"One mouthful apiece, lads. Go

easy, Cookie—your gob's twice as big as anyone else's."

Cookie and the kid forced grins but there was no laughter left to come. He held the can to the kid's dry lips and tilted. He had to pull it away and saw the awful pleading in the boy's eyes as they met his own. He passed the can to Cookie who took his mouthful like a gentleman.

It was Blakey's turn. The knife was out as the can passed to him.

"One mouthful, Blakey. One drop over and I'll let it out of your belly with this." He thrust the blade forward, watching hawklike. He judged the amount and seized the can.

He took his own drink quickly because the kid was looking at him. He screwed back the cap as he swilled the water round his mouth. It was warm but he folded his parched tongue in it before swallowing. Just enough to make him think of more but it was life itself. He placed the can carefully under the seat.

"Take up your posts, lads. You too, Blakey. There'll be smoke soon and we don't want to miss it when it comes. When you sight it, off with your shirts and wave 'em."

Cookie and the kid nodded. Blakey already had his back turned. He searched himself for the truth. It was the eighth day. Once the water was finished they would go after it soon enough. He looked round at old Cookie, a clown with the jokes dried out. The kid was staring out to sea as though he could bring a ship just by looking hard enough.

The day wore on and the sun was in the west when he reckoned it time

for the second and last drink of the day. The can was passed from hand to hand and the knife was out for Blakey's turn.

He had been watching Blakey all through the day. The man had paid him no attention. He might have seen sense. He might have made up his mind to pitch in with them. When darkness came down on the sea and his head ached with fatigue he knew the answer. It came in a hoarse voice.

"Have a good sleep, Sam. Don't forget what I told you!"

He could hardly stop a groan. His head was falling from side to side. He knew he could put the knife into the swine and then rest all he wanted. Cookie and the kid wouldn't tell—they'd be glad to see the back of the devil.

With a physical effort he pulled himself together. He couldn't kill Blakey. The kid shouldn't see a thing like that. Neither could he throw the knife away in case it was badly needed. He heard himself moaning and splashed seawater into his face. He never knew when his head fell in a faint.

Something was lying on him. The side of the boat was pressing into his chest under the weight. He pushed up with both hands, fighting to open his eyes. The weight slid down his back and through mists he heard a thud.

He climbed to his feet, swaying like a drunken man. The kid stood by his side, staring at something in the bottom of the boat.

He looked down and saw the body of Blakey, the eyes open wide and head rolling with the motion. He

dropped to his knees and felt inside the shirt but the man was dead.

He rose to his feet and looked at the kid. As he took the open jack-knife there was no move to stop him. He bent again, wiping the blade on Blakey's shirt and snapped it shut.

"What happened, lad?" He heard the kid for the first time in days, stammering like a child.

"I heard what he said, Sam. I heard what he said to you. I watched him."

He felt his throat tighten. "You mean you stayed awake all last night and tonight?" The kid nodded, eyes still fixed on the body. "Where did you get this knife from?"

The kid replied mechanically. "Me Dad give it me before I left home. He said it'd come in handy for splicing ropes and things."

Big Sam looked down at Blakey. "For splicing ropes and things," he repeated softly. "He sneaked up on me, did he?" There was a nod. "And all the time you kept watch?"

He saw the kid nod again and knew the fear in his heart. He lifted the body to the side and slid it over. He heard it bump once then it was gone.

He could feel the trembling as he wrapped his great arm round the kid's shoulders. He peered into the young face and saw it had lost its childlike look. The face was ashen but the lips were set hard and the jaw thrust forward. Big Sam saw he was looking into the face of a man.

"We're both tired out, lad. We'll kip down together." He pointed to where the body of Blakey had been. "Want to know something? That's one rat who's left a boat that wasn't sinking."

THE WITCH'S DAUGHTER

ROBERT BLAKE

Illustrated by Norman Battershill



T BREAKFAST-TIME Clarke said: "Betty, do you ever have the same dream twice?"

She looked up from the stove, a lock of black hair falling over one side of her face. She brushed it away with the back of her hand.

"Dream, Ray?" She prodded absently at the bacon in the pan. "No, I can't say that I do. But then I hardly ever dream at all. Why?"

"Nothing." He rested his elbow on the table and cradled his chin in his hand. His head was inclined to ache.

Betty brought his plate to the table. "You look a little off-colour this morning, dear," she said with concern. "You say you've been dreaming? Nightmares?"

A crouching figure that waded thigh-deep through rolling mist; a lowering, threatening face; a hand raised, light glinting on metal. . . . And through it all the fear and horror.

"Yes," Clarke told her; "I suppose you could call them nightmares."

"It's your new job," she decided. "That's what it is. You're worrying about it."

He shook his head at that. "No. There's nothing to worry about there. Just the reverse. I'm very happy."

But she had discovered the reason

and she tried to make him understand.

"You may not think you're worrying, dear," she told him; "but you can't change your job after heaven knows how many years without feeling some kind of unrest. It's all tucked away at the back of your mind. . . ."

Subconscious worry? he wondered to himself. Perhaps. And that could explain why the same dream had troubled him twice. The first time it had been so vivid, so frightening, that its memory had stayed with him, resurrecting itself a few nights later. He found relief in the possible explanation. That was the reason, not his new job. That was almost exciting. A new view from his office window; a new routine and fresh faces. Even a strange bus to be caught each morning, and new faces there. New faces—

A woman with white hair. Not the white of age because she had been comparatively young. He had only seen the back of her head, but her neck had been unwrinkled and smooth. She was already on the bus, seated towards the front, when he climbed aboard. He had been attracted by the unusual colour of her hair. And staring at her, seeing the curve of her neck, memory had stirred. He had puzzled, trying to recall where he had seen her before.

"Your breakfast's getting cold," Betty reproved gently. She peered into his face. "Still worrying about those old dreams? What were they like, dear?"

"They were both the same. It was as if something had disturbed me and brought me awake, suddenly. In our bedroom. They were vivid; you've no idea. There was a smell, and sounds. . . ."

He found it difficult to make her understand how the fear had been the worst part. The unreasoning, frantic fear that had come surging with the first sound of something being smashed. It had increased as the shape had come crawling through the window. Through the bedroom window that was four storeys above the pavement.

"It was a man," he told her; "I could make out his face from time to time. A dark face, with very white teeth. And here"—setting his finger to his face—"on his cheek, an ugly brown stain that could have been a birth-mark. He had something in his hand, raised above the mist. It gleamed like metal. He crept towards me— And at the same time it was as if there were hands on my throat, strangling, cutting off my breath." He shuddered at the memory. "Each time it was the same. I knew that he intended to do me harm. I knew that first I had to move the hands from my throat so that I could breathe again, and then I had to stop him using the weapon on me. I woke up just as he had reached the bed and I was striking out at him."

"Everyone gets nightmares at some

time or another, Ray," she soothed. "There's probably some reason for them. If it isn't your work, then it's something else." She patted his hand. "There, now; eat your breakfast, dear. And you'll have to hurry. Time's getting on."

He hurried, but almost missed the bus. It was just moving away as he leapt on. One of the new friends he had already made on the new route turned in his seat at the front of the bus to wave, calling, "Easy on the arteries, old man!"

"Good morning, Robson," Clarke, pleased at the recognition, called back: "I'll take it easy."

The woman with the white hair was a few seats in front of him. She sat by the window, her face in part profile as she watched the passing traffic. Clarke studied her, seeking again for some connection in the past. And now there was a name on the tip of his tongue. If he could remember that he would know where he had seen her before.

Robson lumbered to his feet and came swaying grotesquely down the aisle. The conductor rang the bell. There was a man with long, greasy black hair sitting by the woman. Robson stopped by him, his lips moving, the words drowned by the roar of the traffic. The man turned to reply. His face was swarthy. On his cheek was an ugly brown stain that looked like a birth-mark.

Involuntarily Clarke came to his feet. Robson moved along the aisle as the bus slowed to a stop. Clarke found himself standing on the pavement,

Robson by his side, the bus accelerating away.

"You don't usually get off here, old man," Robson said. "Change of routine?"

Clarke said urgently: "That man you were talking to, back in the bus; the one with the mark on his cheek—who was he, Robson? D'you know his name?"

"Foley?" The other grinned. "Are you after him too? Money, I suppose. He touched me for a quid ages ago. I'll be lucky if I see it again."

"No, it isn't money. It was just that I thought I recognized him."

"His name's Foley." Robson looked at his watch. "George Foley. He used to work for my firm for a time. We had to sack him. He lives in a small house in the suburbs. Tipper Street. Either number four or fourteen. I forget which. And now you'll have to excuse me, old man; time and tide, you know——"

Clarke watched him disappear into the crowds. Then he waited for the next bus. George Foley, Tipper Street. He memorized the address, not knowing what use he could make of the information. He wondered why he had dreamed of the man. And it was odd, too, his sitting next to the woman with the white hair. A coincidence?

When he got back home that evening he said to Betty: "You remember I was telling you about my nightmares and the man with the mark on his cheek? Well, I saw him on the bus this morning, as large as life."

He was prepared for her surprise, but not for her accepting it as a nor-

mal thing, seeing in it the reason for his nightmares.

"So you see, Ray," she finished, "you must have noticed him before, probably on the bus, and you saw the mark and it stuck in your mind. Now you know why you dreamed about him you won't get them any more. You'll see. . . ."

But he wasn't so sure. "He was with a woman," he said. "Only youngish, but white-haired. Betty, do we know anyone like that?"

She frowned. "Platinum blonde?"

He nodded. "Silver white. I don't think it had been bleached. It looked natural. I had the odd feeling that I'd seen her before, that I knew her; to talk to, I mean. . . ."

"We don't know anyone like that, dear," she replied.

That night the dream returned. The smell was there, and the sounds. Mist billowed, and the shape was climbing in at the window. Then the man with the mark on his cheek was coming towards him, his weapon raised. Clarke struggled for breath. The intruder reached the side of the bed. Fear and horror combined in one overwhelming wave. Clarke forced himself upright, choking, reaching out towards the menacing face, shouting——

He woke with Betty shaking his shoulder.

"You were sitting up, shouting," she told him. "I had to wake you."

He lay back, panting. "It was the dream again," he gasped. "Just the same as before. Only this time he had reached the bed. I knew that he was going to kill me. I knew that I had

to kill him first." He broke off, shuddering. "I can't go on like this, Betty. I'll have to do something."

"Perhaps if you were to see the doctor?"

"Perhaps—" A wave of trembling shook his body. She soothed him like a mother comforting her child. After a while he fell asleep again.

The next morning he looked for the man on the bus. But neither Foley nor the white-haired woman were on it. That evening, instead of going home, Clarke took a taxi to Tipper Street. It was a long, narrow road of dreary terraced houses. He paid off the driver at the top of the street. Four or fourteen, Robson had said. He tried number four first. A blowsy woman in a sack-cloth apron told him that her name was Jenkins. His brief-case under his arm he thanked her and walked the short distance to fourteen.

He had worked out in his mind what he was going to say. He knew that a poll of sorts was in operation in the district, a prelude to local elections. He was a member of the organization running the poll. He had picked on Foley as being a typical member of the community. He would ask the usual, pertinent questions. Perhaps, in the answers, he would find a clue to the mystery. . . .

The woman with the white hair opened the door to his knock. They stood for a moment, looking at each other.

"Amanda," Clarke said after a while, the past flooding back. "Amanda Yates."

"It's been a long time," she said,

opening the door wider, invitingly. "It's Foley, now, not Yates. I'm married." Her smile was cool and assessing, almost superior. "You'll come in for a while? George is down at the station. He's on duty all night."

He stood in the musty little hall, fingering his hat, watching her and finding no words to say. Somehow, she seemed unchanged. She was just as he remembered her from long ago. The same narrow, colourless face; the same slanting, grey-green eyes.

She broke the uncomfortable silence, still smiling. "I knew that you lived somewhere in the town. I saw you on the bus a month ago. I even went to the trouble to discover where you lived. Wasn't that silly of me?" Her smile was the smile of a careful woman who never did silly things.

Clarke became uneasy. "I've seen you once or twice," he said, to make conversation. "Only I wasn't sure. I mean, I thought it was you only I couldn't remember where I'd seen you before—" He floundered. "I mean, I only saw you from the back."

"It's a long time," she mused. "Fifteen, twenty years?" She laid long white fingers on his arm. "You'll come inside for a while?"

He felt uncomfortable and uncertain. He wanted time to think about what had happened. The dreams, and Foley, and now Amanda. All linked. He looked at his watch.

"I'm sorry. I must be going."

"The little woman?" she nodded. "I suppose you are married?"

"Yes." He moved towards the door.

"Are you happy?"

He nodded. "Yes, very. And you?"

She rolled up the sleeve of her blouse. There were three purple lines above her elbow. Three ugly, raised bruises.

"Every night," she told him, "I— she hesitated over the word—"I pray that something will happen to him. An accident—" She let the sleeve fall.

"I'm sorry," Clarke said inadequately.

"Once," she said, her eyes narrowed, "long ago, you said that if ever I needed help I was to come to you. Remember? It was just after Mother died."

"I remember," he said. She had been alone then, living in the village where the people crossed themselves at her passing, drawing away from her. Where the children had thrown stones at her, shouting names. . . . They had called her mother a witch. Amanda was the daughter of a witch. When the old woman died the daughter was left alone. It had been pity, and a feeling of superiority, that had made him make the offer. They had come face to face in a lane one day, and he had stopped to speak to her.

"Amanda, I'm sorry about your mother. She was good to me once. I know that what they say in the village is a pack of rubbish. I know what it must be like for you. If ever you need help, you must come to me."

She had nodded without smiling, without voicing thanks. Then a few months later he had left the village. It had been all of fifteen years ago.

He looked round the shabby hall and his hand moved towards his breast pocket.

But she shook her head. "Not that. Money is the least of my worries."

"Well, then—" He shifted uncomfortably, looking at his watch again.

Her tone was mocking. "I mustn't keep you from the little woman."

She was still smiling when he closed the gate behind him and hurried down the street. It wasn't until he was nearly home that he remembered that she hadn't been surprised to see him. And that she hadn't even asked the reason for his visit.

He took off his hat and coat and went into the lounge. Betty looked up from her magazine.

"You're late, dear. Have you been to the doctor's?"

He shook his head. "No. I went to see Foley, the man in my dreams. The man with the birth-mark on his face. I managed to find out where he lived. I thought that if I could talk to him that—" He shook his head again. "I don't really know what I hoped to find." He took a deep breath. "But he wasn't there. Only his wife. And she was the white-haired woman on the bus. Betty, you remember me telling you about a girl called Amanda Yates?"

She puzzled for a moment. Then: "The girl who used to live in your village? The one whose mother was . . .?"

"They called her a witch. You wouldn't believe that in this day and age, for all it was fifteen years ago, that there are people who still think that way. Amanda and her mother lived in a small cottage some distance from the village itself. And because

the old woman used to dabble in herbs and things they called her a witch. There were stories as well, but nonsense. I knew the old lady quite well. She helped me, once. I would be about eleven or twelve. I'd been on a fishing trip. It's a long story, but it came on to rain, and coming back I slipped and fell, hurting my leg very badly. Too badly even to move it. And Amanda's mother came along, God knows where from, and helped me back to her cottage. She put some stuff on my leg and dried out my clothes. She saved me from getting into trouble when I got back home. And the leg was better the next day. That was why—"

"You told me about that," Betty said. "But surely they wouldn't call her a witch just because she had some knowledge of plants?"

"There were stories. There was supposed to be a farmer who had several cows die. And his barn burned down. They, the villagers, said it was because he had got drunk one market-day and shouted names after the old woman. And there was a young man who went out with Amanda for a while. He was trampled to death by a horse. And they said it was because he had told her he wasn't going to have anything more to do with her. And there was another farmer who took his own life. Hung himself from



a tree. Stories of that kind. All of them nonsense.

"When the old lady died they wouldn't even give her a decent burial. I forget just what did happen. Amanda was left on her own. I suppose she must have been eighteen or nineteen. I felt sorry for her, and I felt I owed her a debt for what her mother had done for me. And I felt that I was enlightened, you know? Different from the other village youths. I went to school in the neighbouring town. So when I met her one day I spoke impulsively, telling her that if ever I could help her in any way, then she was to let me know. And I was little more than sixteen."

"All that was a long time ago," Betty said.

"She's in trouble now, all right," Clarke said slowly. "Not money; I offered that. It's her husband. Robson gave the impression that he's a rotter. God knows why she married him. He—he illtreats her. She showed me bruises on her arm."

"If she won't accept money," Betty told him, "then there's nothing else you can do. You can't interfere in the lives of strangers."

"That's what I tell myself. But it's strange the way this has all happened. I mean, if it hadn't been for the nightmares I would never have met her again. Unless I saw her face in the bus. And she had kept that turned away from me, although she had seen and recognized me earlier. It doesn't make sense. And why in heaven's name have I started having these confounded nightmares about her husband?"

"Ray," she said, "is Amanda very pretty?"

"Pretty?" He stared at her. "I don't know. I suppose so. But I've never thought about her in that way."

"Then in what way have you thought about her?"

"I haven't thought about her at all. Until tonight I had forgotten she ever existed. Even way back I never thought about her as just another girl. She was just the daughter of an old lady who had—"

"The daughter of a witch," Betty said. "You don't think that there was any truth to the stories?"

He repudiated the idea. "Of course not."

That night the dream returned. It seemed to Clarke that his head had barely touched the pillow before he was awake again, staring into the darkness and the mist, waiting for the smash of glass and the shape to appear at the window. He was fighting for breath even before the anticipated sound broke the silence. Then the shape was in the window, one leg over the sill. The mist billowed and the smell was fierce and burning in his nostrils. And there were sounds, clearer now, the sounds of voices from far away.

This time there was more detail to the dream. He was aware of light, flickering redly, silhouetting momentarily Foley's crouching form, glinting on the naked steel that was poised ready to strike.

Clarke's hands were ready to meet the menace. Fighting for each breath he still found the strength to force himself upright, arms reaching, hands

grasping at the dull column of throat beneath the threatening face. Flesh was surprisingly firm beneath his fingers. He saw the sweep of the weapon as it was raised, tightening his grip, exulting when the arm fell, shouting when he heard the clatter of the weapon striking the floor.

And then he woke up and the nightmare became reality.

The room was filled with smoke; heat was physical in its scorching impact. Voices called, shouting, screaming. Flames leapt, outlining the smashed window. And beneath the fireman's helmet Foley's eyes were glazed, his mouth open.

Horrified, Clarke loosened his grip and the other staggered and slumped to the floor, writhing, hands fumbling at his throat. He flung himself out of bed, shouting to Betty, racing to her bed to shake her awake before turning to make for the door, flinging it open. Flames roared along the landing, driving him back.

Another shape was climbing through the broken window, axe poised, one leg already over the sill. His helmet silhouetted against the leaping flames, the second fireman shouted, urging Clarke to come.

He shouted back, hoarsely, pointing, "My wife!" and the other pulled himself into the room, raced to the bed and swept Betty into his arms. He stopped at the sight of Foley, hesitating in indecision, then turning to carry his burden back to the window, calling for Clarke to follow.

"I'll be back for him!" he shouted desperately. "For God's sake, hurry!"

But Clarke went back to Foley,

stooping, coughing, trying to drag him towards the window. Flames licked through the floor-boards. A carpet sprang into fiery brilliance, driving him back to the window. Below he could see the dwindling lines of the ladder, the swaying shape of the fireman with Betty slung over his shoulder, the crowd of upturned faces.

The room was filled with flame. A section of the floor collapsed in an inferno of raging scarlet. Foley's body hung for a moment on the verge of the hole and then plunged out of sight. Clarke climbed over the sill as the rest of the floor vanished in a thunder of leaping, roaring flame.

He climbed slowly down the ladder. Dazed, numbed, he heard nothing of the shouts, saw nothing of the flame-filled windows, was barely aware of reaching the ground, of the blanket that was flung over his shoulders, of Betty sobbing in his arms.

Then snatches of sentences. . . .

"Foley, overcome by the smoke—" That was the fireman, shouting over the heads of the crowd. A policeman's helmet bobbed.

"No," Clarke said, "No—" But his voice had gone.

"You all right, sir?" That was the policeman.

And now the crowd was round him, voices telling him of the narrow escape; congratulating, inquiring. . . . Faces, mouths, hands. . . .

And a woman with white hair and slanting grey-green eyes.

He saw her just for a moment, smiling at him, nodding, her lips moving but her words lost in the din.

The witch's daughter.

LA POMMERAIS

LOVING HUSBAND AND MURDERER

S. JOHN PESKETT



AN EVER-RECURRING mystery in the annals of crime is the gentle murderer, the deadly killer who is at the same time the tenderest and kindest of husbands and the adored father of a family. It is curious that many such murderers have been doctors. The classic split personality of fiction was a doctor—Henry Jekyll. Dr. Ruxton was devoted to his children. Dr. Crippen was the gentlest of men. Dr. Petiot, the Paris mass murderer, whose career I have described elsewhere in these volumes, was spoken of as a ministering angel by some of the witnesses at his trial. The notorious Dr. Pritchard was a pious and tearful character, who quoted the Bible freely and, be it said, mainly for his own justification.

Yet it must be admitted that the crime of murder is all the more heinous when perpetrated by one who has taken the Hippocratic oath.

An outstanding example was the poisoner, Dr. Edmond de la Pommerais, who was run to earth by the redoubtable Monsieur Claude, Chef de la Police de Sureté under Napoleon III. The multitudinous exploits of Maigret are small beer compared with the adventures and encounters which Monsieur Claude packed into a dozen stout volumes of memoirs.

In this chronicle of his long career appear some of the most disreputable names in the history of evil-doing. La Pommerais ranks high in this sinister directory.

He was a fraud from the beginning. His real name was Lapommerais but, by a self-ennoblement while still a student, he became de la Pommerais and even procured a bogus parchment to support his claim to blue blood. Later he was to promote himself to Count.

The son of a modest country doctor from the Loiret, he duly passed his examinations and established himself in Paris. It was a very humble practice. With the expensive tastes which went with his social ambitions, he soon ran into debt. In fact, his situation would have been even more disastrous had it not been for the help he received from his mistress, Madame de Pauw, who had a small income of her own.

Medicine at a few francs a visit proved a most unrewarding occupation and La Pommerais soon turned to other activities. An attempt to make money out of a gaming establishment at Monaco failed. In addition he got himself nominated as doctor attached to the benevolent society of the parish of St. Thomas Aquinas. Having been caught with his hand in the cash box, he somehow managed to get out of this first venture in crime. He paid

back the money to the parish authorities but, as this worthy action coincided with the sudden death of another of his mistresses, apparently from typhoid while under his care, it might have been more than a coincidence.

It was the Monaco business which first brought La Pommerais officially to the notice of Monsieur Claude, though the two men had met face to face by a strange accident some years before. Monsieur Claude was on this occasion in a *fiacre* with a mysterious Madame X. I may add that this was strictly in connection with his official duties. Their *fiacre* came into collision with another vehicle going in the opposite direction. The two cabbies entered into the usual Parisian exchange of injurious epithets. Monsieur Claude looked out of the window to see that in the other cab were obviously two guilty lovers, a young man and a woman who appeared anxious to conceal her identity. Monsieur Claude had occasion to reprove his own cabby, who announced himself as one Collignon, a model of probity, when the Chief of Police threatened to have him arrested if he did not at once cease his rioting and disengage the wheels of his own cab from the wheels of the other.

As the other cab finally moved on, the young man handed his perfumed card, decorated with a coat of arms, to Monsieur Claude with a word of thanks. The card bore the name of Dr. Edmond de la Pommerais. Six months later, Monsieur Claude was to sit at the assizes at the trial of the brutal murderer, Collignon the cabby.

Nine years later, he was to lead Edmond de la Pommerais to the guillotine. Such dramatic encounters were all in the day's work for Monsieur Claude.

The affair of the Société des Bains de Monaco was a fraudulent share deal, in which La Pommerais was involved with a certain Prato, who had ennobled himself to be Marquis d'Arnezano. In fact the self-ennobled Count was taken in by the self-ennobled Marquis. Suffice it to say that a number of well-placed people were also mixed up in the unsavoury business and, fortunately for La Pommerais, it was hushed up.

It meant, however, that La Pommerais was still hard up. Thus in 1861 he married a Mlle. Dubizy, who brought him a dowry of 150,000 francs. This was badly needed to pay off creditors and to keep his mistress, Madame de Pauw, whose own resources were limited. Nevertheless, the newly-wed Madame de la Pommerais adored her brilliant and handsome husband. Her happiness was at first shared by her mother, who found her son-in-law the most charming of men. Her delight in the happy marriage of her daughter was short-lived. Two months after the marriage Madame Dubizy died after a very brief illness, diagnosed as cholera by her devoted son-in-law. His grief was softened by the inheritance of a million and a half francs.

Our hero was now rich beyond his dreams. So rich that it went to his head. For a time he frequented the highest ranks of what passed for Society in the Second Empire. He

maintained a number of mistresses, among them the wife of the regretted Marquis d'Arnezano, who was the lady in the *fiacre* some years back! But he saw himself as the great financier and in eighteen months the whole fortune had disappeared in stock exchange speculations. He was worse off than before.

Madame de Pauw had become the mistress of La Pommerais after the death of her husband, who had been attended by La Pommerais in his professional capacity. After his acquisition of Madame Dubizy's fortune, La Pommerais decided on a most ingenious scheme not only to enrich himself further but to rid himself of Madame de Pauw. This involved playing on her simple, trusting nature and her love for her three young children. He proposed that she should take out an insurance of 550,000 francs payable on her death. She would then feign a serious illness, which would alarm the underwriters. They would then agree to the cancellation of the policies in exchange for an annuity, which she and La Pommerais would share. La Pommerais would put up the money for the first premium.

So Madame de Pauw put on her act of a serious illness brought on by an imaginary fall. She thought she would simply have to stay in bed for a week and her children's future was assured. The doctors who examined her spoke of internal lesions. La Pommerais expressed the professional view that she was dying. However, far from negotiating or allowing Madame de Pauw to negotiate with

the insurance companies, La Pommerais kept her secluded for six weeks, during which time he poisoned her. She died, to quote the dramatic Monsieur Claude, after a last night spent with the infamous doctor, who had given her the kiss of death!

It is hardly necessary to add that Madame de Pauw's modest fortune plus the insurance had been bequeathed to La Pommerais. But this time he had gone too far. The insurance companies became suspicious and opened an inquiry. Digitaline was found in the mortal remains of Madame de Pauw. The body of Madame Dubizy was likewise exhumed and more traces of digitaline was discovered. La Pommerais was arrested and charged with murder.

Since the affair of the Société des Bains de Monaco, Monsieur Claude had maintained contact with La Pommerais, mainly to keep an eye on him, and had even been on visiting terms. In fact La Pommerais had solicited Claud's support for the purpose of obtaining an appointment as prison medical officer. Through all this rake's progress, his young wife had remained devoted to what she imagined to be the ideal husband. Now Monsieur Claude found himself in the unenviable position of having to go to the home of La Pommerais and arrest him in the presence of his wife. As a guest of long standing, he could not bring himself to do this. He thought up a stratagem, which would deceive the wife and possibly La Pommerais himself. Thus he used as a pretext the proposed prison appointment. He called on La Pom-

merais and in the course of conversation suggested that they should go together to see the Governor of the Mazas prison, as the latter had been raising some difficulty. The wife was puzzled but more or less deceived. La Pommerais knew that the game was up. He followed Claude, who showed him the warrant once they were in a cab together. La Pommerais swore he was innocent, reproached Claude bitterly for the wrong he had done to his wife and said he ought to have shot him for it. He was the loving husband and she the devoted wife to the end. Yet he could be so unfeeling that, when it was mentioned later that he had taken the precaution of removing his portrait from the table beside the deathbed of his mistress, he could explain his action by saying, "It had a pretty frame. I wanted to put a picture of my child in it before giving it to my wife."

After La Pommerais had been sentenced to death, his wife made every effort to save him, even to the extent of appealing to the Empress Eugénie.

It is said, though it does not appear in the memoirs of Monsieur Claude, that the Emperor did promise a remission of the death sentence. The glad news was conveyed to La Pommerais in the condemned cell. But Napoleon III, weak as ever, was forced to go back on his word when he met the accusing forces of the Commission des Grâces. Thus the murderer who had twice killed was twice condemned.

Yet he loved his wife and she loved him despite everything. As he was being prepared for the end, the chaplain, the Abbé Crozes, read him a long and loving letter from his wife. Before he mounted the scaffold, La Pommerais had a lock of his hair cut off. He left it for his wife after pressing it to his lips. As he died, he spoke her name, the name he had whispered to the priest as he embraced him before being thrust on to the plank—Clotilde!

Man finds the world full of mysteries but surely the greatest mystery is Man.



THE HAUNTED OFFICE

ROSEMARY TIMPERLEY

Illustrated by Buster



HERE WERE RUMOURS, of course, but when a firm takes over an old building which was previously a convent for two hundred years, there are bound to be ghosts or rumours of ghosts. After all, anyone can work in an office, but a *haunted* office is something you can dine out on.

The janitor originated most of the stories. He swore that one night, when he was sitting in his lighted cubbyhole, drinking cocoa and doing a crossword, he heard steps approaching the main door. He looked at the door, expecting someone to enter. The door did not open, but the footsteps came on, across the hall, past his cubbyhole and up the stairs. He went upstairs to investigate but no one was there.

Another time he said that when he was doing his final check-up of the building one evening after the staff had departed, he saw a figure approaching him on the other side of some swing doors. As it drew closer, he realized it was a woman in a nun's habit. He drew back against the wall. The figure glided past him, reached the end of the corridor—and then vanished.

These two stories were widely believed, partly because they were inherently simple and unsensational—

no clanking chains or blood-curdling screams—and partly because the janitor was not, on the face of it, an imaginative type. His life was routine and prosaic. His pleasures were confined to crosswords, football pools and radio programmes. There was nothing flamboyant about him. In fact there was no reason to disbelieve anything he said.

I disbelieved him simply because I didn't believe in ghosts. On the few occasions when I'd stayed in the building after hours, it had been unnerving: easy enough to imagine that a sudden shadow was more than just a shadow, that a dark corner was peopled by a dark figure, that a whisper of wind through a badly-fitting window was a dead voice whispering some prayer of a bygone age. I thought that the old building had worked on the janitor's nerves so that he really thought he had seen a ghost and heard the footsteps of the past.

So I was sceptical—until the night in January when I saw the nun.

It was about seven o'clock, but seeming later because of the early darkness and the intense quiet. The convent was in a cul de sac. No traffic passed. And people who worked in the surrounding buildings left between five and six.

Knowing I had to work late, I'd told the janitor that he could have a couple of hours off if he liked, as

I'd be on the premises until about seven-thirty. He was only too pleased. So once our staff had departed, I was on my own.

My room was at the top of the building. I worked steadily for over an hour, then went to the window and looked out. My office light was the only one shining in the street, which was deserted. Then I saw someone turn the corner and walk towards our building. I watched the figure casually at first, for its outline was blurred. But as it drew closer I saw, with a shiver of shock, that it was a nun.

The shiver chilled me before I'd got my mind working on the subject, then I told myself that there was no reason why a nun shouldn't walk down our street. One saw nuns everywhere—in streets, buses, the Underground—and they were very solid and ordinary. If a nun chose to come along here, why shouldn't she?

I moved away from the window and resumed my work. But I couldn't concentrate. A second later I looked out again. She had gone.

If someone else had been with me, I could have talked about it, worked it off that way. But as I was alone I gave in to mysterious fears. Hurriedly I packed my work into my briefcase and decided to finish it at home. I'd wait in the entrance hall till the janitor came back, then I'd be off.

It was when I was running down the stairs between the second and first floors that I saw her. She was standing on the first floor landing, looking right and left. Her face was

shadowed by the glimmering white coif and the outline of her black habit seemed to dissolve into the darkness behind her.

I stopped, gazing at her, unable to move or speak. My heart was pounding and I could feel nerve-sweat springing out under my armpits. Then she looked up.

She had a young, gentle face, with widely spaced eyes and slightly parted lips. Rather a beautiful face. She said:

"Please help me. I'm lost."

Her voice was nervous, but ordinary enough, and I smiled as I came down the stairs to her.

"You gave me a fright," I confessed, and she smiled and responded:

"You gave me a fright too!"

"What can I do for you?"

"I'm looking for St. Flora's Convent—"

"This is it."

"Then what's happened?"

"It hasn't been used as a convent for a long time. It was converted into offices some years ago."

"Converted?"

"Yes. I imagine the layout's much the same as before, but it's been re-decorated and—well, you'd hardly know it had ever been a convent, would you?"

"I recognized the building from outside."

"They didn't change the outside much," I said. "Why have you come?"

"I went abroad on a mission, but I promised I'd come back . . . and now I have and they've all gone." She sounded so bewildered and sad

that I felt sorry for her. I thought hard, then suggested she go along to the local Roman Catholic church and ask for the priest: "He'll be able to look after you and find your—your friends for you."

"I don't need looking after," she said, with unexpected spirit. "Looking after other people is my job."

"But you can't stay here, and I can't very well send you wandering off into the night," I said. "Come down to the entrance hall with me and I'll ring the priest."

"Ring him?"

"Why not? The number should be in the directory. What's your name?"

"I'm Sister Mary Felicity."

"What a lovely name."



She looked so surprised at my comment that I realized I'd made the sort of quick, flattering remark that I'd make to any other woman. Aware of the little gaffe, I hurried down ahead of her and went to the hall telephone.

In the directory I found the number of the church and was soon speaking to a certain Father Wenslow. I explained that a nun had returned to St. Flora's, thinking it was still a convent, and was very bewildered to find it had been turned into offices.

"Impossible," he said. "Nuns don't just turn up at convents. They're sent there by their Order. It's all very efficiently organized. I'm afraid someone must be pulling your leg."

"I'm sure she isn't," I insisted, lowering my voice in case the nun was listening. "Her name is Sister Mary Felicity. She's young and—and very pretty."

There was a short silence, then Father Wenslow said grimly: "Let me speak to her."

I turned from the phone. "Will you come and speak to—" But there was no one there. She had gone. I told the priest.

"I'm not surprised she's run off," he said. "Someone's been playing a joke on you all right," and he rang off. I realized indignantly that some wretched play-acting girl must have done this, possibly for a dare. Well, I'd certainly know her face again, and if ever I saw her I'd tell her a few things!

Rather shaken, I sat in the janitor's chair until he came back, very cheerful and smelling slightly of beer.

"Hope I haven't kept you waiting, sir. You did say seven-thirty."

"That's all right. We've had a visitor."

"Who?"

"A nun—probably your ghost."

He looked at me so slyly that I knew suddenly and certainly that his ghost stories had been inventions to brighten up the routine of his life.

"You old devil!" I said, laughing. "It'd serve you right if I told *you* a grisly ghost story about a black-garbed figure on the stairs."

"I know you wouldn't do that, sir," he said doubtfully.

"No, I'll be merciful. But a girl dressed in a nun's habit has been here, telling a wild story. She scarp-ered pretty quickly when I got the local priest on the phone."

"Maybe she was a decoy while someone else was doing a job up-stairs," he said alertly. "We'd best have a look-see."

"I should have thought of that," I admitted. "But there's nothing of value up there."

"These teenage vandals will risk their lives for a packet of pepper-mints," said the old man scornfully, and began to go up the stairs.

"You get along home, sir," the janitor said kindly. "You look fair done in."

"I hardly like leaving you alone after this."

"Take more than some teenage werewolf to scare me," he said.

So I took him at his word and was glad to get away.

I thought of the incident a few

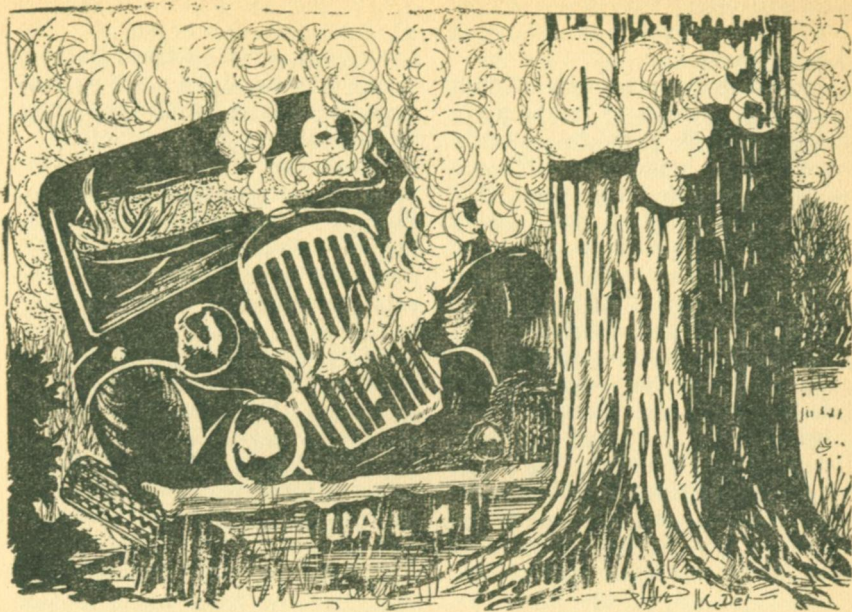


times afterwards, then it faded from my memory—until the other day. I was browsing through the local history section at the public library and came across a history of St. Flora's before we took it over. Interested, I flipped over the pages, looking first at the illustrations. One of them made me stop and stare.

It was a drawing of a nun. Under it was printed:

"Sister Mary Felicity (1835-1862), who resided at the Convent until April 1861, when, according to her own wish, she was sent as a nurse in a leper colony in West Africa. She promised that she would come back to St. Flora's one day, but unfortunately she died of the disease on January 8th, 1862."

Trembling suddenly, I looked in my diary. It was on January 8th, 1962, that I had worked late.



POINT OF DEPARTURE

ANTHONY A. RANDALL

Illustrated by Del

WHEN HE emerged from a state of unawareness into full consciousness,

John Francis Prebender found himself in the main street, staring at the photograph of a house displayed in an Estate Agent's window.

There he was—his tall, lean figure

sharply reflected in the glass. His black bowler and dark grey suit not only emphasized the pallor of his face and the clarity of his eyes but suggested that he had stepped out of some city office.

Satisfied that he was the subject neither of ridicule nor comment Prebender tried to concentrate on explanations for his presence in this unfamiliar street. Apart from a headache he felt perfectly well—though a

trifle exhausted. Perhaps he had been working too hard and suffered a mental blackout.

And once again his eyes alighted on the photograph of the house in the window. He drew closer. Surely he *must* be mistaken! No—his eyes couldn't be deceiving him. That house *was* "Magpies", the place he and Joan had bought as a summer residence. Why on earth was it being offered for sale at £3,500?

Suddenly he felt afraid and very desperate. He was lost—lost like some child of tender years who couldn't find its mother. He glanced up and down the street, his breath coming in little gasps and sweat breaking out on his forehead. The noise of the traffic seemed to rise to a crescendo, the clatter of feet on the pavements to echo louder and louder in his brain. God! It was driving him mad.

John Francis Prebender fled to the sanctuary of the Estate Agent's office. He closed the door behind him and stood on the mat, wiping his face with his handkerchief. So peaceful, so cool in here. A pretty girl tapping a typewriter, a thick-set, good-looking young man sitting behind a walnut desk scraping out the bowl of his pipe. . . . The rasping of the metal scraper sent shivers down Prebender's spine.

"Mr. Filey?" he asked the young man cautiously.

The young man smiled and shook his head, pointing to an old painting on the wall. "Old man Filey died one hundred and one years ago the day before yesterday. My name's North. What can I do for you, sir?"

"Er—that house in the window at £3,500?" Prebender began.

"Nice place," North said enthusiastically. "I'm instructed to sell it by the Bank: they're the executors of the late owner, you know?"

"Executors!"

"That's it!" North replied, lighting his pipe. "Shocking thing. The owner and his wife were killed on the Leyfield road in a perfectly frightful car crash six weeks ago. Went into a skid at high speed and hit a tree head-on. She was hurled out and killed instantaneously." He paused, puffing hard at his pipe. "What was left of him was found trapped under the steering-wheel. The car'd burst into flames and was virtually burnt out. Pretty horrible, actually."

John Francis Prebender felt a slight sense of relief. His fear that "Magpies", for some reason beyond his comprehension, was up for sale had really frightened him. A strange coincidence though, there being two houses so alike. Accepting North's invitation, he helped himself to a cigarette from the silver box on the desk.

"How perfectly terrible," he sympathized. "Had they any children?"

"None," North replied. "Though I didn't know him I always understood that the late Mr. John Prebender was much older than his wife."

With a crash the lid of the cigarette box fell from Prebender's nerveless fingers.

"Pre . . . Prebender, did you say?"

"That's it! John Francis Prebender and his wife, Joan. Did you know them?"

"Yes, I—" Prebender checked himself. Instinct warned him not to reveal his identity. Of course, North was mistaken, yet he didn't *seem* the type of man to get his facts wrong.

Prebender passed a trembling hand over his forehead. Here he was, admittedly suffering inexplicable loss of memory, but otherwise perfectly fit. But Joan! Surely his adorable Joan couldn't be dead?

"You're—you're quite certain of this?"

"Absolutely. I was on the Coroner's jury. I frequently get pulled in for that—usually at the last minute." He leant back in his chair, eyes screwed up in concentrated thought. "We had difficulty over the identification of Prebender. So badly burnt, you know. Fortunately, evidence was given that his wife picked him up that evening in his car at the railway station here at Leyfield. He used to come down for the weekends, you know. An import-export agent in the city. Absolutely rolling in money."

John Francis Prebender suddenly felt a nauseating wave of despair. In his heart he knew that Joan was dead, that he would never see her or speak to her again. How fickle life could be. In his thoughts he'd always imagined that he would be the first to go. Now he was alone.

He blew his nose to hide his tears. "You didn't know Prebender himself?"

North shook his head. "I sold the place to him when he bought it a couple of years ago, but I always dealt with her. She came down here frequently in the summer."

"The house," Prebender said. "I'm interested. May I view?"

He felt instinctively that the house held the key to Joan's death and to his own loss of memory. He'd got to find out what had happened—if he could.

"I'll run you out now," North said, getting to his feet.

By the time the car swung down the sandy lane to "Magpies" Prebender had convinced himself that North must be mistaken and the first person to greet them would be Joan. On a hot day like this she would probably be in the garden and see them drive up.

John Francis Prebender climbed out of the car and walked through the gate, fully conscious of a breathlessness in his chest. The Paul's Scarlet was there, climbing the elm boards over the garage doors. Then he froze.

The garden was a picture of neglect and desolation. Weeds covered the beds, the lawns were uncut and the grass had gone to seed. The curtains were drawn across the windows and the house had an un-lived in, uncared for appearance about it.

He followed North into the hall, sensing the heavy silence. In the sitting-room he parted the curtains and let in the sunlight. The bookcase was covered in dust, the furniture unpolished. The room was familiar: the Jacobean dining chairs, the sliding window and the bureau.

Prebender went to the bureau and opened it. Inside were two letters addressed to Joan, a couple of bills and a circular.

"Here!" North exclaimed. "Really! You can't do that!"

Prebender took no notice and opened the first letter. It was from himself to Joan telling her that he was catching the 6.36 train from Liverpool Street on Friday evening and would she please meet him at Leyfield station at 7.40. It seemed he intended staying until Wednesday of the following week. The letter was dated August 5th, and the address King William Street.

"What was the date of the accident?" he asked, without looking up.

"Er—August 7th. But really. . ."

Prebender held up a hand for silence. He turned to the second letter. It was dated August 6th, and was written in a scrawling hand.

My dearest darling,

I tried to ring you twice last night but there was no reply. Isn't it the giddy limit John cancelling his trip to the States at the last minute? Just like him! We've simply got to sail on the "Orkades" on Tuesday.

There's only one thing for it now—tell John the truth and ask him for a divorce. I'll come over tomorrow evening about 8.30 and suggest we all go out for a drink. Then we'll put it to him.

Whatever happens we mustn't let him come between us.

Dumbfounded, he stared at the letter until his eyes watered. Joan, his Joan, in love with another man! Joan, his Joan, planning to sail away to start life afresh. And going to do it when she thought that her husband was on a business trip to the United States.

Dazedly he glanced at the signature. *All my love, my dearest precious, Phil.*

He slumped into a chair and dropped his head into his hands.

"I say!" North exclaimed. "Are you feeling all right?"

All right! How could he feel all right when he'd just discovered that Joan hadn't loved him for weeks? Indeed, she must've regarded him as a positive obstacle to her own happiness.

Grimly he went back to the bureau and found Joan's telephone book. Quickly he turned the pages. There it was—Philip Grace, Leyfield 55889.

"Look! I can't allow this; really I can't," North said, very red in the face.

"Since when has a man not been permitted to look into his own bureau?" Prebender asked acidly. "Yes! I am John Francis Prebender!" North's jaw dropped and he gazed owlishly, seemingly incapable of speech.

"It's impossible! Dammit——"

"Nothing's impossible, North. I ask you to believe me. I am John Francis Prebender!" He paused to allow his words to sink in. "I want your help. D'you know, or have you heard of a Philip Grace?"

"I—I did know him. I used to play squash with him but he was such a bad loser. . . ."

"Ah!" Prebender muttered without surprise. "What happened to him?"

"He's gone abroad; Australia or New Zealand, I believe. He'd been talking about it for weeks—all his

plans. He was a bachelor with pots of money left by his parents."

"When did he go?"

"I just can't remember."

"He was still in England on the 6th of August!"

"Possibly he was. I haven't seen the chap for over a couple of months."

Deep in thought, Prebender went to the window and stared at the desolate garden. What had happened on August 7th? Had Grace come to the house as he had suggested in the letter? Had Joan asked for a divorce?

He drew his fingers through his hair until it positively pained him. He felt perfectly certain that had she asked for a divorce he would have refused her.

He tried to visualize Joan's reactions to a refusal. She wasn't the type to take "no" for an answer. Perhaps he'd always spoilt her because he had always been so conscious of being twenty years her senior and unable to match her glamour and vitality.

"I've just remembered something," North exclaimed, snapping his fingers. "You didn't by any chance own a signet ring engraved with a phoenix, did you?"

"Phoenix?" Prebender frowned, glanced down at his left hand. Immediately below the lower joint of his little finger the skin was dead white and lined—the sort of lines made by a ring. He looked up. "Why—why do you ask?"

"It was the only thing found in the car after the accident," North replied softly.

Phoenix! Oh, God, if only he could remember, rid himself of this misty, sickening veil that paralysed his mind. Suddenly he stiffened.

"This ring! The phoenix wasn't—wasn't surrounded by flames, was it, by any chance?"

Prebender caught his breath, a trickle of icy fear was running down his spine. North was nodding.

"North! Do me a favour, will you? Take me out to the scene of the accident, please. It's possible I *was* there. If I was, my memory may come back." He grabbed North's coat lapels with quivering hands. "North, for God's sake help me! I've got to discover the truth."

* * *

John Francis Prebender sat in the back as the car sped along the road which ran through low-lying fields. The revelation that he must have been in the car on the night of the accident had come as a profound shock. Try as he might he couldn't escape the thought that something sinister had happened, something more than just a car crash.

Now the car was running parallel with the Leyfield river. Through the bordering trees he saw a white cottage and windmill on the far bank, about a quarter of a mile ahead. Prebender tensed. Something very familiar about that.

"Soon be there," North said.

Prebender hardly heard. That cottage! That windmill! His mind was at feverpitch, struggling hard to associate the present with the past.

Yes . . . the mist *was* falling away. He grabbed the front seat in a convulsion of excitement.

"Stop! Stop!"

North pulled up on the side of the road. "What's up?"

Shaking like a leaf, Prebender struggled out of the car.

No sooner had his feet touched the ground than he became acutely aware of an inner voice speaking in compulsive terms. "You've been here before, John! You *have* been here before!" And his conscious mind was replying: "I know! I know!"

Suddenly the mist evaporated from his brain. The sun vanished and the river shone like a path of solid silver under the white light of the full moon.

"Do hurry up, John," Joan was saying irritably from the front seat. "Find out if the tyre's flat as Philip asked. Really! You're too slow for a funeral."

"Yes, my dear." Obediently he looked at the nearside wheels as Philip Grace opened the lid of the boot. Stiffly he knelt by the rear wheel. The tyre was nearly flat.

"This is the one," he called out as Grace closed the boot lid.

Then he froze solid, staring with horror at the shadow suddenly thrown across the car—Grace's shadow with a raised hand holding an iron bar.

Even as his brain flashed the warning of his deadly peril the arm swept down.

With a piercing scream John Prebender spun round, falling against the side of the car as he lifted his hands

to protect himself.

"What on earth's the matter?"

Quivering in every limb and bathed in sweat Prebender blinked and opened his eyes like a man emerging from a nightmare. The sun beat down again, a fly buzzed noisily nearby. North was standing over him, as white as a sheet.

"I'm—I'm all right now, North. Thank you for all you've done."

John Francis Prebender got to his feet and wandered down to the river. So peaceful, so quiet here and the water shimmering so invitingly in the summer sunshine. Very reassuring and satisfying to know that Joan and Grace had paid such a penalty for their wickedness.

The last thing he heard was North's frantic voice calling, it almost seemed, from another world.

"Prebender! For God's sake! *Prebender!*"

* * *

"Well?"

North came out of the mortuary feeling physically sick.

"I—I can't be certain. The flesh is so swollen and distorted."

The police Inspector rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "You say he just jumped in?"

North nodded. "I thought I heard him swimming, but I never saw him again. When I got to the bank there wasn't even a ripple on the water."

"Very odd," the Inspector observed. "You see, Mr. North, the doctor reckons that the corpse you've just viewed has been lying in the river for over five weeks."

THE FOURTH SHADOW

BARBARA WILKINSON



HERE WERE THREE of them, Hortense and Adolphe and Emilie, and when they were young they loved each other dearly.

Gaily they climbed the hill from the little village of La Baule to the farm at the top where they lived, Adolphe with an arm round each sister's waist, and though there was fear in their high-pitched giggles as they passed the black pine trees, they were able to put up a brave show, pretend it was all a joke—the biggest joke of their lives—the fact that when they left the pine trees and came out into the light again, a fourth shadow joined their own three shadows and walked beside them.

Whose was it? Why did it cling to them so closely? They could not tell, so they gave up asking. It was small and knicker-bockered like them while they were schoolchildren, and, as they came up the hill along the moonlit path between the trees, it hopped and skipped as they did, sometimes on Hortense's side, sometimes on Emilie's. The only concession they made to it, once they were used to it, was to cling to each other closer, though without letting anyone see that they did so.

Later, when Adolphe was apprenticed and Hortense and Emilie were waitresses in the growing town of La Baule, they waited for each other

after work in order to go home together, clasping each other as always; and the shadow, which was growing up too, with long trousers and a flying scarf and hair cut *en broche* like Adolphe's, came as well. They called him Gustave and he seemed merry and genial as a young man of his age should be, and sometimes he was on Emilie's side and sometimes on Hortense's, and by clinging tightly to the living flesh of each other they could bear more calmly the insubstantiality of Gustave. But they avoided bright lights as much as they could, and they avoided other people because, strange to say, they were not so much afraid of Gustave as ashamed of him. Young people are ashamed of what is different from everyone else, they dread being asked questions; and Gustave they could never explain, not even to each other.

They never mentioned him to anyone, not even to their mother though sometimes she looked at them so closely they feared she must know. They were not close to their mother; early widowhood and hardship had distracted her attention from them long ago and she lived in a world apart; certainly they could not mention Gustave to her.

Because they could not confide in anyone, the bond that held them together grew tighter and tighter and the unspoken part of their lives became the biggest part, so that each of

them knew, as nearly as possible, what the other two were thinking. But childhood and youth had to end, for Gustave as well as for them, and they reached the age of love.

Then, when Hortense and Emilie began to think of handsome husbands and even Adolphe's fancy turned to pretty girls, Gustave became involved. He was very personable now, about the same height as Adolphe, broad shouldered, slim hiped; his hair was stylishly cut and his suit, you could see, was good; more than ever they speculated about his identity but now their speculations became bitter—they each wanted him for their own.

"He's my lover," declared Hortense, "I shall look all over the world for him and I'll know him when I see him. Then my arm will be round a real man instead of a shadow."

"Nonsense," snapped Emilie. "Tomorrow he'll be on my side and you'll see with your own eyes that he's my husband; I know him already, everything about him, the sound of his voice, the flicker of his eyes, the feel of his hair when I run my fingers through it; I know what he'll say to me because he has said it so often before. We are husband and wife, Gustave and I."

Hortense grew very angry. "You're a common thief, trying to steal another girl's man, but you're only the younger sister. Gustave and I were pledged to each other before ever you could speak. You'll see."

In their hearts the envy and jealousy that Hortense and Emilie now felt for each other turned to

hatred. Adolphe was annoyed too: "He's like me, he always has been; my height, with hair like mine and clothes like mine. He is my brother, my partner, my closest friend and we have a great future together. As soon as we meet we'll start work and there'll be no holding us till we get the earth. He and I have bigger things to think about than marrying silly girls."

For the first time, as they walked home from La Baule under the pine trees, among which a whole new suburb of villas was now springing up, Adolphe took his arm from his sisters' waists and where they had felt a warm hand before there was now a belt of ice. Gustave had disappeared because the moon had gone and they had passed the last street lights, but they were almost relieved because, now, instead of binding them together, he had come between them.

He had come between them like a sword and they scattered to the ends of the earth; they could not bear each other any longer, nor the thought that either of the others might get Gustave.

They heard nothing of each other, directly, for twenty years and more; they only heard indirectly from the aunt who had occupied the farmhouse since their mother died and who was now keeping it warm until they should return. She wrote and told them the news: that Hortense had married a baker in Canada, that Adolphe had gone into the meat trade in South America, that Emilie had married a sheep shearer in Australia,

had been widowed very early and had then married a widower with nine children and gone to live with them all somewhere in French Equatorial Africa.

La Baule had grown and grown and the villas now covered the whole hill. At the bottom they were palatial, with large gardens and patios, but at the top they were *bijou* shacks, crowded together and painted with crude colours. Among these the old farmhouse stood, grey and incongruous, without electric light, or bright shutters or window boxes, the object of the greed of every speculative builder in the district. The aunt was hanging on to the house for them like grim death but, as she wrote and told them, if they did not come home soon and decide what they wanted done with it, the speculators would get round her somehow.

So, one by one and gradually, they returned: Hortense first, lined and grim, without either husband or children; Adolphe next, tubercular and taciturn, with no apparent wealth or history; Emilie last, fat and talkative, the only one who was at all cheerful, having the widower and the nine children in Africa to return to when her affairs were settled.

The business for which they had come was soon arranged; they sold the farmhouse and the remaining land for an inflated price, bought a *bijou* shack instead and prepared to live in it with the old aunt staying on as housekeeper. They had no love for each other; Hortense did not speak, nor did Adolphe, while Emilie talked so incessantly and so inanely that it

was the same as not speaking at all. They never went out, except into the garden, and their old aunt did the shopping.

But suddenly the old aunt died and they had to go to church for her funeral. They walked back up the hill afterwards, the three of them together, and they knew then that the affair they had really come to settle would be settled at last. The moon came out, the street lights were bright, and they walked out of the shadow of the pine trees into the light, not holding hands or clasping waists as they used to do but close together all the same. Furtively they looked behind them and there it was.

The fourth shadow. But this time its neck was broken and its head lolled at an angle, its body was thin and swayed like a body hanging, its feet dragged on the ground and the rope dragged beside them.

They stopped and stared; under the pine trees they looked at each other with terror. The Gustave they had loved for so long, had fought and parted over, had ended on the scaffold; whoever had got him had not been so lucky after all. Who had got him? Who recognized him now? Their eyes bored into each other, no one could evade such intense and agonized scrutiny, yet each one did. Painfully they pried into each other's very souls but all they saw were grim lines and shadows of suffering, or the foolish fleshiness of Emilie; not a trace of recognition on any of those hurt faces. How long they stood there they couldn't tell; their feelings could

not be analysed; they turned and stumbled home without a word.

Waiting for them, in an envelope forwarded by the lawyer, was a letter, from their old aunt, now deceased:

I promised your mother that, when she and I were dead, you should at last be told the truth about your father; you always wondered who he was and what became of him, he who was her husband and my brother, but while we lived we could not bear that anyone should know. Now I must tell you: he was a murderer and he was hanged, his body hung on the gallows till we cut it down. Perhaps it would have been better never to tell you but you can be sure that no one else knows; we

moved to another country where no one recognized us. There was only one good thing about him; he loved his children and asked for their forgiveness. That is what you are to remember.

Farewell,
Your Aunt Mathilde.

So that was it. Again they stared and stared at each other, their minds trying to grapple with it. After a long time Hortense smiled, Adolphe smiled, Emilie giggled. They were so happy, they were so relieved; they jumped up and embraced each other.

What was the knowledge that their father had been their shadow and had ended on the gallows compared with the knowledge that neither of the others had got Gustave after all?



FAIR REWARD

EVA BURFIELD

Illustrated by Buster



NICK WAS SURE she had murdered his grandmother.

He stood on the small balcony off a bedroom on the second floor where his grandmother had slept. He felt the wrought-iron railing with his hand. It was firm and unyielding, but no doubt it was new. It was the old railing that had collapsed beneath her weight. He looked down to the garden below and, though he had never seen his grandmother, he imagined her body lying spreadeagled on the concrete path below. He pictured her looking like his grandfather with white, sleek hair, a rather ruddy face, thin and stooped.

The house stood in its own acre of park grounds. From where he stood he could see the lawns, the trees, the many bushes. And he thought about the grandmother he had never seen. And he knew he should hate her though, somehow, he didn't.

It had been her fault that they were strangers. Though he had been orphaned early in life, she had refused to have him in the house because she had, for some reason unknown to him, hated his father. And she had carried this hatred to the extreme. It was only on her death that his grandfather had sent for him and given him a home.

On a lovely spring day when clouds like whipped egg-white cushioned themselves against a milky-blue sky, when the first green of the new leaves smudged the landscape, he drove up to the house in a taxi from the station, hurt underneath because no one had met him, awed by the opulence of the house and its setting.

His grandfather came out on to the terrace to meet him as he climbed out of the car, and she was behind him. He stood on the drive clutching the carpet bag that contained all his worldly goods, eleven years old, wearing tight, blue jeans and a fawn, water-proof jacket, thin-pared to a minimum—sensitive features, fair hair, fair skin that coloured slightly as he felt the eyes of the woman absorbing him.

His grandfather, obviously pleased to have him there, introduced him. "This is the boy. My grandson, Nicholas. What are you called? Nicky?"

"Nick," he answered. Like his body, his actions, his words were also at a minimum. No unnecessary movements, no words that could be left unsaid.

"Well, Nick, this is Miss Tracy, my housekeeper. She looks after me."

The woman came down the steps and, though he ached to squirm away, she put an arm round his shoulders. He tolerated it while he heard her

voice above his head saying, gaily, "Welcome home, Nick. I hope you'll be happy here."

She would have led him into the house but he turned back to the taxi, peering into the interior. "Butch. Here boy!" he called, softly, and his dog bounded out. He was mostly fox-terrier with large, black patches on his white coat. With one bounce, he lodged himself securely under Nick's arm.

"What's that?" asked the woman, sharply, stepping backwards.

"It's Butch," he said, hugging the dog. He turned anxious eyes on his grandparent. "I wrote and asked if I could bring him."

"Yes, so you did. Well, that's all right. I guess we can make room for one small dog around here."

Without more ado, the woman led him into the house. He could not explain the immediate aversion he felt for her. She was slim, and, though her hair was dark and her eyes bright, to him she seemed old, partly because he was young and partly because she had what he called a shabby face.

He was quickly ashamed of this thought as they entered the main doors and the taxi drove away.

"I'll show Nick his room," she told his grandfather at the foot of the stairs. "We must remember your heart."

He looked about him, seeing the rather dark reception hall, the heavy, stained panelling. He followed her up the stairs on to a landing, up another flight to the second floor. She showed him into his room which was the twin of his grandmother's with the same

small balcony opening off the french windows.

Coming up the stairs, she had talked loudly. "After you've put your things away, I'll make you up a nice lunch. Mr. Jordan and I have eaten but you must be hungry. . . ." But now, as she pushed open the bedroom door, he was amazed to see her smile go, her face harden.

"This is it," she said, her eyes narrowing. "It's not fancy, but it's clean. A lot better than you're used to, by the look of you. Can't understand what makes the old man want you here. But you keep out of my way, do you hear me? I won't stand for any cheek from you." She looked down into his remote eyes, but he had learnt early to control his emotions and his expression was completely unfathomable. "Do you hear me?" she repeated.

"Yes," he said.

"Things around here are how I want them and I'll stand for no interference. No running to your grandfather with tales. Any nonsense from you and I'll get you sent back to that home quicker than you can say 'Jack Robinson'. Just remember that. Your grandfather listens to me. We're . . ." She stopped. "Well, that's none of your business." She paused in the doorway. "And another thing. That . . . that animal. . . ." She indicated Butch who was by now cowering under the bed, only his nose twitching in sight under the bedspread. "That goes. I won't have any dirty animal messing up the house."

He stood between her and the dog and, now, there was a faint spark in

his eyes, he was alert and on the defensive.

"No," he argued, tense. "Butch stays. My grandfather said I could bring him. He's staying here."

Perhaps she could see she had gone too far, or perhaps she did not want an argument to go before her employer which would place her in an unfavourable light, for, though she paled visibly and he thought she was going to hit him, she recovered her composure within a second or two, and said, fiercely, "You keep him out of my way, or you'll be sorry. There's a dozen ways to kill a dog."

Then she was gone, and he unpacked his bag and put the few clothes and belongings away in the chest of drawers. As he descended the stairs, he could hear her talking to his grandfather in the dining-room off the entrance hall. She was using the same, gay, coy tone she had used on the doorstep.

She greeted Nick with another bright smile as though the ugly scene in the bedroom had never been. And she had prepared a special lunch just for him.

"Eat up, Nick," his grandfather said kindly, as he sat staring at the plate. "There's plenty there. Miss Tracy is a wonderful cook. Boys like to eat a lot. You could use some big meals, help put some weight on."

"I'm not hungry," he murmured.

"Well, never mind, eat it anyway," the old man went on, jovially. "Miss Tracy has gone to a lot of trouble. . . ."

"If Nick doesn't like it, perhaps I can cook him something else . . ." she suggested, amiably, though her eyes



were cold over his grandfather's head.

"Of course he likes it," the man interrupted genially. "He just doesn't know us very well yet. He'll settle down. . . ." The boy felt sick, feeling the falseness of the woman, the undercurrents, of which the man seemed happily unaware.

She was like that all the time, so pleasant in company, so vicious when she had him alone. He lived in constant fear for his dog's life, never letting the animal out of his sight. He even insisted that the dog sleep in his room.

His grandfather had demurred at first, but agreed to let him when Nick begged for him, thinking that his grandson was lonely. Behind his grandfather's back she went on and on about Butch. He had made dusty footprints on the stairs, he had dug a hole in her garden. But with his grandfather as a witness, she took to feeding the dog biscuits when she baked in the kitchen.

"You're as keen on that dog as the boy is himself," his grandfather once said, and couldn't understand why Nick called the dog sharply and carried him away.

"What's the matter with the boy?" he heard the old man asking as he went. And her smooth, irritating reply. "He's probably just a little jealous. He loves that dog. . . ."

But it was the pensioner who came several times a week to do the gardening who first sowed the murder seed in his mind.

Nick was on the lawn with the dog as the gardener hoed around the rose bushes. He was a stocky, small man

with wispy white hair who obviously loved to talk.

"So you're old Mister Jordan's grandson," he said, chattily. "Heard in town that you were coming to live here. Yes sir, there ain't much the local gossips don't know. Hear tell that that there Miss Tracy ain't none too pleased about it. Won't like sharing the old man's money with any relatives. Your grandad going to leave you some of his money?" he asked, studying Nick, who was too polite to do anything but stand still and listen.

"I don't know."

"You get on all right with your grandad?"

"I guess so."

"Miss Tracy won't like that. She's bin ruling the roost around here for years. Real hoity-toity she is. Even when your grandma was alive, she knew who was the boss. Verra suspicious her fallin' off that balcony. Seemed like a gen-you-wine accident, but there's them that have their doubts. Coroner called it accidental death. Eh, she's young yet, but you'll be seeing her your new grandma, mark my words. . . ." He broke off. "'Ere, keep that dog off her lily-of-the-valley bed or there'll be trouble."

Nick sprang to life and called Butch from where he was busy digging a wonderful hole in one of the many flower beds. He looked anxiously towards the house. Was it his imagination or did he see a shadow behind a drawn curtain, a white hand holding back the drapes?

When he went back into the house, she pounced on him, her eyes cat-like, her face grim. "What has that

silly old fool been talking to you about?" she demanded.

Registering no shock or surprise, he answered, "Nothing."

"Did he say anything about me?" she whispered furiously, glancing round to be sure his grandfather was not within hearing.

"No," he lied.

She caught his wrist, her fingers biting into the skin. "Yes, he did. What did he say?" His wrist bones under her fingers felt they would crack. "What did he say?"

Her eyes were on the level of his face, they were green, vicious, without an ounce of human pity.

"He said you will marry my grandfather."

She breathed sharply and stood up, letting his arm fall. "Is that all?"

"Yes," he lied again.

She smiled slyly. "Perhaps I shall." Her features hardened again. "And when I do the dog goes, and so do you. I saw the dirty animal rooting up my lily-of-the-valley. It won't live to leave here. I'll get it one day. You wait and see."

He went upstairs, clutching the dog, determined to defend it with his life. Butch licked his fingers, his eyes huge and pleading as though he begged forgiveness for the hole in the flower bed. She meant what she said. She would find a way to destroy the dog if she could do it without his grandfather knowing she had done it. But she would not jeopardize her standing with her employer by doing it openly.

And so he stood on the balcony and felt the railing and wondered about the woman who had fallen down into

the garden below. And though it was only the suggestion of a garrulous old man and he had no proof at all, somehow he knew that his grandmother had not fallen into the garden at all, but that Miss Tracy had pushed her. And the knowledge sent a chill of fear along his spine.

While he stood there he heard a movement in the room behind him. He shrank back out of sight, holding a hand over the dog's mouth, immobile against the wall. He heard her in the room humming to herself and he was terrified of being caught there on the balcony.

After a while his heartbeats grew calmer and curiosity would not be denied. He peeped slowly round the edge of the wall, through the french doors, into the bedroom.

She was standing in front of his grandmother's mirror, trying on his grandmother's jewellery. She had clasped a necklace of pearls around her neck and as she turned this way and that in open admiration of herself and the jewels, they glowed luminous. He watched while she fastened a matching bracelet on her wrist, singing in an undertone all the while. And, involuntarily he shuddered. There on the balcony he condemned her. She had murdered his grandmother in order to get his grandfather for herself.

No one would ever believe that but himself and, apparently, the gardener, but it did not occur to him to suggest it to any responsible person, perhaps his grandfather. He had learnt early in life to mind his own business. It only convinced him that

he must not let Butch out of his sight for a moment. In her hands he could expect no mercy.

He stood there on the balcony for a long time after she had gone, waiting to be sure she would be downstairs again and not waiting in the hall to pounce. It was Thursday, her baking day, and she would be in the kitchen all afternoon making up the weekly supply of cakes and biscuits. And if his grandfather was around she would probably tempt Butch with a biscuit.

He was lying in bed late that night when he heard a commotion in the house. The sound of whispering, the trample of feet up and down the stairs, the coming and going of cars. He stiffened, wondering what was going on out there in the dark. He snapped his fingers and called the dog, and, with a spring, Butch was beside him on the bed, nuzzling into him as if he, too, felt afraid and in need of reassurance.

And the next morning the house was full of strangers, and one of them, who was apparently his grandfather's doctor, told him that his grandfather had died suddenly in the night.

Miss Tracy was there in black as though she was a widow and not just the dead man's housekeeper. She hovered over all, a glow of excitement behind the enamelled surface. "It was his heart, you know," he heard her telling one of the visitors. "To be expected. And the lawyer tells me has left me everything. I am the mistress of this house now. He was grateful

for all my years of devoted attention. Those were his own words."

"What about the boy?" the visitor asked, nodding in his direction, as though he was an animal and could not understand.

Miss Tracy fixed her stare upon him. "Mr. Bennett tells me that Mr. Jordan had spoken of altering the will and making provision for him, but, unfortunately, he died without having done so. Everything is mine."

He faded out of the house into the garden, full of apprehension for the future. He was romping with Butch on the lawn and failed to see the police car that drove up the drive and unloaded two policemen and an inspector at the front door. It was only later on that he wandered back inside and found the living-room full of police. Miss Tracy, a good deal paler than he remembered her, and no longer shining with her own peculiar brand of happiness, was sitting on the couch, arguing, her voice raised.

"But this is ridiculous, Inspector. Mr. Jordan had a heart attack. Doctor Summers will tell you that."

Unruffled the Inspector strolled around the room. "No, Miss Tracy," he said, stopping in front of her, his hands behind his back. "Doctor Summers was not at all sure it was a heart attack, there were too many other signs. We've inspected the contents of his stomach, and we are sure that Mr. Jordan was poisoned."

"That's ridiculous!" Miss Tracy snapped, but the Inspector was interrupted by one of the uniformed policemen. There was a consultation in the hall between the two of them,

and the Inspector came back looking grave.

"Miss Tracy," he began in measured tones, "I must warn you that anything you say from now on will be taken down and used against you."

"What are you talking about?" she snapped, showing no sign of fear.

"I am arresting you for the murder of Mr. Phineas Jordan."

Her composure was remarkable. "You are joking, surely," she said, icily.

He shook his head. "No, Miss Tracy. I don't joke about murder."

"On what grounds?" she asked with a slight sneer.

From the policeman behind him, he took a biscuit. "Did you make this?" he asked.

She stared at it. A plain, brown biscuit. And she paled slightly. "Of course."

"There are half a dozen like it in the kitchen and they each contain a lethal dose of poison, Miss Tracy. I think that is grounds enough. Mr. Jordan died from eating one of these biscuits. You stand to gain everything from his death. . . ."

"No," she gasped, struggling to her feet. "He couldn't have. You must believe me. I didn't give it to him. He must have helped himself to them. Yes, he did that sometimes. Came into the kitchen and sampled what I was baking. I remember I answered the 'phone just as I took them out of the oven. I thought he was upstairs.

You must believe me," she cried. "They weren't meant for him. . . ."

"Be careful what you say," the Inspector warned a second time. "Who did you mean them for?"

Her eyes went wildly round the room and saw Nick standing in the doorway holding Butch against his chest. "They were for the dog," she cried, almost hysterical. "I made them for the dog. I said I'd kill that dog. Ask him. I told him I'd kill that dog. It was always on the garden, messing up the house. . . ."

"Surely an elaborate way to kill a dog," the Inspector murmured. "It would have been a great deal easier to mix the poison in the dog's food. . . ."

"But the boy fed it himself. He watched him all the time. I couldn't get near it. . . ."

The Inspector turned to Nick, standing in the doorway. Only as a gesture, he asked, "Do you think Miss Tracy made those biscuits for your dog? You heard what she said. Had she ever said she would kill it?"

Nick looked at the woman, the veneer down, desperate, yearning towards him, asking. . . .

He watched while he answered, thinking not of his grandfather, but of his grandmother and of his dog. And because he was eleven and his mind was direct and uncomplicated, it seemed to him that justice was done.

"No," he said.



DANGER IN SIGHT

JOHN FALKNER



THE SOUND OF voices awakened me. Lazily, I moved my head in the direction it came from and I saw her. For a moment, in that warm lullaby of an afternoon, I thought I was still dreaming, but in the same second reason told me I was fully conscious. It was then I should have spoken, or taken some positive action. But the instant passed by, and it was too late.

I tested myself to make sure the sight of her was no trick of the imagination. I noted her slim, gamin-like figure, her short, boyish brown hair, the challenging smile on her diminutive face, and the wayward tilt to her neat head.

And, to prove it was all reality, Martin's heavy hand came over and slapped my shoulder.

"Wake up, sleepyhead," he boomed. "We've got visitors. Brenda Stewart—meet brother Steven. And I warn you, he's the deep one of the family. If he didn't brainfeed me, I doubt if I'd ever make the grade to being a doctor."

"Surgeon," I corrected. "And it wasn't my idea, Miss Stewart. It was his. You see, when we were boys we were out riding, and I tried to be too clever by taking a high stone wall. The horse fell, and so did I——"

"And Steven ended up on his back for about a year," Martin put in. "It was all my fault. If I hadn't dared

him, damn fool that I was, he'd never have tried that blasted wall. That's my penitence for nearly wrecking a body: to try to mend others." He paused. "Anyway, you don't want to hear our family history. We're on holiday."

The holiday was Martin's idea. He'd heard about the cottage being vacant from a chap he studied with, and insisted we shared it. "Maybe the last break we'll get together for some years, what with exams and clinical experience and what have you," he pointed out.

It was our first afternoon down there, and I had been having an afternoon's forty winks under the shade of the hedge when I awakened to see Brenda Stewart. At first, I rather resented what I regarded as an intrusion. The holiday was to be ours, Martin's and mine; I was too fond of him as a brother to want to share it with a third person.

"You're down here on holiday too, Miss Stewart?" I asked.

I saw her eyes cloud. "Call me, Brenda, please," she said, looking away. It was a moment or two before she answered my question. "Yes," she went on without looking back at me. "Yes. You can call this a holiday."

Martin, eager and ebullient as ever, broke in. "She loves sailing," he said. "I'm going to hire a boat. There's a bloke in the harbour, I can see him tonight. Perhaps," he spoke directly

to the girl, "perhaps you'd care to come with me?"

Again she hesitated with a slight trace of embarrassment before replying. "No . . . if you don't mind," she said, at length. "But I would like to come and see you again, if I may—both of you," she added, turning to me. I noticed the difference in her expression. When she spoke towards Martin it was open, trusting, appealing. For me, her look was thoughtful and questioning—uncertain, perhaps.

I knew I should say something to Martin, yet I hesitated. We were on holiday, and if he wanted more active companionship than I could offer, and feminine companionship at that, why should I begrudge him it?

"Come along whenever you like," he said, heartily. "And don't forget our date to go sailing, shipmate."

She smiled brilliantly. "A strong man, a strong boat and a fair wind—then it's hey-hey, over the horizon far away." It should have been a gay, lightly-said jingle, but she gave it, somehow, a more profound meaning.

She left just afterwards, going away reluctantly as if the breeze itself was carrying her off. I wondered when, or if, we would see her again.

My answer came that evening. I was listening to a concert on the Third Programme when I suddenly looked round and there she was, at the door. She must have moved as softly as thistledown, for my hearing is very acute, yet I hadn't heard a sound.

"Martin hasn't come back from the harbour," I said, switching the radio off, "but you're welcome to

come in." She accepted my invitation, and sat on the edge of the chair, looking far from being at ease. "You know most all there is to know about us," I said, with a slight laugh to break the silence. "Let's talk about you for a change."

She smiled slightly, and rather wistfully. "There's not much I can tell you," she said, her eyes, ears and attention on the door, waiting for the sound of Martin's return. "My father's one of those something-in-the-City types, and I've always spent most of my summers down here. Sailing, chiefly. Not anywhere particular, just drifting and dreaming, more or less."

"And your winters?"

She shrugged. "They were rather more lonely than my summers—there were more people around me, you see."

I nodded. "I see."

She began to confide in me with a rush. "I'll be honest, Steven. Daddy's pretty wealthy. You're intellectual —"

"Hardly," I corrected. "Let's say, I have plenty of time to ponder over matters without, very often, coming up with an answer."

"To some people it wouldn't matter—being the daughter of a rich man, I mean. But to me, it's always been awful: not the money, but the nagging in the back of your mind that your friends, even if they're not interested in your money, are conscious of your possessing it. Suitors?" She laughed, not without bitterness. "Are they seeking love or an heiress?"

Anyway, thank goodness now it can only be for myself alone."

I think she would have gone on talking, but at that moment the front door banged, and Martin shouted from the hall, "Yo ho, heave ho!"

I could tell the moment he entered the room, just by looking at Brenda. Her face shone with the serenity of devotion. And Martin? I could only judge by the sound of his voice. It boomed—Martin's voice always would—but there was a definite brake on its normal galloping heartiness.

"Hello, shipmate," he said. "No luck with the boat." Obviously, he was speaking to me, and looking at her. "The chap's hired it. But I've to see him in a few days. Anyway, it's a lovely night. The moon's shining, the air is balmy, the waves lap the rocks below us. How about taking me out to see if we can find some genuine Cornish pixies?"

"I'd love to," she said simply.

"Settled then. You won't mind, Steve, will you?"

"Of course not," I assured him.

I saw her leave, her eyes never once faltering in their gaze up at him. After they'd gone, it was some while before I switched on the radio. Martin, I knew, was becoming infatuated with her; it might turn to love, and I could see his getting hurt.

Because he was my brother, because I had deep affection for him, I didn't want that to happen. And there were his studies. I was convinced that Martin would one day make a great surgeon; nothing ought to distract him from that path.

I wondered anxiously, during the

next few days when Brenda was a frequent visitor and their moonlight strolls in search of pixies became an evening custom, what I could say to Martin. He was headstrong in any case. If he was in love with Brenda, he would be even less inclined to listen to a friendly word of warning.

And what was I warning him against? Nothing, really, only an inner conviction against his friendship with the girl. It was not that I had anything against Brenda. Far from it: the chats we had while she was waiting for Martin endeared her to me. Like me, she had spent much time in thinking—perhaps dreaming would be a better word—about life. Hers had been done in a boat in the bay, mine from an armchair. That might have been the only difference. We both seemed to realize that the more one thought, the more there was to think about—and the less chance to comprehend it.

Martin was upstairs shaving—on holiday, he always left that particular chore until evening—when I found I was no longer able to contain what was on my mind.

"Brenda," I said, avoiding looking at her. "Perhaps I shouldn't say this, but—I know you love Martin. Don't ask me why, but I have the feeling there's something . . . something . . ."

"Wrong?" she suggested. "Is that what you mean, Steven?"

"No," I said hastily. "Not wrong in the accepted sense of the word. It's a sort of 'can't be' feeling I have. With us, it's different. I know you don't love me, but there is an understanding between us——"

She wouldn't let me finish. I saw sympathy in her eyes. "I'm sorry, Steven," she said. "There is something nice about our being together, but it isn't love. I love Martin, and I know he loves me—for myself, and not for my earthly possessions. It's the first time. I can't lose it, Steven. Really, I can't."

If what she said was true—and I didn't think she was exaggerating Martin's feelings towards her—then I had left it too late to try to turn Martin's thoughts away from her. One might as well try to derail a train with a matchstick as try to alter Martin's course once he was determined.

I could only sit back and wait and hope that when the need arose, as I was sure it would, I would be able to console and help him forget. Martin was essentially an extrovert. In the deep waters of the mind he would be lost and helpless. I sensed their presence, even though I might not be able to fathom them. Martin was blissfully unaware they even existed.

The morning after I had tried to suggest to Brenda that her obvious need for love and affection might be better found in someone like me, Martin suggested we went to the harbour to see the "bloke with a boat".

"Been neglecting you a bit, I'm afraid," he apologized. "Still, you like the crowd in the pub. Good types, all of them."

The pub was fairly full, but fortunately Martin's bloke with a boat was there. After he'd agreed to let Martin have the boat as from that evening, Martin drifted off with

others in the way holiday pub drinkers have, and I was left with the boat-owner.

"Up at that cottage, eh?" he said, when I'd bought him a drink. "Nice place that. 'Course, 'twas always taken up to last summer."

"Oh," I said, trying not to sound too curious. "What happened then?"

"'Bain't you heard, me old darling?" he asked, surprised. "'Twas always rented regular, all summer. Then the lass was out in the bay." He took some gulps at his beer. "I dunno. We do get squalls. But she could handle a boat, all right. They said 'twere an accident—not, mind that I'd argue, but—"

He went on talking, but his voice receded into the background for me. After all, there wasn't anything else I wanted to know. The pieces all fitted so nicely together. I didn't even have to ask him the name of the girl who was drowned.

Now that I had all the facts, I could talk to her: reason with her about Martin, I hoped. As for Martin, he needn't even be hurt when she went. It could be done neatly, carefully, and he'd soon forget her as forget her he would have to do in one way or another.

That evening I broached the subject, first of all suggesting that Martin and I might go out together.

"Sorry," he apologized, "but I promised Brenda. You don't resent my seeing so much of her, do you?"

I shook my head. "Resent's not the right word," I said. "I just think you shouldn't, that's all. For your own sake."

"Rubbish," he snapped. "You've got nothing against her. Anyway, Steve, I may as well admit it now as later! I'm in love with her. You don't know how much——"

"No." I heard myself shouting. "No, Martin. You can't be, you mustn't be. For God's sake promise me that you won't see anything more of her—before it's too late."

"Too late?" He had a right to sound puzzled, I suppose. "Too late for what? Are you off your rocker, Steve?"

"I can't explain. It's . . . it's . . ." I found myself stammering.

He patted me on the shoulder. "You're not afraid she'll come between us, are you? You know that could never happen. And as for Brenda herself. Be honest, Steve, you've got to admit she's a gem."

"She's a gem all right," I said. "Only not for you, Martin——"

"What do you mean?" He paused. Then comprehension came into his voice. "I think I understand, Steve. I remember what Brenda told me. You're in love with her yourself."

I began grasping at straws. "Yes. Yes, that's it. I am in love with her," I said, feverishly. "Martin, I've never made any demands on you before, never accepted that you were to blame when that horse threw me, But now, I'm asking you. Please, please . . ."

"For God's sake!" I felt the contempt in his voice cut me. "You're being nothing more than a pathetic little fool. Do you think you can turn feelings on and off like a tap? What do you think Brenda would say if I told her my kid brother felt I should

give her to him because he's had a raw deal—she isn't a box of chocolates to be handed around, you know."

"Martin." I reached out for his coat sleeve. "Don't see her again—tonight, or any time. I beseech you. . . ."

He dragged his arm free. "You're making me feel sick," he snorted. "I never realized you were eaten up with self-pity to this extent. But it's no good. I'd do a lot for you, not because I feel sorry for you, or for what happened, but because I've always liked you—as a man, as a brother. Now, I can't think of you as either. Brenda and I are in love. No matter how you whine, you can't alter that."

"She's told you——"

"She's told me she loves me, that she wants us to be together always."

I put a different interpretation to the words than Martin had obviously done.

"That's what I'm trying to stop——" I was almost screaming with despair and frustration.

"So I see." His voice was cold and bitter. "I'm sorry. It's one matter in which you won't get your own way. I'm going now. I promised to take Brenda for a moonlight sail around the bay. I had thought of asking you, but——"

Noisily, he pulled the door open. I started forward after him, falling over the footstool in my way. He didn't come back to help me.

"Pick yourself up for once, Steve," he said. "You'll be better for it."

I heard his feet stamping across the floorboards in the hall.

"Martin!" I pulled myself up and

went after him, banging my shoulder on the door, knocking over the hat-stand in the hall in my frenzy. "Martin!"

He'd left the front door open. I felt the night breeze on my cheeks, heard the swish of the sea at the cliff's edge. I saw her then waiting for him. Even at a distance, I could see the look of love and devotion for him on her face.

I called again. "Martin!" If he heard, he took no notice. Brenda looked round at me for a moment; hesitation, doubt—whatever it was, a slight shadow crossed her face. But then it was gone as he neared her, and I saw her reach out a hand towards him.

I moved forward and, in the strange surroundings, for I had not yet grown accustomed to the cottage, caught my foot in the doorstep and went sprawling on to the gravel path. It knocked breath and sense out of me.

When I recovered and was able to look towards them again, I knew it was too late. Her walk now was swift and steady and assured.

I got to my feet, bruised, my arms and cheek rashed by the gravel, and felt sorrow at having lost a brother who would have become a surgeon capable of saving other broken bodies.

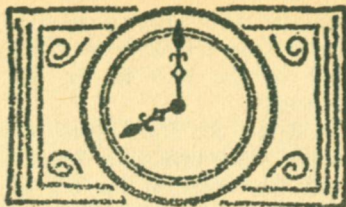
Yet I could not begrudge him happiness—if he found it by sailing with the girl of his choice on a voyage that would have no return. I thought of her jingle when we first met: "A strong man, a strong boat and a fair wind—then it's hey-hey, over the horizon far away."

Brenda Stewart: the lass that went sailing last summer—and didn't return to the cottage until this year. The girl I never heard make a sound when she walked or entered—yet whom I could see as clearly and distinctly as a microscope will see a piece of dust.

That's how I first knew there was something unusual, and why I tried to warn Martin of what lay ahead of him if he chose to go with Brenda. For I could see her—and I had been totally blind ever since I had been thrown by my horse ten years ago.



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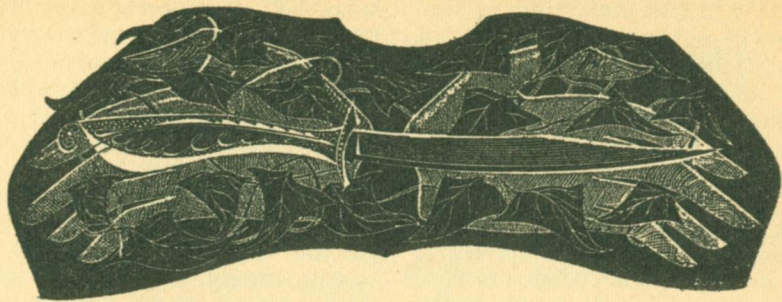


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CROOKS IN BOOKS

A review of some recent crime, mystery and detective books

STEVE AUSTEN

“LOVE IN AMSTERDAM”, by Nicolas Freeling (*Gollancz, 15s.*).

This is well out of the common run—an exciting, Simenon-ish thriller set in Amsterdam. Elsa de Charmoy has been shot in the stomach in her house in the Josef Israelkade and Martin Mevrouw, her ex-lover, was only a stone’s-throw away, on the other side of the canal. He has not seen her for five years—or he says he hasn’t. The Inspector, Van der Valk, doubts his story; he keeps Martin shut up in that odd Dutch institution, the House of Keeping, while he investigates, bullies, cajoles—and delves back into the past. If the Inspector himself is a little too eccentric—for art, that is, not for life—and if the final *dénouement* is not quite as satisfying as it promised to be, these are only minor criticisms. *Love in Amsterdam* is head and shoulders above

the ordinary crime novel; it is a first book, by a Dutchman writing in English and writing very well. His next book should be very well worth waiting for.

“THE SHEPPARD MURDER CASE”, by Paul Holmes (*Cassell, 21s.*).

For many of us, fed on a constant diet of rapid, dramatic disclosures and (eventual) justice triumphant, Mr. Holmes’s book is a reminder that fact is not only stranger than fiction: it is often also more frightening and more disturbing in its lack of ultimate certainty. Mr. Holmes, with an excellent eye for detail and the care and caution of a skilled reporter, who is inevitably something of a research worker, recounts the controversial murder trial, its provenance and its consequences, of Dr. Sam Sheppard who

in 1954 at Cleveland, Ohio, was accused of murdering his wife, Marilyn. Paul Holmes was present throughout the trial and he now writes a considered critique, analysing the case, the trial the personalities and the background to them. He writes fairly and well, but he has little doubt that the trial ended in a misconviction, which, it turned out, was irreversible. A good, but thoroughly unsettling book, it deserves serious study. Highly recommended. Some people may care to know that Erle Stanley Gardner, wearing his forensic hat, has written an endorsing foreword.

"PARDON MY GUN", by John Paddy Carstairs (*W. H. Allen, 13s. 6d.*).

Back with the nobs; yachts in the Mediterranean, Aston Martins on

land, O.E. status symbols rampant, together with slightly remote sex and an occasional "working over"—just to remind you that this is a thriller. A minor baddie seems to have got this way because he was maltreated at Eton. "I was your fag, Trenton, and I knew you wouldn't remember, because you were so goddam important. Only Trenton mattered to you, no one else. After you had been made Victor Ludorum you became even more big-headed." And so on. The speaker, you might note, won an Art Prize at the old school. Ah, ha! Trenton quotes from time to time just to show that he's a bit of an egg-head as well as a big-head. There are also girls—even an engagingly off-colour non-U sex-pot, but she gets knocked off—and the sun, France,

A season of nerves

James
Mayo
author of 'Rebound'

A young Englishman takes a tutoring job in France and becomes trapped in a narrowing circle of violence 18s

'as best thriller of the year (1961) I nominate James Mayo's 'Rebound'... hair-raising situation, beautifully worked out. Incidents, characterisation, dialogue, very superior indeed.'

Nicholas Blake, Sunday Telegraph

The case of the demure defendant
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Corsica and the delectable D.B. kicking up the gravel. It's all thoroughly good fun, and I suppose is meant to be no more than that, but somehow, for my money, it's a bit too thin, a trifle too low level.

"PIPELINE TO DEATH", by Alfred Eichler (*Hammond, Hammond, 12s. 6d.*).

Whisky (straight grain, bonded, U.S. not Scotch) in the pipes and murder at the Old Masters Distillery's head office. It's at the change-over point where the fairly legal hucksters take over from the semi-legitimized ex-bootleggers. But how ex is any bootlegger? The hard-pressed, freelance investigator is a Madison Avenue ad-man who handles the Old Masters account. The prime suspect is a Hollywood star who was going to advertise the whisky but was not used after being black-listed as belonging to some Communist Front organization in his early years. Quite crisp, quite enlivening, quite exciting and somehow slightly different.

"THE DEADLY FRIEND", by Hugh Pentecost (*Boardman, 12s. 6d.*).

A clever, interesting and subtle plot about a national American hero (scientist, explorer, philosopher) who suddenly betrays his ideals and another country's secrets and then disappears. A senate investigating committee cashes in on the publicity and, in a manner of speaking, all hell is let loose. The hero's son tries to sort it, and himself, out. Good, enjoyable, exciting stuff. Characters, background, dialogue, are all convincing. And even

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if the pay-off, being inevitable, is not quite as unexpected as it should be, for the top class of thrillers, I would recommend this latest book of Mr. Pentecost's for the strong drama, the astringent style, the forceful observation and the width of canvas.

"DEATH OF A CLOWN", by Elizabeth Blackhouse (*Hale*, 10s. 6d.).

This book is a great deal better than the illustration on the jacket suggests. It is perfectly straightforward, a crime novel beginning with a mystery and ending with an execution, but the setting—a wandering circus in the north-west of Australia—is unusual enough to give a fresh dressing to the salad. Plot, characters and writing are effective without being distinguished. Miss Blackhouse writes with economy and plans her story with some cleverness. She also knows how to use changes in pace and in degrees of suspense. Worth putting on your reading list, if you like your detection (comparatively) straight.

"LIFE BEGINS AT MIDNIGHT", by Robert Colquhoun (*John Long*, 21s.).

Ex-Detective Chief Superintendent Robert Colquhoun, M.B.E., to give him his proper rank and style, was one of the policemen who removed (most of) the razors and broken glass from Glasgow. I am told that memoirs of ex-Detective top brass have now become almost *de rigueur*, but I have not read many of them. This one certainly has its moments, as indeed it should since its author spent thirty-seven years with the force and

worked on some fifty murders, and it has an engaging air of journalistic amateurism. But fact is not always stranger than fiction and I found myself reading the book not so much for the cases as for Mr. Colquhoun's reflections on crime, criminals, penology, capital punishment and so forth, as well as for the charming vignettes about police sporting activities and how they help. A good, fire-side, cosy armchair book, ideal for dipping into during the natural breaks or when you are sitting out this group of programmes. Ideal, too, I should have thought for Aunts, Z-car enthusiast nephews and old lags.

"THE CRIME AT HONOTASSA", by M. G. Eberhart (*Collins Crime Club*, 12s. 6d.).

Miss Eberhart has written an historical crime/romance—not a bad mixture, though for addicts the romance, and the contrived happy ending, may make them feel cheated. Otherwise, this is an excellent read with some good—or, at least, highly convincing—historical background: the book is about the American Civil War and the fortunes of a Northern heiress who married a Southern gentleman rather impulsively in Cuba and makes her way, alone, to his family plantation at Honotassa. There she meets his family, some of them mysteriously hostile, and the Plot Thickens. Now and again, I found myself wishing it wouldn't; some of this book is so good—the description of what it might have been like to live on a Southern plantation in the path of an invading army

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—that it seemed a pity Miss Eberhart had not, for once, broken out of the rather rigid confines of the crime story.

"DOCTORS ALSO DIE", by D. M. Devine (*Crime Club*, 12s. 6d.).

A rather good second book and one that I found enjoyable and intelligently written. The setting is a provincial Scottish town and the protagonist is a young doctor whose senior partner has died, either accidentally or at someone else's intention. The police and the local big-wigs, venal and concerned to a man, favour accidental death. The doctor thinks he knows better but life is complicated by his relationship with the dead man's wife. Read on: it's well worth it. Realistic, or at least contemporary and skilful enough to make a suspension of disbelief possible, the book is also sufficiently tightly-planned and tautly-written to get you interested and then involved. Beta plus. And D. M. Devine on the showing of his two books deserves recommendation.

"THE JACKALS", by Frederic Valmain (*Macdonald*, 13s. 6d.).

This is that comparative rarity in English publishing, a French thriller. The period is 1958-9, the place, Tizgirt-sur-Mer, Algeria. And, for those of you that have forgotten, the Franco-Algerian war was on then and sudden death was not so surprising as it might be in Weston-super-Mare. The hero is a young doctor who gets hooked by one of the most attractive (at first seduction, at any rate) fic-

tional creatures in a month's reading. She wants to get rid of her ogre husband.

You've heard the story before? Yes, but not quite this way and not with quite the same overtones. It's worth a recommendation—for background, handling and a neat line of subtlety, if not for originality.

"THE DEATH'S HEAD", by Arthur Wise (*Cassell, 16s.*).

Mr. Wise, as I feel sure his schoolmasters used to remark, writes well. His characters and his dialogue produce the illusion of depth which is more usually found in the non-criminal departments of fiction. Having said all this, one wonders why Mr. Wise chose to write his latest book as a near-thriller.

It is an account of a private investigation in a northern provincial town. Someone is suspected of passing trade secrets to another firm. Head Office, in London, contacts an investigating organization and they send a chap north to do his stuff. This is his story and it is far more concerned with him as a person—and to be fair, he is tolerably interesting—and with his relationships with various people, e.g. his second wife, than with the investigation itself which seems almost as dreary as most people would find the town. The author himself seems to treat the business most perfunctorily. Everything gets solved, almost by accident, practically at the end, but meantime two marriages have broken up, one by suicide and one by a combination of what our



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JOHN LONG

Atlantic cousins so charmingly call incompatibility and what I suspect is just plain, old-fashioned boredom. An odd book, good in its way but inconclusive, unsatisfactory and not, repeat not, a thriller in any meaningful sense.

Nonetheless, I feel this author is worth watching, and once he has decided what kind of book he wants to write and discovered what plot suits it, then both he and we should be on to a good wicket.

"THE GENTLEMEN AT LARGE", by John Boland (*Boardman*, 12s. 6d.).

This is the third, and if not quite as rewarding, equally amusing, volume recounting the dubious exploits of the League of Gentlemen, the most cultured, Mayfair-vowelled and Old School Tied group of demicriminals in the business. Here they begin, as might have been anticipated, in jug: they end almost but not quite officially acknowledged as patriotic, if dangerously and criminally eccentric, English gentlemen who have once again done—after their own dubious fashion—their bit for the country. In between, they arrange a *coup d'état* in one of those desert states which is not colonial enough to allow of direct imperial intervention. All this, of course, is done in inimitable Gentlemen style and the Union Flags, if not exactly enthusiastically waved by H.M.G. at the end, are at least damply fluttering. Excellent light fare for the post-holiday recuperation, but not, I think, a vintage Boland.



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