LONDON MYSTERY

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QUARTERLY

No.
55

A quarterly anthology of the best in
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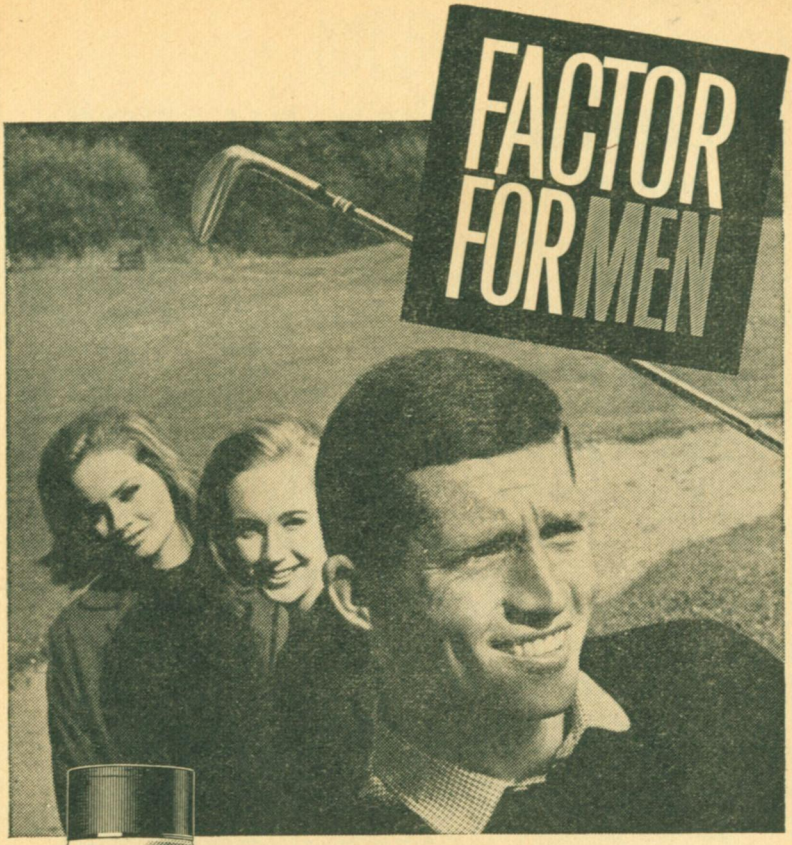

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THE LONDON MYSTERY SELECTION

It is not so very long ago that people in England still had a strong belief in witches. In 1751, as you will read in this issue, an old woman met a grim death in a country village not far from London because she was thought to possess supernatural powers.

Witches and evil spirits, although presumably dangerous at all times of the year, were, according to old superstition, particularly powerful at Hallowe'en, the last night in October, and Walpurgis night, the last night in April. On these dates they were free to roam abroad and there were various methods of keeping them at bay. Rowan berries were considered very beneficial, and people hung them over doorways to protect their houses; failing rowan, honeysuckle and woodbine were also considered effective. In some villages on the Continent the witches were driven away by noise. At midnight adults and children shouted and sang, banged saucepans, set the dogs barking and rang out the bells. Not surprisingly, the witches were only too glad to depart, crying out for mercy as they fled. Their departure was followed by a procession round the village, the men carrying flaming torches.

Today these legends have a pleasantly archaic ring . . . although one or two of the stories in LONDON MYSTERY suggest that the supernatural may still be very much with us.

EDITOR.

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

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THE SEVENTH MAN

L. P. DAVIES

Illustrated by M. P. Higgins

ONE EYE ON the clock, he finished writing the letter that was to accompany the report while he ate his breakfast. The morning paper and the mail lay unopened at the side of his plate. He signed his name in full, Trevor Ransome, and then hesitated over adding his qualifications, deciding that that would be unnecessary because he had already mentioned in the letter that, while he was by profession an analytical chemist, the material in the report was the result of his spare time work as a marine biologist.

Sheila, her hair still in over-night curlers, looked anxiously at the clock. "If you don't hurry you'll be late," she warned.

He sealed the bulky envelope. "For what it's worth, it's finished. I wanted to drop it in the box on my way to work." He sorted through the mail. "Three; all for me. I'll read them when I get to the lab." He slipped them in his pocket and rose to his feet.

She offered a cheek for his ritual kiss. "Take care of yourself, dear." She said the same thing when he left every morning.

Ransome dropped the envelope in the post-box by the laboratory entrance. He was late and Melton, short and stocky with a red-brown face and acid-stained fingers, was already at work at the bench.

He glanced up. " 'Morning, Trevor. Nice week-end?" And then: "Something pleased you this morning? You look like a cat that's been at the cream."

Ransome nodded. " 'Morning, Cliff. Pleased? Yes, I suppose I am. I finally got round to finishing my report over the weekend and I've just posted it away to the Royal Research Establishment. In a way it's something of a weight off my mind."

Melton grinned with a great show of white teeth.

"I'm all for a man having a hobby," he said. "Stamps, gardening or even collecting beer-mats. I've never been able to see what pleasure you get out of cutting up crabs."

"Lobsters," Ransome corrected pedantically. "Otherwise *Homarus Vulgaris*. And I don't spend all my time dissecting them."

Melton swung his stool back to the bench, and looked glumly at the contents of a mortar. "The damned stuff won't stay in suspension," he complained. "You might have a try at it." He pushed the offending container along the bench. "So you finally finished your work and got it all down on paper. About time, too; how long have you been on this lobster lark?"

Ransome slipped his arms into his

overall sleeves. "How long?" He frowned thoughtfully. "On and off, oh—twenty-five years." He bent over the mortar. "You won't do any good with this. Too much free fluid." He pushed the mortar back and then felt under his overall for the letters in his jacket pocket. He held them up. "I didn't get a chance to open these before leaving home. Or of reading the paper. Any special news?"

The other brooded over the mortar. "The Americans have started another series of tests; the Russians are expected to follow suit; a train disaster in Italy and the old man says it's vital he has this emulsion before midday today. You might give me a hand with it."

But Ransome wasn't listening. He had opened two of his letters, glanced briefly at their contents and then thrust them back in his pocket. But the third he read through twice and then exclaimed his astonishment aloud.

"A bill," Melton suggested; "or a *billet-doux* from the Other Woman."

"Huh?" Ransome looked up. "Here—" he pushed the letter along the bench; "read this."

It was a single, unheaded sheet of notepaper. The writing was strong and sloping; the sentences short and crisp, the letter of someone with no time to spare on the niceties.

"Dear Ransome," it started with no preliminaries beyond the date, "I have had second thoughts about your offer. I feel that there is room for a marine biologist in my expedition to the Amazon basin. If, despite my earlier rejection of your offer, you still feel interested, perhaps you would be good enough to contact me at your earliest convenience. The party sails on the "Tunic" from Southampton on Friday of next week. If I haven't heard from you by Wednesday I shall assume then that you are no longer interested."

The letter was signed, "Gerald T. Rumbold".

Melton whistled sharply through his teeth.

"Well, what do you know?" he marvelled. "Applying to join an expedition to the Amazon. Good God, Trevor; you're not seriously thinking of chucking everything up and going off into the uncharted wilds? Not at your age—" He pulled himself up. "Sorry, old man; but you know what I mean. This kind of stuff is for youngsters."

Ransome said heavily, "I was a youngster when this was written. Look at the date."

Melton looked. "February 16th, 1937," he read aloud, and looked up. "1937? That's——"

"Twenty-five years ago," Ransome told him.

The other puzzled. "But what's it all about? I don't get it."

Ransome picked up the letter and read it through yet again.

"Twenty-five years ago," he explained, choosing his words carefully, "I read about Rumbold's expedition to the Amazon basin. There was quite a lot about it in the papers at the time. I'd just taken my degree and I was feeling restless, unable to make up my mind whether to carry on with analytical chemistry or swerve off into

my first love, marine biology. I wrote on impulse to Rumbold, offering my services as a biologist. He turned me down, rather sharply as I recall. But it seems that after all, he had second thoughts." He waved the letter. "If this had been delivered as it should have been, then—" He stopped, enlightenment dawning.

"You wouldn't be working here, now," the other finished for him.

"I wouldn't be working anywhere," Ransome said. "There were six in the party. Rumbold and five others. They were all drowned. If I had been with them, the odds are that I would have died with them. A certainty, I would say."

"A lucky break," Melton suggested lightly and leaned across to inspect the envelope. "It isn't often the post office slips up, but when they do they make a real job of it. I've heard before of this kind of thing, a letter being delayed for a long time; they usually offer the excuse of it having been stuck in the bottom of a mail bag. The post mark doesn't tell us much except that according to the post office the letter was collected at three-thirty yesterday afternoon from a place called Balsa Magna. But that could mean anything."

"You know something, Trevor, old son?" he added genially, "you've been living on borrowed time. Twenty-five years by courtesy of the P.O. Just long enough, when you come to consider, for you to have completed your lobster-cutting. Quite a thought, and something of a coincidence. And a little mystery that you'll probably never be able to solve."

"A coincidence," Ransome echoed absently, studying the letter again. Then he made another discovery. "You'd think that after all that time the ink would have faded and the paper gone yellowish." He held it to his nose. "It doesn't even smell musty."

"If it's been in the envelope so that the light couldn't get to it, then the ink won't have faded," Melton said shortly, beginning to lose interest. "And everything smells the same after it's been in a mail bag. In any case, it stands to reason that it can't be freshly written. Now what about this emulsion?"

"See for yourself." Ransome held the letter out.

"It looks fresh enough, I grant you that. But for all that, it must have been written twenty-five years ago. Now forget it, come down to earth and help me work out another formula."

A feeling of uncertainty tinged with worry was steadily taking grip of Ransome. The phrase "borrowed time" nagged. It was odd that the letter should have been delivered on the very same morning on which, his private research completed, he had finally posted his findings away. In a way, it was almost as if time had run out and the past caught up with him. It was as if he had been granted those twenty-five years for a purpose. But for what purpose? Certainly not his research; he hadn't achieved anything of importance there. All he had done was a series of experiments that were interesting enough to a marine biologist but had no general importance.

He told himself that it was simply a coincidence. But still he went to the bookshelf over the desk and ran his finger along the titles.

Melton looked up from the sink where he was washing out the mortar. "Lost something?"

"The A.A. Handbook," Ransome told him, and then found it. But there was no mention of Balsa Magna. It must only be a small village. The name seemed vaguely familiar.

"Rumbold must have forgotten to post it," he mused aloud, replacing the book; "or else he gave it to someone else to post and they stuck it away somewhere. In a drawer perhaps. . . . But why does it look as if it were only written yesterday?"

"You still worried about that? Here—" Melton strode impatiently across the laboratory floor, his hand out. "Give it to me. I'll give it to old Jobson in the main office. He dabbles in old manuscripts and the like. He'll be able to tell you just how old the damned thing is."

Left alone, Ransome sat to the bench and made a pretence of starting work. But his thoughts refused to be turned away from the letter. He closed his eyes and suddenly, just for an instant of time, heat beat furiously on his face and his nostrils were filled with the smell of rank, decaying vegetation. There were sounds, too; coming from afar. Rustlings and shrieks and chattering. When he opened his eyes the smell and the sounds went. Association of ideas, he told himself; merely a trick of the imagination.

Then Melton came back.

"He says he will give it the once-over tonight," he said, pulling up his stool. "He'll give you the dope on it tomorrow. All right?"

Ransome thanked him. Oddly enough he had the feeling that it would perhaps be better not to know, one way or another, just when that letter had been written.

Usually his sleep was undisturbed, but that night he dreamed vividly, finding himself in a world of tall, close-growing trees, festooned creeper and strange foliage. Beneath his feet the ground was resilient and steaming, the rank odour of decay pungent in his nostrils. He was on a narrow track that wound out of sight into darkness made more intense by the moonlight that filtered from the leafy ceiling. Just for a moment he had a glimpse of someone ahead, a man wearing a floppy brown hat and a khaki shirt that was black with sweat. Just for an instant he saw him, the man half-turning, looking back over his shoulder, seeming to hesitate, and then he woke up, his forehead and arms bathed in sweat.

He blamed the dream on the stormy, sultry weather that had come during the night. The next morning the air was heavy, the sky lowering and threateningly purple. He was first in the laboratory. As he entered the room the usual tang of chemicals was lost in the new smell of jungle decay. It persisted only for a second and then was gone as suddenly as it had come. Melton came in as he was changing into his overall. His usual smile had been replaced by a puzzled frown.

He had the letter in his hand. "I just collected this from Jobson. We seem to have something of a mystery on our hands. He says he's sure that it has been written only recently. It seems there's no doubt about it, something to do with the ink. He thought it might be someone trying to play a practical joke, you know? He says he remembers the Rumbold affair. Apparently there was some mystery about the way the six men lost their lives. It was assumed that they had all drowned when their canoes capsized. But apparently the boats were recovered later. Intact. Jobson says he went to the trouble of checking off the details at the reference library. And he looked up Balsa Magna. That's where Rumbold used to live. It seems his widow still lives there. He thinks she may have posted the letter. Beyond that, he's completely mystified."

"Written only recently?" Ransome said dully. "But that's out of the question. The man's been dead for twenty-five years. Jobson must have made a mistake."

"There is that to it," the other agreed doubtfully. "But he is an expert." He glanced up under his eyebrows. "He says Balsa Magna is a few miles from Chelmsford. Not all that far away."

"No," Ransome said. "Not far." He felt very tired.

"If you did take a trip there," Melton pointed out, "you might find the answer. I mean, it's better than worrying and doing nothing."

"Yes," Ransome said, and then the phone rang. Melton took the call. "It's for you," he said, offering the

receiver. "An outside call. A Professor Hollinger."

At first the name didn't register. Then: "The Royal Research," Ransome said, the letter forgotten. "That's where I sent my report." He took the receiver. "Ransome here. . . ."

And then he listened in growing amazement. His paper had been studied with great interest. With more than usual interest, the rather pompous voice informed him. "The work you have done has a parallel with that upon which we have been engaged here. Your findings have filled an important gap. We would appreciate it if you could find the time to visit the laboratories personally——"

The voice went into details.

"So you feel that I haven't been wasting my time?" Ransome asked pleasurably when a break came. "You feel that my findings may be of some importance?"

The voice all but exploded. "Good God, man! The implications are staggering. I don't feel that I am exaggerating when I say that your discovery may one day mean the salvation of mankind."

Later, he gave a summary of the conversation to the patently interested and curious Melton.

"In a nutshell, I've been trying to isolate the substance that enables a lobster to regenerate any part of its body it happens to have lost. My paper dealt simply with the method I used to isolate this substance. Only apparently it isn't so straightforward as I had assumed. Hollinger has explained what this substance can do. What it boils down to is this: if a lobster loses a claw this substance automatically causes a replacement to grow. And if it is attacked by disease, then it works in a different way, reacting to the invading bacteria. Or to any foreign body. Including radiation. If this substance can be injected into the human body, then the recipient becomes virtually immune to the after-effects of radiation."

Melton nodded slowly. "I see. So it could be important."

"He said that one day it might mean the salvation of mankind," Ransome said soberly.

"What does one say?" Melton said, turning back to the bench. He spoke quickly over his shoulder. "Nice work, old man. I hope that you get proper recognition. You deserve it after all those years."

All those years. Ransome's pleasure evaporated. If the letter had been delivered at the proper time then this discovery might never have been made. Time had been lent for a purpose. He rested his hands on the bench to stop their trembling. What was the logical conclusion now that the purpose of the borrowed time had been accomplished? And yet, it still might be only a coincidence. But now he had to try to get to the bottom of the mystery. For the sake of his own peace of mind he had to discover if there was a reasonable explanation for the delayed delivery of Rumbold's letter.

That afternoon he left work an hour before his usual time. In the train to Chelmsford he dozed. When he woke with a start his palms were

sticky, his forehead beaded with sweat. He panted a little, still smelling the decay of the tropical forest. Even when he opened the carriage window the air that came in was warm and heavy.

It was seven o'clock when he reached Chelmsford. The sky seemed so low that it rested on the roofs of the buildings. The clouds hung in grape-like formations, coiling and entwining with monstrous, threatening life.

After a long wait a two-coach local chugged him to Balsa Magna. A porter, the only porter, on the wood-planked platform confirmed that Mrs. Rumbold still lived in the village.

"In the 'ouse that stands by itself on far bank of the river," he said, pointing vaguely. "You follows this road till you reaches the bank an' then you turns left. You can't miss it, fer you'll see the excavators an' such-like wot they're usin' to widen the road. Then you follows the river fer p'raps a mile till you comes to the wooden bridge. You'll 'ave to be careful 'cause the place is covered in mud an' slippy-like an' the bank's a bit on the steep side. An' it'll be worse when the rain comes." He looked up at the sky, loosening his shirt collar. "In fer a right storm by the looks of it an' p'raps that'll clear the air. You ought ter get there afore it starts if you 'urry. You'll see the 'ouse once you've crossed the bridge."

Ransome found his way to the river without difficulty. The bank was ugly with uprooted tree-stumps and gashes in the turf. The road was clearly being widened at the expense of the river. A crane and an excavator were inert and lurching drunkenly by a mud-covered bulldozer. Ropes were slung between the trees, hanging loosely, some of them weighted with blocks and tackle. His feet slipped on a patch of red clay as he turned off the road to cross the narrow wooden bridge.

The first spots of rain started to fall as he reached the far bank. He saw the house some distance ahead and a little way off the road, tucked into a surround of trees, sombre, for all its black and white frontage, against the purple-black of the sky and a line of grey hills. There were no other signs of habitation. The bridge, it seemed, had been erected for the convenience of the occupants of the house.

Mrs. Rumbold, small and wizened, mumbling a little, sometimes speaking sensibly, sometimes lapsing into the senile meanderings of age, seemed pleased to see him. Visitors, she told him, her hand cold and boneless in his, were rare. Not sure how to broach the matter of the letter he followed her into the furniture-dominated drawing-room.

A housekeeper, a flint-faced female with darkly suspicious eyes, brought a tray with cups and plates. Seated where he could see out of the window, Ransome saw how the sky was darkening still further, blending now with the gathering dusk. The rain was coming down steadily. The sooner he had received answers to his questions so that he could start on his way back to the station the better. He started by mentioning tentatively, and a little untruthfully, that he had once known her husband.

"I almost joined his expedition," he said; "I wrote to Mr. Rumbold and was at first turned down. But apparently he had a change of heart. There was a letter—" He watched her carefully.

"A letter—" she quavered, half to herself, and was lost in the past. "I had letters from Gregory. Two of them, and then he was drowned. You knew he was drowned?"

"Yes," Ransome said.

She didn't hear him. She was alone in the room with her memories.

"It wasn't the canoes. They said it was the canoes but they were all right. All six of them were drowned. None of the natives. They had bearers and guides, you know. They were all right. They took the bodies from the river. There was something strange about everything that happened. Gregory wrote to me twice before— You knew they were all drowned? Did you say you knew Gregory?"

"I hoped to join his party," Ransome told her.

Ignoring the tea-tray she clasped her hands, holding them in her lap, looking down at them. "There was Mr. White and Mr. Hudson. Nice gentlemen. And Mayrick. I forget the others. There was to be another——"

Ransome watched her twining fingers.

"Gregory wrote to him, I remember, but there was no reply. Gregory was proud, you know; stubborn and proud. He didn't bother to write again. There wasn't much time, you know. And then they were all drowned. I have two letters. Would you like to see them?"

"I think that I must have been the one that he wrote to," he told her. "It was about that that I came to see you——"

She didn't seem to hear him. "Two letters," she murmured; "if you knew Gregory, perhaps you might like to read them. They are only about the expedition. He was never a demonstrative man."

Her eyes, raised now to his, were colourless and mutely imploring. She was pathetically eager to live for a while in the past.

Ransome thrust his impatience aside. He would have to wait for another opportunity.

"I would like to see them very much," he told her gently.

They were there, ready to hand, in one of the bureau drawers. The paper was yellow, the writing faded, creases testifying to the number of times they had been opened, read and refolded.

"This is the first one."

He took it from her, recognizing the bold handwriting. He read an account of the journey by sea, the trouble they had had with the Customs at the other side, a description of Manaus. More trouble there, it seemed; some confusion over the size of the party. Ransome couldn't quite make out just what that trouble had been. Rumbold, mentioning the question of economy, complained in the letter of having to pay for seven hotel rooms when only six had been booked by wire from the coast.

There was mention then of the trip up-river to Iquitos, "where we start the journey proper", Rumbold had written. "Hudson has been out hiring

bearers and guides. We shall need, in all, four canoes. I have put White in charge of provisions, which is something within his capabilities. He struck me in England as being of rather more than average intelligence. His manner seems to have changed. A man of nervous and imaginative disposition, as he is turning out to be, will be more of a hindrance than an asset once we strike into the jungle. I discovered this morning that he had seen fit to purchase seven sets of utensils, metal plates and the like, when there are but six of us in the party. When I taxed him with this—for with our limited capital we have to budget very carefully—he seemed oddly confused and had no explanation to offer."

The letter ended at the point where the party was ready to leave Iquitos by canoe, with Jaquinta as their destination. From there, Ransome gathered, the party was going to strike inland.

The second letter took up the story. The light from the window was fading as dusk augmented the thunderous sky. Ransome had to hold the letter up to such light as there was before he could make out the writing. Half-way down the first page he found:

". . . a strange thing, and I can only attribute it to the conditions in which we now find ourselves. Not only White, but also Hudson, and, to a lesser degree, Mayrick, seem to be suffering from the hallucination that there is a seventh member of our party. Each of them seems to be reluctant to be left alone or even to be in the position of bringing up the rear when we are on the march. There is also some uneasiness among the natives. Three have already left us without explanation. At the evening meal yesterday Mayrick prepared seven places and was thrown into confusion when this was pointed out to him.

"The thing appears to be catching. Even I have fallen victim to it. After the evening meal and fairly late, for we had marched longer than usual because the moon was full, lighting up the way almost as if it had been broad daylight, I walked some distance from the camp, seeking a few minutes solitude. And I had the strange feeling that I wasn't alone, that someone or something was following me. So strong indeed was the feeling, that I was forced to turn and look back the way I had come. And for a moment my imagination played a trick on me so that I could have sworn I saw the figure of a man on the path behind.

"But I am not unduly worried. This hallucination of an invisible member of a party is not new. One of the expeditions to the Pole, as I recall, experienced much the same thing."

The letter continued for four more pages, but Ransome found himself unable to read any further. For one thing, the light had all but gone; for another, he had read enough to set his hands trembling and the sweat breaking out on his face.

The purpose for his visit forgotten he took his leave a few minutes later, refusing the offer to stay for the night or at least until the storm had eased. He wanted to be out of the house, out

in the open, despite the weather, where he could think and try to reason the whole thing out.

But reason was denied. All he knew was that somehow, the past had caught up with the present as if the intervening twenty-five years, their purpose achieved, had been condensed into hours. Walking, head-down against the rain, his thoughts revolved endlessly. In some way he had been a member of that party. He felt sure that it was Rumbold he had seen in the dream. And Rumbold had also seen him. And the others of the party had sensed his presence.

A mist was rising from the warm ground to form tendrils and tenuous pools of white in the hollows. The smell of rich displaced loam and rotting leaves rose in waves. Despite the thinness of his raincoat his shirt clung damply to his back and sweat trickled down his face.

The river was lost in the darkness. The trees had become a tangled mass of grotesque shadowy shapes. His eyes searched for the gap that led down to the bridge.

When it failed to appear he fancied that, engrossed in his thoughts and confused by the darkness and the rain, he must have passed it without noticing it. Then it was there, leading down the steep, slippery bank to the bridge that was little more than a dark shadow against a dark background.

As his feet found the planks and his hands felt for the reassurance of the handrail, the darkness seemed to swoop down afresh, bringing with it a torrential downpour. Carefully feeling his way he started across. And when he reached the middle the boards beneath his feet suddenly seemed to change their texture, softening, becoming unstable, giving loosely at his step. Grasping futilely at the rail which gave at his touch, he shouted his panic, and then screamed, knowing what was going to happen.

He had a dim impression of shapes appearing on the far bank; wavering, indefinite shapes that seemed to come from the trees, drawn by the sound of his voice, melting, merging, then separating until there were six figures on the bank, and then on the bridge as they hurried towards him.

And then there was nothing beneath his feet and he plunged, screaming....

The last thought that came to him before the waters closed over his head was that now he knew how Rumbold and the other five had lost their lives, drawn back to a swaying rope bridge that was to break beneath their combined weights, by the anguished appeals of the seventh man.

A verdict of accidental death was

returned at the inquest. The representative of the contracting company concerned was unable to give an explanation as to why the temporary rope bridge, thrown across the river for the convenience of the workmen and to save them having to make the long walk to the wooden bridge each time they wanted to cross to the far bank, should have become detached from its moorings by the weight of one man.

A rider was added to the verdict, deploring the laxity of the company in having neither a night-watchman on duty nor an illuminated sign pointing out that the bridge was unsafe for use by the general public.

Like one, that on a lonesome road
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And having once turned round walks on,
And turns no more his head,
Because he knows a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread.

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

Leaves have their time to fall,
And flowers to wither at the north wind's breath,
And stars to set—but all,
Thou hast *all* seasons for thine own, O Death!"

FELICIA HEMANS.

... What seest thou else
In the dark, backward and abysm of time?

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE.

"YOU'RE SO CARELESS, CYNTHIA!"

CHARLOTTE AND DAN ROSS

YNTHIA BELSOM stood in the doorway of the living-room, her *svelte*, breath - taking figure clearly outlined through the sheer, black *négligé* she had hastily thrown on. Her vivid red hair tumbled to her bare shoulders in curls framing the perfectly moulded features of her boldly attractive face. Her large green eyes, which were her most striking feature, were flecked with anger as they fastened on the thick bull-like neck and bald head of the big man who sat at the dining-room table with his back to her.

She waited there for a moment, glaring at the fat, middle-aged man with his shirt sleeves rolled up to the elbows as he bent intently over his work at the table. Then she spoke sharply: "Are we going to the Club or aren't we?"

"Let's postpone it until next week." The deep bass rumble from the man at the table was disinterested and vague. It was his habit whenever he was absorbed in a project. Eric Belsom was single-minded and far more interested in his duties as assistant curator of the reptile house than in his duties as Cynthia's husband.

"You said that last Saturday," Cynthia reproached him. At the same time she glanced distastefully at the shining glass box on the far corner of the table at which her husband sat. It held a tiny, writhing black viper with vivid red and yellow spots. This was another thing that annoyed her, his bringing home live specimens to study.

She'd married him to escape from the remote village in Africa in which she'd found herself, the young widow of a bankrupt planter. Eric Belsom, who had come to do research for the zoo, seemed a welcome solution to her problem. At the time he hadn't seemed so old or overweight. He'd shown a lively interest in her, for a few weeks, and had been quite an ardent suitor. But it soon changed after their marriage and return to England.

She ran a hand through her immaculately groomed red hair and spoke again in an angry voice: "How can you expect me to stay here twenty-four hours a day? There's hardly room to breathe!"

This was a favourite complaint. The flat was tiny, and she continually taunted him about it.

"I think you'll survive," he told her without raising his head from the report he was completing. And added: "Good job it is small. Not so much of a problem to keep tidy."

She knew what he meant. It was his rebuttal. She was a bad housekeeper and he often accused her of being slovenly and careless. In a person as precise as he was these were offences beyond understanding or even tolerance. The wrangle between them went on continually.

Cynthia's lips pressed in a hard line. A sarcastic smile came to her face. Let him think he was Lord and master! What did she care? She'd evened the score and he hadn't even guessed; hadn't caught on to her friendship with Guy, the bartender at the club. Or the afternoon visits Guy paid her when her husband was at work at the zoo.

And then it came to her. If only her husband were dead. Things would work out nicely, with Guy to fill his shoes quickly. And her big green eyes rested for a thoughtful moment on the glass cage with its twisting prisoner. She made a fast decision.

Stifling the revulsion she felt for both her husband and the tiny viper in the glass case she moved across the room to them. Leaning over her husband's shoulder she gently massaged his fat cheek. "You really mean to stay here and work tonight, dear?" she asked in a soft voice.

Eric Belsom was disinterested in her rapid change of manner. He grunted. "Go find a book." His eyes still fastened on his report. "Or call someone on the 'phone. Don't paw me!"

"I won't, darling!" she cooed. And resting her hand on his shoulder she held her breath as she used the other to deftly raise the glass end of the cage on the table. Her husband showed no awareness of her action.

She moved away quickly. "I'll 'phone Julia," she said. Then stood tensely in the doorway and watched and waited. The tiny black viper slowly emerged from the glass container and began its writhing journey across the table, its red and yellow markings vivid under the desk light as it came close to her husband's arm.

It took only a fraction of a second to happen. Eric Belsom gave a startled cry and looked down and saw the viper. He swung away from it and wheeled around to face her. His face was filled with mingled astonishment and fear. She backed through the doorway as he came toward her. And then, his bovine face growing purple, he clutched his hands to his throat as if to free himself from some unseen constriction and with a choking cry toppled face downward on the rug.

Hastily she slammed the door and stood trembling with her back against it. She knew the snake was small but its venom deadly. If her husband wasn't finished now he would be in a few minutes. Gradually she became more composed. She'd wait a half-hour. Then she'd call the police as if she'd just made the discovery. Eric might think her slovenly and careless but she'd show him how neatly she could arrange a murder.

The thought pleased her and a smile crossed her face. She looked around the tiny kitchen. Perhaps if she made herself a cup of tea it would fill in time and brace her up a bit. She went to the stove and turned on the gas, and taking her teapot to the tap she rinsed it with fresh water. She was just putting it back when the 'phone in the bedroom rang.

She went in and picked up the receiver and it was Guy. His easy, masculine voice gave her a lift. She threw herself outstretched on the bed and

said: "Darling! You couldn't have called at a better time. I've some good news for you."

* * *

The plain-clothes Inspector who was called in on the case interviewed a Mrs. Shirley, who lived just across the hall from the Belsoms. She was a dried-up, old woman with thick glasses and a habit of closing her sentences with a sniff.

"Thank you for giving me this time." The Inspector smiled gravely as he seated himself on a settee opposite her in the old-fashioned room.

Mrs. Shirley sat very straight staring at him. "I don't know that I can tell you much. I didn't really have a friendship with the Belsoms." She sniffed.

The Inspector took out a notebook. "Still you do live across the hall from their flat and you must have seen something of them."

"Seen and heard them too! They were always arguing!"

"Indeed!" The Inspector made a note and then looked up at Mrs. Shirley. "It is a very curious thing. There are odd circumstances about the case. A man who had spent as much time with snakes as Mr. Belsom should have been more careful to protect himself."

Mrs. Shirley nodded agreement. "Seemed very sensible. Always polite. Not like her."

"Mrs. Belsom, you mean?" The Inspector's eyebrows raised.

"No better than she should be. Queer goings on and men callers when the Mister was at work. I saw plenty, I tell you."

"Well," the Inspector was interested. "I'll put that down."

Mrs. Shirley leaned forward in a conspiratorial manner. "What do you really think, Inspector?"

He shrugged. "Well, I——"

"You know what I mean," Mrs. Shirley insisted firmly. "Do you think she did it? Let the snake out to kill him?"

"That's a pretty serious accusation to make," the Inspector said carefully. "I admit the circumstances are suspicious. It's difficult. We'll just have to try and fit the pieces to find an answer."

"I don't need to," Mrs. Shirley sat very straight again. "I'm sure she did it."

The Inspector folded his notebook and thrust it in his pocket. "She could have. But then, Eric Belsom might have been a careless man."

"Oh, no!" Mrs. Shirley said quickly. "That's what they often fought about. He was a very precise person, Mr. Belsom was. He used to call her slovenly and careless."

"Really?" The Inspector stood up.

"I remember them quarrelling one day and hearing him say to her: 'You're going to be sorry one of these days with that scatterbrain of yours. You'll turn on the gas and forget about it as usual. And I won't be be here to save you.'"

The Inspector nodded. "Really adds up, doesn't it?" he said. "Because that's precisely what happened, or she'd be alive to answer our other questions right now."

CRIMSON WITNESS

NIGEL ELLISTON

Illustrated by J. V. R. Davies

ERNEST MULLETT was one of those frustrated souls who go through life constantly trying to blind themselves to their own mediocrity by fingering over their few meagre accomplishments like beads on a rosary. In all his undistinguished career, Ernest could find consolation in only two noteworthy achievements. The first of these was his successful wooing of the much sough-after Judith Harlow, who subsequently made little secret of her disappointment. The second was the single perfect bloom which he culled from his garden each morning on his way to the office, and displayed in the lapel of his jacket throughout the day. Ernest Mullett treasured his triumphs as dearly as the family failure prizes his pedigree.

So when bluff, go-ahead, man-of-the-world co-worker Roger Farnum, in a brief and elaborately manly speech, let it be known that he had supplanted Ernest in his wife's affections, he really was asking for trouble.

In point of fact, Ernest had made up his mind to kill Farnum almost before the words were out of his mouth, but he was quick to realize that any sign of resentment at this stage could be seized upon later as a motive connecting him with the killing. His solicitude for Judy's reputation and his comradely concern for Roger's career were masterpieces of deception, and the subsequent divorce was hailed on all sides as a model of civilized human behaviour.

Nor was it any great trick to maintain the illusion in the months that followed. His continued daily association with Farnum at the offices of Messrs Pitman & Croft spoke for itself, as indeed it was intended to do, and the latter's appointment as manager shortly afterwards brought an element of prestige to the relationship which soon transformed it from an irksome pretence into a rewarding social asset. If it hadn't been for the new florist on the corner, it is possible that vanity might have seduced him from his purpose.

But the newcomer specialized in exotic and showy blooms, and Roger, whether with malicious intent or not, had soon taken to picking up a flower for his buttonhole every morning. It wasn't long before admirers of Ernest's' home-grown product were adding, ". . . but have you seen the one the Boss is wearing this morning?" This was the last straw.

Ernest had devised and discarded half a dozen plans in as many days before the perfect solution sprang out at him from the pages of his customary evening paper:

$50,000 BANK HAUL
Manager Slain
Police combing Underworld
In a flash of inspiration he saw it all.

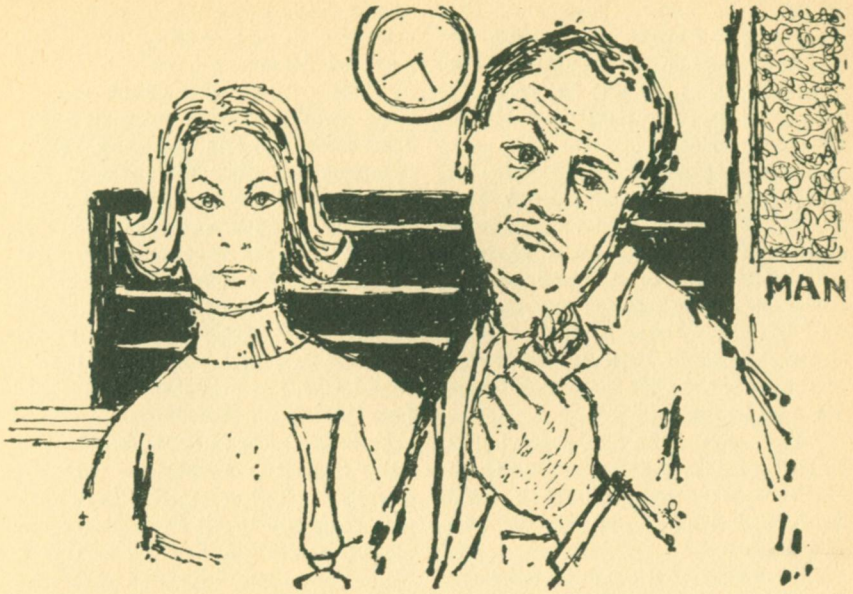
Roger Farnum's office was separated from the main office by an anteroom occupied throughout the day by a decorative, if somewhat witless, young lovely, commonly referred to as "our Flo'." There was a second door into an outer passage, through which Farnum himself might come and go without passing through the ante-room. All other traffic with the inner office was monitored by Flo'. Every Thursday afternoon, the cash for the weekly pay-roll was brought here and deposited in the large safe which stood against the wall flanking Farnum's desk, to be packaged and distributed the following day. The same practice had been followed for years. It wouldn't be remarkable for a thief to have become acquainted with these details.

The safe itself had a four-letter combination lock, the coding of which could be altered at will. This much was mere lunch-room gossip. But the operative combination was known only to Farnum, who wasn't likely to share the knowledge with anyone who had access to his office. Ernest was going to need this, and he could see only one way of getting it. He must watch the safe opened, and try to spot the dial settings for himself.

An insurance policy in Judith's favour, which Ernest had deposited in the firm's safe shortly before their luckless union had come to an end, provided the occasion for a first attempt. It was logical enough that he should now wish to change the name of the beneficiary. Blessing the oversight that had prevented him from attending to this earlier, he made his way to Farnum's office, where the latter unsuspectingly provided him with his first demonstration. On this occasion, Ernest was able to observe only that the first letter of the combination was a J. At that point, half turning to throw a remark over his shoulder, Farnum obliged him to avert his eyes, and the opportunity was lost.

A second visit some days later, ostensibly to return the amended document to the safe, elicited the letters J.U.D. . . . The final letter went almost the full sweep of the dial W? X? Y? Z? There was only one of these it *could* be. He left the office boiling with inward fury. If ever a man drove the last nail into his own coffin, Farnum had done so when he chose the letters J-U-D-Y as the key combination for Pitman & Croft's office safe. To have said that Ernest was now "ready to go" would have been a beggarly understatement. Wild horses wouldn't have stopped him.

The ten-inch length of lead pipe wrapped in a woollen stocking was almost two inches across and must have weighed all of two pounds, but tucked into his trouser pocket with his hand on top of it, it was surprising how inconspicuous it could be. Ernest slipped it into his brief-case. He chose the flower for his lapel with more than usual care—a beautiful crimson bud from his favourite rose,



ideally a little too full-blown perhaps, but so lovely that he couldn't bear to pass it over. Today was the day; he felt ten feet high!

His sister came to the door to see him go. "Remember we're going to the Regal tonight, Ernest. Early supper. Come straight home." Ernest hadn't forgotten. Ernest had arranged it.

At twenty minutes to five, Ernest stepped into the ante-room. In his right-hand trouser pocket was the length of lead piping. Under his arm was a correspondence folder.

"Mr. Farnum free?" he inquired.

"Yes. Go right in, Mr. Mullet." The girl glanced at the clock and reached for her powder compact. 'You're not going to keep him for ages, are you? I want to go home."

In his mind's eye, Ernest had rehearsed the events of the next two minutes till he was letter perfect. The open folder on the desk, the left hand pointing over Farnum's shoulder, the right curling round the home-made bludgeon. There was no blood; the pink skull just caved in like a crushed pingpong ball. He handled the safe with a silk handkerchief. J . . . U . . . D . . . Y. He laid the weapon on the floor of the safe. He collected the dead man's panama from the hat-stand, scooped up his brief-case from the table, and tossed them in, too. Swiftly he ran through the victim's pockets for the bunch of keys which

included, he knew, the key of the inner office. Finally, he heaved the body out of its chair and disposed the sprawling limbs as best he could inside the safe. The iron door closed with a heavy sigh.

The corpse had been awkward to handle; he was breathing hard. The whole job had only taken a minute and a half. He forced himself to stand still while the second-hand of the clock on the wall swept out another half minute. Then, with a thumb stuck at random between the leaves of the folder, he let himself out into the ante-room.

"Well, that didn't take long, did it?" remarked the girl, glancing again at the clock. "Say! That's a swell *bootoneer* you've got today, Mr. Mullett."

This was a real piece of cake for Ernest, who, for all the phony reputation he had acquired since his supposed lapse from grace, had no sort of conversational line with women at all. It had been part of his plan to keep the girl in play for a few minutes. By association, it might have appeared odd for Farnum to have disappeared so promptly following the termination of their interview. Now he was enabled to expatiate for some minutes on horticulture in general and roses in particular. He concluded by tucking the rose into the vase on her desk, extracting a further two minutes of gushing appreciation in return. It was ten minutes before five when he left her. Any time now, she would be going into the inner office to take leave of her employer. It wouldn't matter now; there would be no appearance of precipitancy about his assumed departure.

From then on, Ernest's movements were fully accountable should the need arise. He left the office in the company of other members of the staff at five o'clock, even providing a lift for one of them on his way home. From five-thirty until well after midnight, at which time both ostensibly retired to bed, he was never out of the company of his sister, who would also testify that he rose and breakfasted with her at the usual time before leaving for the office next morning. She was one of those people who sleep cheerfully through a thunderstorm, but flare up at the suggestion that their hearing is in any way impaired. There was little to be feared from her in the final step which he now had to carry out.

It was two o'clock when Ernest rolled the car quietly out on to the road and headed back across the river to the office. He left the car at the end of the block, and completed the trip on foot. There was a subdued light in the front lobby of the building. Otherwise, all was dark and silent. He made his way round to the car park, and let himself in through the employees' entrance. There was no trick to it really if you had a key. Aside from the night porter, whose doubtful vigilance extended only a few yards from his cubby-hole in the front lobby, there was no one in the building at this hour. The first would be the office cleaners, who would appear at six o'clock.

When he left the building five minutes later, he left behind him an open safe with a dead man sprawled beside it. On the desk lay an opened brief-case and a bunch of keys, and on the hatstand hung the victim's panama hat. With him, in a canvas bag concealed under his raincoat, he took the better part of $5,000 in notes and coin and a ten-inch length of lead piping wrapped in a woollen stocking. The bag and its contents were at the bottom of the river when he arrived home shortly after three.

Ernest received his first account of the crime when he arrived at the office. The body had been found by the office cleaner shortly after six o'clock. The police seemed to reckon it had been done fairly early, and as employees arrived they were being questioned as to their movements between 4 p.m. and midnight. The earlier limit was advanced to 5 p.m. on the evidence of two witnesses—Ernest himself, who had seen Farnum alive and well at twenty minutes to five, and Flo' Simmons, the secretary, who had heard Mr. Farnum invite Mr. Mullett in, and had herself entered the inner office on the stroke of five to find that her employer had already gone. She knew he had left because he had taken his hat and his brief-case. It had happened many times before. The door between her office and her employer's was seldom locked. She had locked her own door, and gone out through the main office.

The cashier had been questioned as to the contents of the safe. He himself had taken the cash to Mr. Farnum's office earlier in the day, and had seen him deposit it in the safe. He denied knowledge of the combination. On those occasions when the code was entrusted to him, the combination was always changed when the manager returned. It was for his protection as well as for the manager's. He was sure no one could have known it.

Needless to say, Ernest's alibi from 5 p.m. onwards was perfect.

Things were going pretty well, thought Ernest, but he wished he knew what was going on inside. They had evidently got their teeth into the robbery, as he had intended that they should. Doubtless, they were stretching the medical evidence to suit the other probabilities, which again was good. No one would have seen Farnum leave the office, of course, but if he had gone out ahead of the rush, that would seem natural enough. Someone might have noticed his car still in the parking lot at five o'clock, but what of it? Sometimes it was; sometimes it wasn't. Ask anyone the day afterwards and he wouldn't remember. Hell, no! There was nothing to worry about.

Our Flo' emerged from her office, drifting aimlessly like an unmanned boat.

"What are they up to in there?" asked Ernest.

"Going over the safe—inside. Vacuum cleaners, and tweezers and little envelopes for things. Like in the books you know. They were asking me about you again—whether you were carrying anything when you came out. I told them you weren't—only that folder thing you had."

Ernest felt a brief stab of anxiety. Was someone getting too warm? Oh, well. What the girl had said ought to satisfy them.

"Your flower was getting a lot of admiration," the girl went on. "Fellow who was questioning me asked if he could show it to the Inspector. They were both raving about it."

Ernest relaxed. He was still relaxing ten minutes later when the Inspector beckoned him into the inner office.

"Sit down, Mr. Mullett. We've been admiring this rose of yours. A lovely thing, isn't it?"

Ernest agreed, smiling.

"Now, we just want to check one or two small points with you," continued the Inspector. "We understand that you were in this office for about a couple of minutes yesterday, from about four-forty to four-forty-two."

"That's right," agreed Ernest.

"Were you in here at any time previous to that, sir?"

Ernest shook his head. "Miss Simmons would confirm that," he said.

"And you have never at any time opened this safe? You wouldn't be able to, is that right?"

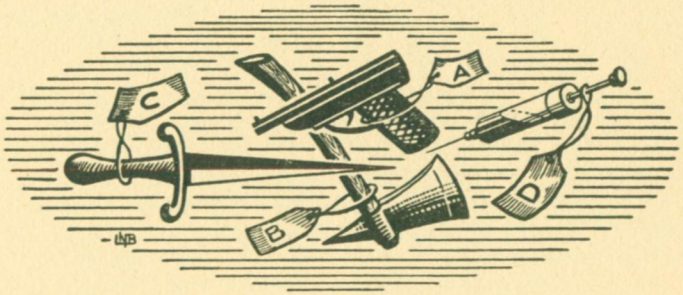
"I don't think anyone could," said Ernest, "except Mr. Farnum."

"Quite so. That's what we thought. Now let's get back to horticulture, shall we? Did you happen to notice if Mr. Farnum was wearing a flower yesterday?"

"Yes," said Ernest, grateful for the digression. "It was a white gardenia. A beautiful specimen."

"But you wouldn't expect it to shed a red petal, would you?" The Inspector reached for a small envelope that was lying on the bare glass-topped desk. His fingers pressed lightly across the edges, causing the mouth of the packet to bulge open. "That was why we thought you might like to explain to us how *this* came to be found inside Mr. Farnum's safe this morning."

On the glass desk top lay a deep crimson rose petal.



NEKO WA MAMONO

(A CAT IS A WITCH)

WILLIAM STROUP

Illustrated by Norman Battershill

THERE WAS something evil about Sueko's cat. The perverse presence permeated its whole being; in the measured manner in which it moved, in the shrill, almost human tone of its voice. Robert Parker could feel the evil like a touchable wall of cold, corrupt ice in the air.

The cat spat at him.

"Niki! *Warui neko* bad cat!" Sueko scolded. Then, as if it had only been imagined, the sensation of unspeakable malevolence vanished, and Parker stood staring at a quite ordinary though oversized mongrel cat.

"Father should be in from the field soon," Sueko said.

"I wonder what he wants to talk to me about?" Parker mused.

Sueko answered him with a shrug of her pretty shoulders. It wouldn't be about their marriage plans again, he thought. Odaka had already given his consent to that. Taroto Odaka had been a hard nut to crack. It had taken Parker two years of careful determined persuasion to talk the old man into allowing his daughter and only child to marry an American—a long-nosed *gaijan* foreigner. But Parker had done it. If Odaka was hard, he was also wise. He ran a small tea farm on the southern coast of the Japanese island of Honshu, about twenty-five miles south of Shizuoka; a farm so small that it hardly supported himself and his daughter. Parker was stationed near by, a staff sergeant at an American Radar Site. Odaka realized that marrying Parker would mean a better life for his daughter. And he liked Parker, who unlike the average American G.I. overseas, took the effort to learn the language and customs of Japan.

Parker heard the swishing sound of the sliding door at the rear entrance and knew that Odaka had arrived. The old man was non-communicative —something on his mind, Parker thought. He entered, bowed to Parker who bowed back; then he washed his hands and sat beside the table on the straw mat floor. Supper was already on the table.

Miki, the cat, brushed past Odaka. "Get that cat out of here!" he boomed at Sueko. For an instant Parker felt the strange malevolence again. Then the cat was gone.

They ate in silence. For some reason the atmosphere was tense, strained. When they had finished,

Odaka told his daughter to leave the room, and to make sure the cat was with her.

Parker suppressed a smile. Sueko had often told him about her father's hatred for her cat. It seemed strange, and he wondered why the old man didn't just get rid of the animal.

Odaka sat at the low table facing Parker. His gnarled hands were clasped together, and for a long time he simply sat watching them as if they had a story to tell.

"Bob," he finally began, "I have a job to do and I need your help—let us say your moral support, and perhaps even your physical strength. You understand us Japanese more than most Americans I've met. But in spite of that there will always be a wall of different customs and beliefs between us. I am old and have seen much here in the quiet country where we don't rush, where the sounds of nature are louder than the sounds of men. With my own eyes I have seen strange things that would be hard for you to believe . . . things you would call superstition, or the results of too much wine."

"But what are you driving at?" Parker asked frowning.

"I am going to rid my house of a witch and I need you to help me."

"A witch?"

The old man looked him straight in the eye. "Niki the cat! The cat is a witch!"

Parker felt like laughing but Odaka's expression was so serious that he didn't dare. He was familiar with Japanese superstitions regarding cats. It was claimed that the cat is the most intelligent of animals: that some cats in their old age develop strange, evil powers—the power to understand human speech, the ability to walk upright, along with devious powers of sorcery. In the rural areas of Japan, cats have been accused of everything from murder to vampirism. And Sueko's cat was all of twenty years old. But this was the nineteen-sixties and Parker was surprised to find his future father-in-law so superstitious.

As if in answer to his thoughts, Odaka said, "I have never been a superstitious man. But three years ago, just before you came to Japan, Sueko's mother died. Did Sueko ever tell you *how* she died?"

"No," said Parker, shaking his blonde head.

"My wife never had trouble with her nerves. She was a simple, kind woman. Two times in her life she walked in her sleep. The first time was five years ago. Niki didn't come home one night which was not unusual—cats are independent creatures. But Sueko had a sixth sense about the cat. She was sure it was in trouble. So I went outside to look for it but I couldn't find it. Late that evening I heard my wife get up from her bed. She was in a trance, sleepwalking, her arms held out before her. It is said that one should never wake a sleep-walker, so I followed her. She walked almost a kilometre and entered the rice farm of a Mr. Kajiwara. Mr. Kajiwara was having trouble with rats and he had baited some large traps in his field. Niki had caught its leg in one. Still in a trance,

my wife freed the cat and returned to bed."

"Well, that's a strange thing, but——"

"Wait," Odaka rebuked. "I'm not finished. My wife went sleep-walking one more time—three years ago. She wanted Sueko to get rid of the cat. At age seventeen, the cat would have nothing to do with anyone but Sueko. My wife had made up her mind that day that Niki had to go. That night she rose in her sleep and walked outside—towards the sea—towards the high cliff at the end of the tea bushes. When she reached the edge of the cliff she—she kept on walking." Odaka's eyes dropped.

"I'm sorry," said Parker. "But it could only be . . ."

"Coincidence?" Odaka finished for him. "I wish it were. As I told you I have never been superstitious. If I were, the evil cat would already be dead. As it was I did nothing. Niki and Sueko have always been like sisters. Sueko is my only child, and Niki was a starving stray who wandered into the farm the day Sueko was born. My wife's death seemed to draw Sueko and her pet even closer. It was just what the cat wanted . . . but it took me a long time to come to my senses."

"Look, why don't you just let me take Niki with me? I can let the houseboy in my barracks look after her?"

"Impossible. In the first place Niki would simply run away and come back here."

"Well then, what do you want me to do?"

Odaka smiled. "You know it is considered very unlucky to kill an old cat. Even after death it is dangerous, and I no longer doubt the old superstitions. But there is a way out. I am sure now that Niki killed my wife. So I must kill Niki the *same* way . . . and tonight!"

"Why tonight?"

"Because tonight is the anniversary of my wife's death. Tonight, you and I will take the cat to the cliff and throw it into the sea. But your main help to me will be your very understanding of why Niki must die. After the cat is gone, Sueko will listen to you even more than to me. I am her father, but she is in love with you."

"Well, if it's that important to you, count me in."

Odaka smiled. He seemed suddenly happy. "Tonight after Sueko is asleep."

Parker felt foolish. Moreover, the fact that they were getting rid of the cat behind Sueko's back bothered him, and he considered backing out. But even more than Odaka's explanations the memory of the strange sensation of evil he had felt in the cat's presence decided him in Odaka's favour.

Sueko and her father usually retired at ten. Odaka and Parker agreed that he, Parker, would leave the house and return at midnight. It was a dark night and Parker carried a flashlight. He reached the farmhouse at midnight and scratched gently on the paper window of the front door. A moment later Odaka stepped outside carrying a wooden cage. There was no need for Odaka

to tell him what was in the cage. The cat pawed in vain at the walls of its prison. It sputtered and spat. Worst of all was the eerie fog of malevolence that seemed to cling heavily to them, like a choking slime .

"My God! Do you feel it?" asked Parker.

"I have felt it many times," whispered Odaka.

"Doesn't Sueko notice?"

"No. To her Niki is only Niki her cat, who has been with her all her life. Come, let us get it over with."

Parker followed Odaka. "How did you get Niki in the cage?"

"Cat mint, or as you say catnip, and a certain incense which makes one sleepy. Come, let us hurry!"

Parker stopped asking questions. With the aid of his flashlight they hurried up a small slope between rows of tea bushes. Suddenly Odaka stopped. There was no fence at the point where Odaka's tea field ended in the two-hundred feet cliff. The crowded land was utilized to the very edge.

The thing in the cage was still now. Yet it was fighting, not with claws and teeth but with the very presence of evil itself. The men moved slowly. Breathing was difficult. It was even harder to control the urge to run . . .

not back to the house, but over the black precipice and into the cool, clean sea where the unsufferable, choking evil presence could be washed away.

Odaka and Parker held the cage over the edge. Odaka opened the lid. Both men tried to pull the cat out. It clawed and bit at their hands and held firmly to the cage.

"Throw the cage over!" Parker shouted.

They tried to let go of it but their hands wouldn't respond to the commands of their brains. Then suddenly Parker heard the voice.

"Wait! Wait!" He looked around and saw nothing at first. He freed one hand and shone the flashlight back towards the house.

Then he saw her . . . Sueko! running towards them, straight for the cliff, her head held high, her arms stretched out in front of her.

"Sueko! My God!" Parker and Odaka turned at the same time. Sueko was almost upon them. "Wait . . . wait," she called in a strange voice. The sight of Sueko heading for the cliff made the two men forget the cage for just an instant . . . but long enough to break the spell of the thing that glued their hands to the cage. The cage with the howling cat still inside, careened over the cliff. The air vibrated with its half-human screeching. The two men turned their heads towards the sea again.

Faster than they realized, Sueko was upon them. She brushed past Parker and he heard a tiny moan deep inside her throat. Quickly he grabbed for her and missed. She reached the precipice and kept going. She did not scream. Odaka and Parker listened in horrified silence. There was only a slight sound as Sueko's body landed on the rocks below. Then there was no sound but the steady wash of the sea against the rocks.

The two men stood at the edge of the cliff in silence. Parker tried to speak and couldn't. He felt absolutely numb inside. I am dreaming, he thought. Too much had happened too soon. He could not think.

Finally Odaka spoke. "The witch has won and it's my fault. It is honourable that I die with my daughter," he whispered.

Parker heard the old man speak but his words made no sense. Something inside told him that Odaka was stepping to the edge of the cliff. Some small voice told him that he should stop him. But he had no will to move. This was all a dream. If he went back to the house they would all be there —Sueko, her father, and Niki, who, after all, was nothing but a cat. He staggered back towards the house, tripping his way through the tea bushes, moving by instinct rather than by conscious volition. Somehow he reached it. He slid open the door and stepped inside.

"Sueko! Sueko!" He groped through the house searching for her. There was no one there. Slowly, his head spinning, he lowered himself on to the straw mat floor. Then he lost consciousness.

When Parker awoke it was still dark. Someone had turned on the single bulb in the ceiling overhead.

Someone had covered him with a rug.

"Sueko!"

"Here I am, darling."

He sat up. She came towards him.

He breathed a sigh of relief. "I had a terrible dream," he said. "I . . . I dreamed that you and your father jumped over the cliff."

Sueko smiled at him. It was a beautiful smile. Yes, he thought, his Sueko was so beautiful. Then he noticed her clothes. They were half torn from her body, wet and in spots bloody. Traces of blood and dirt still covered her hair. And her face . . . there was something strange about her face. He stood up.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"You . . . you've been hurt. Then it wasn't a dream. But you fell over the cliff—two hundred feet . . ."

He backed away from her. She put out her arms. Her voice was soft . . . almost purring . . .

"Oh, my poor darling. What a terrible dream you must have had. Come to me, darling."

He stared at her hands. Her hands were the worst of all. They were covered with blood, and there was something wrong with the nails—they were long and curved . . . bloody! He backed up until his back touched the wall.

She stepped towards him. Then he looked into her eyes. Her eyes glistened. They were large yellow eyes, with a hint of green. The pupils were narrow slits.

"Come to me, darling."

He felt the evil presence again—it was strong, making him dizzy. And then it didn't seem quite as evil as before. Sueko's eyes seemed to grow larger—larger until they filled the room.

"Come to me, darling!"

He took a step towards her. She was so beautiful! A new passion was filling his body, beckoning him! But then his eyes dropped to her hands again. She was close to him now. He saw one bloody forefinger, and as he watched it a drop of blood formed and dropped to the floor. It sobered him slightly. He backed to the wall again.

It was at this moment that he felt something hard against his back. And he remembered. It was Odaka's samurai sword—the long, sharp curved blade that had belonged to Odaka's samurai grandfather. With a final burst of sanity he half turned and pulled it from the wall—then with eyes half closed he shoved it with all his strength between Sueko's breasts.

Then he fainted.

* * *

Inspector Hideo Kinuta of the Shizuoka Prefecture Police waited impatiently while Doctor Izawa examined the unconscious American on the floor of the Odaka farmhouse.

"Well?" he asked.

The doctor shook his head. "He's in a coma. There's no telling when he'll come out of it. Maybe an hour —maybe a week—perhaps never. He must have experienced a very bad shock."

"Just my luck," said the Inspector. "How long do you figure he's been this way?"

"I'd say about two days—it's hard to say."

"Well that ties in. The neighbours called us early this morning, when they found Odaka's body and the skeleton below the cliff. But the skeleton, Doctor. I can't believe it. How can you expect me to make a report like that?"

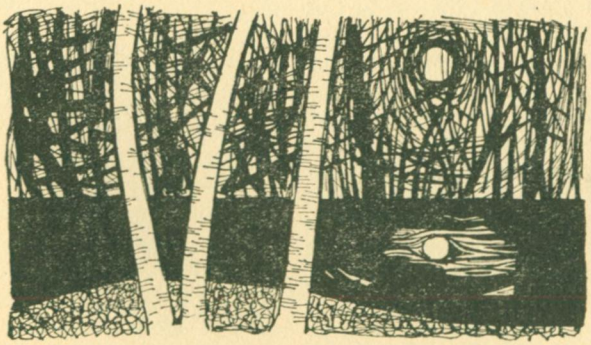
Doctor Izawa shrugged his shoulders. "Report what you want. But I tell you that not more than forty-eight hours ago that clean-picked skeleton was Sueko Odaka. As to what animal or animals devoured the flesh . . . that is as much a mystery to me as to you. I only know what I see, and I'll stake my professional reputation on the fact that two days ago that skeleton was Sueko Odaka."

"Well, I hope the American pulls out of his coma. Perhaps he can tell us something. And you know there's another thing that puzzles me," said the Inspector.

Then he glanced down at the body of the dead cat. "The American was lying beside the cat when we found him. He was unconscious, of course, yet his hands had such a tight grip on this samurai sword that we could hardly pry it loose. As you can see he buried it in the cat's chest clear up to the hilt."

"So what is it that puzzles you?" asked the doctor.

"Oh, I don't suppose it has any bearing on the case, but I wonder why the American killed that poor, helpless old cat."



THE INTRUDER

G. DE SELINCOURT

Illustrated by John Wood

JOHN DERWENT SHIVERED in spite of his rough, heavy tweeds. This cold. It got you after all those years in Malaya. And the moaning wind. The house was like a tomb. He kicked the smouldering fire, hunching his massive shoulders, hurt and perplexed, his thick grizzled eyebrows drawn together.

It was this strange way she'd acted; gone off to bed with not even a goodnight. They'd been sitting together after supper, he and his mother. His first evening, he had so long looked forward to it; to be with her once more and comfort her now she was alone.

"You've locked the door of Father's old workroom," he'd said, "where I used to play as a kid, remember, Mother?"

It was the way she looked at him. Startled and furtive. Her eyes, always rather protuberant, that used to be so full of fire and laughter, were glassy. Expressionless. Then she looked so quickly away. And her hands, veined and mottled now, working in her lap, twisting at a soiled handkerchief till the knuckles showed white. Great strong hands still, though she must be in her seventies.

"Nobody ever goes in there," she said, hard and suspicious.

"Well, Mother," he said, surprised at her tone, "I only wanted to see if any of my old things were still there. You can let me have the key. I'll lock up again."

"I've lost it," she mumbled, sullen, on the defensive. "There are rats. They'd be all over the house."

"I could soon see to that," he said, trying to humour her.

So changed she was. It was pitiful. Her black dress was dirty, the iron-grey hair greasy, uncombed, falling straight and matted over her cheeks. And the room! the neglect, the damp-stained walls, tangled cobwebs.

He started telling her something of his life abroad, trying to interest her, come closer to her, but found he was talking, not to a listener, but into a watchfulness alert and wary.

"Mother," he pleaded, trying to reach her, "it must have been awful for you when Father went. I would have come if I could have got away, you know that."

There was a hiss of indrawn breath as she jerked a hand roughly to her chest. She was breathing with difficulty, mouth half open, staring at him. Then her eyes slid away, a sly look in them.

"It's my heart." She began tearing again at the handkerchief, twisting it. "It's been bad for some years."

He glanced down at the swollen

feet, the thickened ankles, sick with helpless pity.

"I'm going up now," she said, struggling to her feet. He jumped up to help her but she made an angry movement fending him off. "Let me be," she said harshly. "I'm all right."

* * *

John Derwent knocked out his pipe. She'd be asleep now. Rats, she had said. He hated to think of her being afraid. That was one thing he could do for her, he thought. When he told her he'd blocked everything up, she'd be pleased.

He turned down the lamp and went out to the back. The wind caught him as he turned the corner of the house and a few heavy raindrops drove like ice against his face. He knew where the shed was. He'd find a bit of wire. He'd picked a lock before, in his boyhood days. He smiled to himself.

There was a hurricane lantern in the shed and he lit it. He came back with the lantern and the wire and listened a moment for any sound from above. He felt almost like a boy again, on an adventure. He went along the passage to the locked door and inserted the wire, manœuvring it until there was a faint click. He pushed the door. A heavy, musty odour assailed him and there was a frightened scrabbling in the corner.

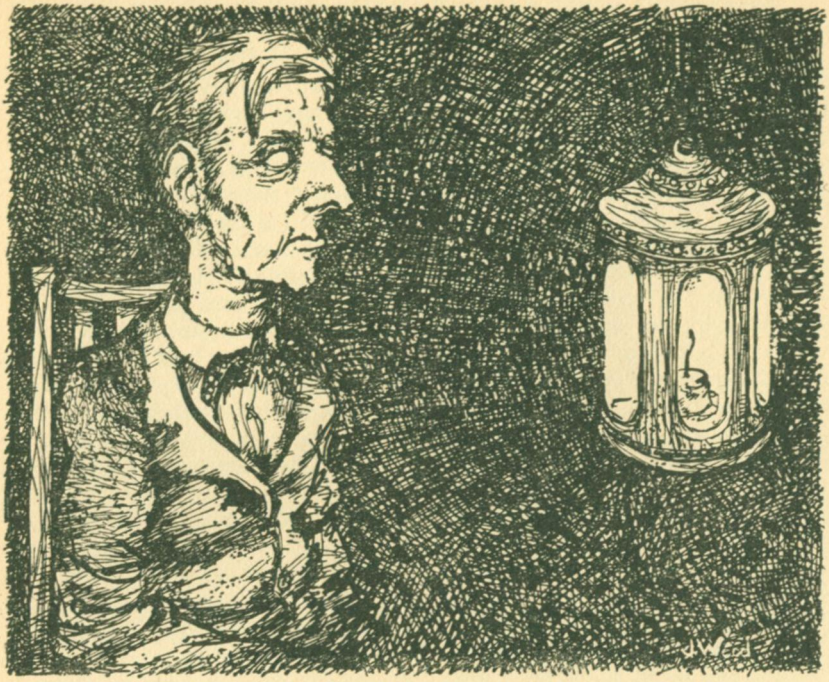
He went in, lifting the lantern. Against the wall, among rotting sacks, cardboard boxes and indistinguishable junk lay the broken remains of waxwork figures. There came a rush of memories.

He put the lantern on the floor, sat down on an old kitchen chair, rubbing his rough hand across the back of his neck. His father's old trade had been a maker of waxworks. Those had been such happy days when, a boy, he had watched his father working, his mother painting the heads, and the hands, carefully, beautifully. How different she had been! Singing, scolding him, loving him. The house was spotlessly clean and there had been laughter then.

But they were poor and he had to find work. Always he'd wanted to go out east. The long letters he'd written home and his mother's answering ones, warm and tender, anxious about him. Then his father's going . . . and no more. How she must have suffered! He must comfort her, get back to her . . . somehow.

There was no air in this room. The small window had been nailed up, filth and cobwebs hung matted over the board. A momentary drowsiness overcame him and for a moment or so he must have dropped off. He pulled himself up with a start, picked up the lantern and moved towards the far end. He stopped suddenly. Looking at him out of the shadows, in the dim, swaying light of the lantern, was a face. He drew in his breath sharply, unnerved. Then he went slowly nearer.

A man sat in a high-backed chair, arms resting on the chair arms, hands gripping the ends. A thin man with drooping shoulders. He wore dark clothes. He was quite still. John Derwent reached out gingerly and touched one of the hands. It was



cold and hard, made of wax. He rubbed his hand across his neck, shaking off the unpleasant illusion of reality. Of course, he thought, how ridiculous of me. It's a waxwork of Father. Marvellously done too.

* * *

He didn't see his mother till supper the next day. Then they sat again in the living-room.

"I've made a job of that room, Mother," he said. "There'll be no more rats now."

"You went in *there*!"

"Well . . ." spreading his hands in a small gesture, appealing to her, "it was something I could do. . . ."

Her eyes were on him, still watchful.

"By the way," he said, fighting down a sense of hopelessness, "that figure of Father, it gave me quite a start. Took me in for a minute."

She made an angry movement, pulling at the skirt of her dress. She was tense and rigid, armoured against him.

"You did a wonderful job there," he went on, leaning forward and gripping his pipe with both hands. She *must* talk to him.

"I did, yes."

"But why put it in that room?"

"I go there sometimes. To sit with him."

"But you said you'd lost the key."

She said nothing. Her mouth was drawn into a thin line, her great hands working.

"You told me in your last letters that things weren't right between you and Father. That he'd gone off. Was it—with someone?"

"It was this woman."

"What woman?"

"She had a hold on him." Her voice trembled and the handkerchief ripped as she tore at it.

"He went with her?"

"He did. And left me . . . like this." There was such a hatred in the old sunken face that he turned away.

"His passport . . . two tickets . . . I found them in his drawer." Her voice had a horrible rasping sound.

"How can you want to sit with that waxwork, Mother?"

"To feel that he's still here. With me. As he should be." Her voice was a snarl. It was like an animal.

John Derwent felt baffled. After she had gone up he sat on, turning it over in his mind. He thought of her, sitting in that dark, airless room, hatred in her heart. She must have made it, the waxwork, with hatred. Yet it was such a fine thing. He would have another look at it.

He took the lamp, shielding it as he went down the draughty passage. He opened the door again and carried the lamp over to the seated figure. The legs were planted apart, the boots resting firmly on the floor. There was a thing he hadn't noticed before. One of the boots appeared to have turned slightly as if the ankle had given. He brought the lamp closer and stooped to look. The whole of one side had been eaten away and there was something sticking out.

He felt in the pocket where he carried his knife. He knelt down, probed gently, then began to cut away a little of the leather.

He choked down a sudden nausea. He had uncovered half-eaten pieces of bone and flesh, then lurched to his feet, his head swimming. Feeling he was under the compulsion of a nightmare, he took a quick step forward and drew the sharp knifeblade down the cheek, over the jaw line, into the neck. He did it again in several places until the waxen head came away, down to the shoulders. He looked into the human face of his father. But the eyes were staring out of their sockets and on the throat were the dark, ugly marks of fingers.

He stood there swaying, frightened, appalled. The knife clattered on the floor.

In the doorway stood his mother. She was staring at the body.

"There he is," she cried, raucous, almost unintelligible. There was froth on her lips. "I did it. I did it with these hands. . . ." Her fingers were working. Horribly, like tentacles.

She swayed against the door jamb, clutching at her chest. Her breath coming in gasps, harsh and sibilant. "To keep him . . . with me. . . ."

The convulsion shook her and without a cry she crumbled on the floor. John Derwent stepped swiftly past the body. He did not look. He went out into the night.

"BANG! YOU'RE DEAD"

DAVID LEWIS

Illustrated by Jennifer Gordon

"BANG!" shouted Willie Packer jumping from behind the hedge two fingers pointed at the stranger's head, thumb cocked back. "Bang! You're dead."

The tall, slightly built man, in the shabby blue suit that was too small for him, spun round. He saw Willie and a smile came to his thin lips. "Good shot, son, right between the eyes." Willie blew the smoke from the end of his small fingers and looked up at the man. "I'm Hawk-eye," he announced gravely. The man stared past his shoulder, looking up the narrow brick path to the cottage.

"Mummy's out." Willie followed his gaze. "Did you want to see her?"

"Mrs. Packer?" Asked the man, not looking down at Willie, his eyes on the unlighted windows of the house.

"Can I give her a message. I'm William, her son."

The man knelt suddenly, taking him by the shoulders.

"Do your friends call you 'Willie'?"

"They used to." Willie saw that the man's face was very pale and smooth like some plants he'd found under an old box in the garden. Plants which had been shut away from light for a long time. The man's eyes were brown like his own but they seemed very bright. Two bright coals burning under faint black eyebrows, and his hair was long, curling over his ears. His fingers were very strong, Willie could feel them pinching through the patched cloth of his jacket.

"Why used to?" asked the man, and Willie felt the grip on his arms relax, like the tight lines on the pale face.

"When we lived in London I knew lots of boys, but then we moved and now I don't know anybody."

"You like it though—in the country I mean." He looked around absently, at the trees behind the cottage, the wide fields.

"I don't know yet, we've only been here a few weeks."

"All on your own, just your mother and you?"

"My father's dead, he was killed after I was born. When we were in London Mummy had a nice man, my uncle, to help her. But then one night he went away, and so we came down here to live."

"What time does your mother come home?"

Willie climbed on the gate swinging against the spring.

"She has to work late mostly, then the nice man she works for gives her a lift home in his car."

"What time is that?" The man

swung Willie to and fro on the gate.

"About ten — later sometimes. Often I'm asleep."

"So you have to play all on your own."

"I'm eight and a bit."

"Yes—I know." The man stopped swinging the gate for him. He looked up and down the road as if uncertain. "It's very quiet," he said.

"Sometimes," said Willie, "I pretend there's a stage coach coming down the road, then I hold it up." He raised his fingers. "I used to have a real gun, my uncle bought it for me for my sixth birthday—then it got broken."

"Perhaps I'll buy you a gun," said the man.

"You're not an uncle as well are you?" asked Willie hopefully.

The man laughed shortly. "Would you like me to be?"

"I bet Mummy would, she's been terribly sad since my other uncle left. . . ."

"Who puts you to bed?"

"I do," Willie told him indignantly. "I'm eight and a bit."

The wind blew down the lane rustling the hedge, disturbing the man's long hair, making Willie shiver. "I'm going in now." He climbed down from the gate. The man caught his shoulder.

"Let me come in and wait for your mother. I don't want to stand out here." Willie looked at him feeling uncertain.

'You might be a burglar."

"But I'm not," he reached down and took hold of Willie's hand, "besides you've always got your gun."

"Come on then." He led the way up the brick path, into the house. "You can sit in the other room if you like—I've got to wash up."

"I'll come and help you."

Willie pushed the front door closed and went into the kitchen. The sink was piled with dirty plates, the man looked at them.

"She doesn't keep things very tidy, does she?"

"Mummy's very busy you see." Willie pulled a chair up to the sink which was too high for him.

"I'll wash, you wipe." The man turned on the taps.

"All right." Willie took a cloth from behind the larder door.

"You must get bored playing on your own."

"Yes, but Mummy doesn't like me to go down to the village."

"Perhaps you'd like me to play with you, when we've finished the washing up."

"What shall we play?"

"Anything you like. We'll play your very favourite game."

"Spies," said Willie with decision. "I like that best. You can be the bad spy and I'll be the good one. . . ." He looked at the man anxiously, "You don't mind being the bad, do you?"

"No." The man ran his hand through Willie's hair. "I don't mind."

"I'll show you my hide-out at the top of the garden."

"Thanks." The man dropped the plates into the water and stirred the suds thoughtfully. "Willy . . ." He hesitated. "If I play with you, will you promise me something."

"What is it?"

"If some men come here—tomorrow, or the next day or anytime —don't tell them I've been here. Don't say you've seen me."

"Why?" demanded Willie, feeling suddenly excited. "Are you really a spy?"

"Sort of. Yes that's one way of describing what I do . . . spy."

"Let's see your gun. You must have one . . . all real spies do."

"I haven't got one." The man looked down at him, some spots of froth on his chin from where he had rubbed it. "I never carry one . . . but will you promise?"

"O.K. Come on, let's play now . . . before it gets too dark."

The car pulling up outside the house burnt two paths of brilliant white over the yellow paper of the kitchen walls.

"That's Mummy . . ." Willie looked at the man, "now we won't have time to play."

The man was staring through the window, and Willie saw his face was hard again, his fingers clenched tight.

"We could play tomorrow. We could play when I come out of school. I finish at four o'clock. Can we play then. . . ?"

"Yes, yes we'll play then," said the man absently. Willie heard the muffled voices, the slamming of a car door, the roar of an engine. Then he heard his mother's high heels clicking up the brick path.

"Go to bed, Willie," said the man suddenly.

"But I want to see Mummy."

"Go to bed like a good boy. I'll ask her to come and tuck you in."

"But . . ." protested Willie. The man's voice sounded hard and cruel, not the kind of voice Willie wanted to obey. He turned to go, then he saw the man put his hand in his pocket.

"You have got a gun!" Willie reached out. "Let me see . . ."

"No," the man pulled it away from him. "It's only a toy, just a toy pistol. I'll show you tomorrow. Go to bed now."

"After school — when we play spies?"

"Yes, after school." Willie knew that the man was listening. A key turned in the lock, his mother came into the hall. "Go on now, quickly." The man pushed him from the room, up the dark stairs. Willie climbed them, went into his own room and sat on the bed. The voices of the man and his mother floated up the stair well. They were high and angry.

Willie pulled off his shoes without undoing the laces, and let them clatter to the carpet. It wasn't fair not letting him see his mother. Resentment burnt up inside him. The man wasn't his uncle, he wasn't even a friend of his mother's. He wasn't anybody . . .

". . . nobody — nothing." His mother's voice was shrill, taking his thoughts and bringing them to hysterical life. "Come down here, expect me to treat you as if nothing ever happened . . ."

"You can talk to me about nothing," the man was yelling too. "I know all about that man. . . ."

The voices died. Willie took off his shirt and vest dropping them on to his bed. The moon glinted at him

through the window; he liked it, sitting on his bed in the dark, with only the moon to see him. It was safe, comforting. He went out of his bedrom and down the passage into the bathroom. The lino was cold to his bare feet.

". . . he was kind to me. How else could I have managed, how else could I have supported the kid. You didn't think of that when you got yourself put away . . ."

"O.K. I was a fool. You know I didn't mean to hurt him, May, you know what I'm like when I lose my temper . . ."

"If you hadn't come round Bert wouldn't have run off. I'm too old to start again. I'm too old . . ."

Willie tried not to listen, it made him feel sick. He wished his mother wouldn't shout at the man, he seemed quite nice. "Slut! Look at you, look at your clothes, your face—running off with the first pair of trousers. It wouldn't have made any difference to you if I hadn't gone inside. Once a tart . . ." Willie heard a crack, sharp and high. He knew that his mother had hit the man. He splashed cold water around his neck, remembering how his own face had stung when she'd slapped him. He shut his mind to it, finishing in the bathroom and going back to his own room. When he'd put on his pyjamas and brushed his hair they were still shouting. Suddenly he couldn't stand it any longer. He went downstairs.

"Think you can frighten me with that!" His mother's voice was shrill with laughter, but Willie knew that she wasn't laughing.

"You frighten, May, like anybody else. Why else would you have shut yourself away in this hole. . . ."

"I was thinking of the kid."

"Like you were thinking of him when you left him alone tonight."

"It was an exception—I had to work late."

"It's the same every damn night. How much does he pay you for overtime?"

"For the last time, put that silly toy down and get out." Willie heard a thud. Then his mother laughed.

"I knew you wouldn't use it—takes a man to use one of those, not a weak snivelling little jailbird. Go on, get out—get back to your gutter . . ." Willie pressed himself back into the hall. He felt frightened and ill—his heart was racing, beating against his chest. Then there was silence, and Willie was suddenly less afraid. There had been silences like that when his mother and uncle had quarrelled, and after the silence he would be allowed into the room again, and his uncle would wink at him and wipe his mouth with the back of his hand, and everything would be happy again.

But when the silence had gone on for a long, long time Willie couldn't bear it any more. He pushed open the door. His mother was in a chair, Willie thought she must be asleep because she was so still. He wondered how she could sleep with her head at such an uncomfortable angle, all bent sideways. The man was standing in the middle of the room staring at his hands. The gun lay glinting at Willie, black and inviting on the floor. The man didn't hear Willie come in—

didn't hear anything until Willie said:

"Stick 'em up." Then he turned very fast and his face was white.

"Put it down, Willie," he said softly. Willie held on to the gun tightly. It was much heavier than the toy one his uncle had given him. Much more exciting.

"Is Mummy asleep now?" asked Willie. The man looked away from him towards his mother.

"Yes, she's asleep now." He held out his hand, and Willie saw his long fingers with the black hair on their backs reaching towards the gun like spider's legs.

"If she's asleep we can play spies for a little," said Willie. The man stopped still, not a yard from him.

"Please give me the gun, Willie." His eyes were very bright, a trickle of saliva had rolled down from one side of his mouth. He was breathing hard. "Please give me the gun."

"I'm Hawkeye," Willie tightened his grip on the gun, his finger pulling on the trigger—it was much harder to pull than the trigger on his toy gun. He didn't think he'd be able to manage it. But he did.

"Please, Willie," said the man.

"Bang!" said Willie. "Bang! You're dead."

The silence which followed the explosion was the longest he'd ever known. Then he started to cry.

MODERN ART

G. E. FOX

Illustrated by Paul Fielder

CHRISTIAN CHELLIS HAD made a fortune by his sculpture—dark saturnine shapes that came unexpectedly under his chisel with meanings just evading comprehension; he felt somewhere there was meaning, but so far he had found it elusive as the chimera. That is why he was in the South Pacific doing nothing, but lying in the sun, in his frustration trying to forget art, and particularly modern art.

Cruising around the sublimely indifferent sea, pottering amongst the islands with their booming reefs and quiet lagoons, he had forgotten modern art until he saw those black, significant stones on the Banks Islands. Why had they disturbed him so? Was it because they had meaning, but like his own sculpture the meaning was hidden from him? They were old—older than civilization and yet they could have been the result of his own fantastic and cryptic inspiration. Their mystery disturbed him.

The message from Milton Urban District Council also disturbed him and irritated him into the bargain. They had asked him to design a memorial to a handful of Miltonians who had made the mistake of disputing with a troop of Prince Rupert's horsemen the right to cross a river ford. The Miltonians had died at the ford and the horsemen of Prince Rupert of the Rhine had crossed over. Now the Milton Urban District Council had decided to erect a memorial to this insignificant three hundred years' old episode in the Civil War! Contemptuously he signalled back that his fee would be £2,000, anticipating refusal; but Milton was full of rich Yorkshire woollen manufacturers proud of their local history, and they accepted.

"Damn Milton Urban District Council!" said Christian Chellis to the wireless operator who gave him the message. He would have to return to England sooner than he had expected. He might have known the fools would accept.

Then he remembered the black stones on the Banks Islands. One of the black stones, suitably erected, would pass for modern art. Yes, indeed, he recognized the similiarity to something he had done before—a memorial to an air disaster. He had designed, without knowing how or why, a brooding monstrosity of black wings and it had been acclaimed as genius, but to him it had been sombre and grotesquely meaningless; at least, his reason told him it was, but again deep within him was an uncertain and elusive feeling of the force and terribleness of the black wings—of his unreasoning creativeness.

He ordered his hired motor schooner to one of the islands—a small uninhabited island little more than a reef and a lagoon—where he had seen one of the black stones on a shelf of coral above the reef. Its shape was indeterminate. A woman weeping? A man crumpled up in despair? He recognized both impressions as inept. There was a more powerful significance in the stone, but it would be easy to move and transport, wrapped securely in coconut fibre so that it would not be damaged, and that was the main thing at the moment.

As they were moving it from the shadowy niche in the reef, an outrigger canoe with a solitary native in it shot into the lagoon. When the canoe was within hailing distance the native shouted out urgently.

"What does he say?" said Christian irritably to an Australian deckhand.

"He says there is a dangerous ghost in the stone. He says they call it the 'Eating Ghost' and nobody must go near it."

The sun and the sea and the soft Australian voice, the frightened, expectant face of the Melanesian, the moan of the reef, the almost imperceptible sway of the white deck like the slow rhythmic movement of a violinist playing a sad melody ingrained themselves into his memory in the startled silence that ensued.

"Tell him to go away," he snapped.

The native understood the ill-humour of the words, even if he did not get their meaning.

"He says the ghost will draw the

spirit out of any man whose shadow falls on the stone," said the Australian. "That's why it's in the shadow of the reef. It was put there so that no man's shadow would fall on it any more."

The men had stopped work on the stone to listen.

"Get on with it!" Christian called. "I don't pay you to listen to superstitious nonsense!"

They obeyed reluctantly and he noticed that when they lowered the stone on to the schooner's deck the native crew kept clear of it and walked well beyond it so that their shadows did not fall on it. When the native saw Christian was determined to take the stone he set up a howl and paddled himself rapidly out of the lagoon.

That night they wrapped the stone up in coconut matting and pushed it right up into the bows where nobody was likely to go near it inadvertently.

They are really frightened of it, thought Christian Chellis. Was he frightened too? He didn't think so, yet he could not help but remember his feeling that the stone had meaning and power.

But a ghost in the stone! That was nonsense, of course. The more he thought about it the nearer he came to understanding the terrible force of art—ancient or modern—but he never quite disentangled himself from the veils of his own cynicism and so he never completely saw the truth in his own dark creations.

The stone was like a plague spot on deck during the return voyage to Sydney. Nobody would go near it and

it remained wrapped in its coconut matting like a monstrous cocoon. The men looked at it with revulsion and when he told them to remove the cover so that he could look at the stone they openly rebelled. He had to accept that. It was no good threatening or cajoling and unless he opened it up himself it must remain covered.

The stone remained covered, and when he handed over the schooner to its owner in Sydney Harbour one of the crew, a half-caste Polynesian came to him with a troubled face: "I wish you no harm," he said. "The others say, 'Let him learn—take what's coming', but I can't let you go with that stone without telling you. It's dangerous."

Chellis merely gave him an icy stare.

The boy went away slowly. When he was on the quayside he turned and looked back. "My grandfather told me about the stones. They're bad!" he called.

Christian didn't answer, but turned impatiently and walked away.

The stone travelled to the Thames in its coconut matting and a barge took it up river to Chelsea. He found it one day in his studio—a strange unpredictable shape in the middle of the floor, but nevertheless, a shape full of potentiality. He could see force and meaning in it even with the packing around it.

With strange eagerness he cut away the coconut matting and when he saw the brooding black stone revealed under the subdued light of the skylight he felt a strange exaltation. Was this indeed inspiration? He saw unique possibilities: he felt the power of creativeness in his fingers and yet when he took hammer and chisel to the stone so little seemed to be necessary. A stroke here, a chiselling there and some dark vague idea in his mind transferred itself to the stone and the thing took on a new meaning. It was a memorial now to men who had died under a wild charge of horsemen. He felt their anguish; he heard the cries of death and triumph within him; and over it all hung the sense of distant time. It was a masterpiece of delusion. He felt its power. Had he really created something?

He worked at the stone until the light failed, then for some unaccountable reason he laid down his chisel and hammer and decided to do no more. Why did he not continue now that inspiration was upon him, urging, nagging like a shrewish wife? He had a disquieting antipathy to light—the brilliant light of the studio arcs—all of a sudden. For some reason he desired only the diffused light of the skylight which cast no shadows.

He was sitting in the half-light fascinated by the dark malignancy of the stone, richly satisfied by his own inspiration, when Lorrimer the artist from below threw open the door.

"Chellis! What are you up to?" roared Lorrimer in his usual, put-on, boisterous, man-of-the-world way. "Let's see your new masterpiece! Where the hell are the lights?"

When the lights flew on Chellis instinctively leapt to his feet and fled to the wall where he cowed, terrified.

"Put the lights out!" he screamed.

"Put them out, Lorrimer, put the lights out!"

Lorrimer obeyed and out of an infinity of foreboding Chellis heard his voice, curious, startled, from the door: "You all right, Chellis?"

"I'm sorry, Lorrimer," he stammered. "Yes, I'm all right. You startled me." Hurriedly he added: "I'm coming out. Don't put the lights on, old man."

But he knew. Yes, he knew he had been terrified of the lights. They cast shadows. He had seen his own shadow across the floor, just failing to touch the black stone. Incredulously he realized he was fearing the black stone's potentiality for evil.

He finished the sculpture, working only by day and when at last it was finished he exhibited it to critics, newspapermen and a few friends in the shadowless light from the skylight. The memorial was acclaimed as his best piece of work. He saw consternation, admiration, bewilderment, fascination and even fear in the faces of those who crowded into the studio to see it. Nobody laughed, nobody was contemptuous, as in the past some had been, and he knew he had done something inexplicably truthful at last.

The Milton Memorial Committee looked at it, applauded, paid handsomely for it and arranged the unveiling day.

Then Carpenter turned up—Carpenter the Australian deckhand who had told him about the "Eating Ghost". Christian recognized him as he stood in the studio doorway, but made no gesture of welcome or friendliness. The fellow was only a deckhand.

"Know me, Mr. Chellis? Carpenter. Remember?"

"What do you want?" said Christian ungraciously.

"Why, I'm just visiting the old country, Mr. Chellis. I'm on 'P. & O.' boats now. The 'Strathhaird'. Just in at Tilbury."

"Well?" said Christian.

"Saw a picture of your latest work of art in the paper on board. They said you got £2,000 for it."

So that was it! Christian, loathing the Australian's smile, came near to assault with the mallet he held in his hands. The fellow was after blackmail without a doubt.

"What do do you want, Carpenter?" he demanded.

"Aren't you going to invite me in?" asked Carpenter aggrieved, or pretending to be.

"Come in!" said Christian curtly. No good letting all the neighbourhood hear.

"You're out to blackmail me, aren't you?" he asked bluntly.

"Now, Mr. Chellis . . ." began the Australian suavely yet his eyes had hardened.

"Well, you needn't bother. I've worked on the stone. Any fool can see that, Carpenter."

"You're not selling it to fools, Mr. Chellis," murmured Carpenter and taking a photograph from his wallet passed it over to Christian.

"See what I mean, Mr. Chellis?" he asked softly. "You can have that. I've plenty more. Took it that day we

moved the black stone from the reef. Not much difference is there?"

He saw the truth of the assertion. All he had done to the stone was to disguise its antiquity with a few recent chippings and smoothings. So much for his inspiration! Bitterly he realized that the inspiration, the terrible hidden meanings in the stone had been the inspiration of a savage, dead these many thousand years.

"Two hundred isn't a lot out of two thousand," murmured the imperturbable Carpenter.

"Go to hell!" shouted Christian and running to the light switches turned on all the power of his arcs.

Surprised, Carpenter turned. "Why the light, Chellis?"

Chellis knew full well. He saw the black fore-shortened shadow of the Australian across the stone and he knew why he had put on the light in that sudden frenzy. Was it truly possible that he, Christian Chellis, had done such an obscure and even absurd thing or, more incredibly, had he any belief in the thing he had done? Carpenter had not remembered. Only puzzlement showed on his face.

"Get out!" screeched Christian.

The shadow crept down the stone as Carpenter reluctantly moved to the door. Fascinated, Christian watched and it seemed as though the stone were slowly eating up the shadow.

"O.K.!" said Carpenter slowly. "I reckon the papers will pay me for a good story, Chellis. I'll let you think it over. I'll come again in the morning. I can wait."

He smiled confidently. All Christian's hate had gone. He was suddenly terrified. He felt he had just performed some diabolical act of witchcraft. Carpenter stared at him curiously as he passed him by the door.

"Tomorrow," he said significantly, but Christian was staring fixedly at the black stone, now monstrous and meaningful in a way he had not contemplated before. There would be no Carpenter tomorrow. Tomorrow . . . He listened for Carpenter's footsteps on the stairs. There were none.

Indeed, Carpenter never returned. Christian felt that somewhere a man had met something dark and inexplicable like death because his shadow had fallen on a black stone, because the "Eating Ghost" had taken his soul. Was this madness . . . ? And yet Carpenter never came back. Carpenter had gone forever—not on a "P. & O." liner to Australia; not anywhere you could name.

Carpenter's disappearance brought a dilemma. Lots of shadows were going to fall on the stone in the future. Dare he or could he, inspired as he was with a conviction of danger, place the stone in a position where human shadows would inevitably fall on it?

He thought of a compromise. He would erect the black stone on a high pedestal and he would make sure the thing was amply covered before and during erection.

The night before the unveiling ceremony the chairman of the memorial committee went to look at the stone. He took a short step-ladder with him and another member of the memorial committee to shine a torch for him. When Christian strolled uneasily down to the ford to make quite sure

there was nothing more to be done, he saw the chairman at the top of the ladder peering under the nylon Union Jack which covered the memorial, while his assistant from the foot of the ladder shone his torch so that the chairman could see the stone.

Christian stopped petrified. He could neither move nor shout. He wanted to shout a warning, but he knew it would sound ridiculous. It was too late, anyhow, for the chairman's shadow was on the shimmering black surface of the stone. Christian raised a hand to his mouth like a child in a quandary, then he slowly lowered it in resignation. What business had the fool to poke and probe in the night?

"Odd sort of thing!" the chairman called down to the torch bearer. "You know, John, I don't quite understand this modern art, but I must admit this thing has got me. What do you think?"

"Oh, I agree," called the other. "It's effective all right. Prefer the usual sort of memorial myself, you know. St. George and the Dragon, or a nice horseman."

"Not nowadays, John. People don't go for that stuff any more. This is what they want. Mystery! Something that needs thinking about!"

God! What vague and idiotic excuses for spending £2,000, thought Christian.

"John, are you there?"

"Yes, Arthur. What is it?"

"I don't know. I'm coming down. . . ."

Christian saw the torchlight on the stone and no shadow—nothing, only an empty ladder. Only the night and a man with a torch scattering light in bewilderment and panic. . . .

"Arthur! Arthur! . . ."

Christian ran into the night, in his mind a terrifying picture of a man melting like wax on a ladder and then vanishing—just vanishing.

It was an inauspicious unveiling, for the chairman of the unveiling committee had disappeared, most unaccountably, and another committee member apparently had had some kind of stroke, for he shivered and gibbered and could not explain his malady. When he tried, a look of misery came into his eyes and he wept, "You'll only think me mad——"

The nylon Union Jack fluttered to the ground and there was the usual and guarded applause before those who watched had absorbed into their understanding the stark and bewildering shape on the pedestal above them. Christian, complacent in their awed surprise, had a moment's belief in its grim aptness. It is indeed a memorial to tragic folly, he thought. It was the very symbol of death and loss, and there was also a sense of rushing turmoil and the sharp swift thrust of destiny in the lines of the stone . . . The strong sunlight made the rock luminous like black glass and he could almost swear he saw faces peering through the blackness. Momentarily he imagined men staring upwards out of the dark water—dead men, cut to ribbons by the horsemen of Prince Rupert of the Rhine, drifting aimlessly, faces upwards in the black depths of the pool below

the ford. Others had seen and the applause died away weakly and without enthusiasm. "It's too grim!" he heard someone say.

Those faces—or rather that sort of impression of faces in the shiny depths. Had he really won that strange effect of light and shadow out of the stone or had they always been there? No, he could not remember that unusual effect on the rock before. Dead men, in deep water—dead faces blindly turned up to the light. If only he could see the faces a little closer. Maybe they would not look like faces nearer at hand. It was distance and light that made the illusion.

"You are the sculptor, I believe?"

He came out of his reverie to find himself being addressed by a young man. Art student, he surmised. There's a look about an art student—a sort of intensity under a cloak of nonchalance. He had been one, so he knew.

"Yes, indeed!" he murmured complacently.

"Mr. Chellis, I think the memorial is an abomination. It's not art. It's obscene!"

"My dear boy!" he expostulated good-humouredly.

He was piqued, nevertheless. This sort of thing was expected by modern artists, but the memorial had seemed all right, so positive and so different.

"It's a parody of art!" said the youth angrily.

He shrugged his shoulders and turned away from the young man whose angry, eager face was beginning to attract attention.

"All right, Mr. Chellis, don't listen," he shouted. "But remember Rima!"

Rima? Why Rima? Ah yes, the students at regular intervals had tarred and feathered Epstein's panel to Hudson's woodland spirit in Hyde Park because they said it was a parody and an insult. He smiled indulgently.

"They're all alike, these students—" said the police superintendent who was on the rostrum with him, apologetically, as if he were personally to blame for the incident. "Mean no harm. Just like airing an opinion."

A week later the statue was tarred and feathered one moonlight night and the same night a car-load of students crashed through level-crossing gates into the Edinburgh express. Two of the students who should have been in the car were not. They were just missing. Nobody knew where they were.

Christian read about the tragedy in his newspaper and began to worry—mainly on his own account. Somebody might start an unpleasant inquiry into the origins of his memorial. So far, nobody had thought of the occult in connection with the disappearances, but he knew some of the sensational papers would eventually give hints in that direction and that might start off the students of occult phenomena. Then what? They would remember his trip to the South Pacific. He had brought back a block of stone. The black stones of the Banks Islands were known to have weird origins. The "Eating Ghosts" were part of South Sea legends and superstition. He realized that he was building up a fantasy.

When he had finally made up his mind to ignore the whole thing as plain nonsense, he remembered the faces in the black depths of the shiny stone. The faces tormented him. He could not delude himself; he had not achieved that remarkable effect of light and shadow....

"All right! All right! I'll destroy the damned thing!" he shouted.

But how destroy it? The stone was hard and difficult to work.

Explosives? The difficulty was in obtaining such things and he had no knowledge of explosives . . . Then he remembered the article in a Sunday paper he had read some time ago. "Confessions of a Safe Breaker" it had been headed, but he couldn't remember the paper or its date.

It took him a week of patient and cautious inquiry and research to find the particular paper containing the article, and another week of patient and cautious bribery to find the safebreaker. He found him at last in a pub in the Old Kent Road. He was a thin, pious looking man in a dark suit and rather brown shoes; he had a long inquisitive nose and a plaintive voice. He did not look like a reformed safebreaker at all and his respectability seemed to be confirmed by his companion who was a decent little woman of that round and placid type one always associates with good intentions and great volubility.

"Mr. Flint?" asked Christian, bending politely over the little table at which the two were sitting.

The man looked up and the woman subjected Christian to a long, cool stare of appraisement.

"Yuss?" said the man guardedly.

"Can I have a word with you in private?"

Flint looked at him inquisitively and shrewdly.

"What abaht?" he said.

"Your article in the paper."

"I'll scarper, Joe, then you can 'ave a little talk with the gentleman," said the woman.

"Take yer Guinness, ducks," said Flint.

"Nah, mate, wot abaht my article?" said Flint when Christian had seated himself in the chair the little fat woman had vacated.

"What will you drink?" asked Christian.

"I'm drinking," said Flint shortly. "Come on, mate, out wiv it. Wot yer want?"

"I want you to blow up a piece of stone, that's all. I'll give you two hundred quid to do it!"

When he had convinced the safebreaker there was nothing more to it than that, and that no Soho, Brighton or Notting Hill gang was interested in the blowing up, and that it was all because he didn't like the memorial, Flint agreed.

As he left the pub he saw the little fat woman lift her glass of stout and her shopping bag and quietly rejoin Flint. They looked like respectable tradespeople.

Christian selected a dark moonless night for the destruction of the Milton memorial. It was all very quiet by the historic ford and the only sounds were the river's gentle rush over smooth pebbles and the murmur of the night breeze in the willows.

Christian parked his car along the road and put out its lights. He noted with satisfaction the little bundle Flint carried so carefully, but it was the man's quiet air of confidence that gave him most satisfaction. He had the air of a man who knew his job. The pious, inquisitive look in the parsimonious face had been replaced by the earnest and steadfast lines of a craftsman. Christian felt that Flint would blow the black stone into minute fragments with great efficiency.

"Got the ladder, guv?" asked Flint. He had—an extending light metal one to reach the foot of the black rock on its pedestal.

"Yes," he murmured. "What do you expect?"

"Just asking! Like to be sure."

"I want to have a look at the stone before you blow it up," said Christian.

"Don't waste time, guv, once the charge is laid," warned Flint.

"I won't," he replied tersely.

There was something he must find out. Flint was quick and silent. Christian had a sudden admiration for the man's cool indifference. He must have caused the safe-makers many a pang.

"Up you go, guv, but don't be long," said Flint at last.

When he was at the top of the ladder, his groping fingers felt the smooth, cold stone of the memorial. Was it so terrible a thing after all? It felt just what it was—stone and no more, but if he shone a light on to that cold surface what might he see in the stony depths? Light would fill them with illusion and—what else? He took out a slim pencil torch and directed its puny white needle of light on to the polished stone which immediately became a black mirror—an ancient mirror which showed his face, pale and wraithlike and indistinct. That he expected, but beyond, in the dark depths were more faces, inscrutably staring at him with eyes like pebbles. His breath whistled in a sudden uncontrolled exhalation. He fought to disbelieve. He stared at the endless Polynesian faces stretching down the black slope to infinity, at the pale English faces just within the mirror surface—the face of Carpenter, the blackmailer, the face of the busybody chairman of the Memorial Committee, the face of a young student who hated modern art . . . and he screamed.

"What's up, guv?" Flint called anxiously and shone his torch upwards.

"No! No! No!" screamed Christian in the minute but terrible beam of light. He saw his shadow on the black rock for a short space of time and desperately he tried to erase it with his free hand as if it were a chalk picture on a blackboard. The light was switched off and Christian tried to scramble down the ladder, but he seemed to be caught in a hard shell of dark space and also, it seemed, that all around him was a crowd of silent people—and far back beyond that frightening crowd he sensed something even more terrifying.

Flint got three years for destroying the memorial. He might have got less had Christian Chellis been in the court to corroborate his story. Unfortunately for him, Christian Chellis had vanished completely.

BRAIN HOOK

PETE HAMMERTON

Illustrated by Woodward

PAUL LAMBERT'S thin body quivered with eagerness as he peered through the hedge, for the blackbird was responding. It had alighted in exactly the spot he'd willed, and now stood motionless by the water's edge, head raised as if listening.

Concentrating all his will, he thought: *There's a fat, juicy caterpillar over here.* He strained to visualize the imaginary grub, arching up a grass blade. The blackbird's head jerked; it ran a few steps forward into the sun, jabbed its yellow beak in the grass, the looked up again —alert, poised for flight. *Just a bit farther!* Paul's dark eyes bored into the wary little body, concentrating, concentrating. The head flicked, then the bird was gone, clattering its alarm through the undergrowth. A shadow fell across the grass. Cora's harsh voice sneered, "Still at it?"

Choking with anger, Paul turned to glare hate at his deformed sister. Her voice was thick with scorn. "Talking to birds and animals. Pah!" Her yellow teeth showed in a sneer. "I won't be happy till they take you away and leave me in peace again."

Trembling violently, Paul rose from his knees. He fought to keep his voice under control. "Watch your tongue, Cora, or by God I'll have you out of here! It's my house, remember that; and nobody's going to take me away!" He strode past her across the lawn, aiming a futile kick at her spitting cat as he passed.

Her final taunt mocked him as he closed the front gate. "You'll soon be back inside. I've taken steps!"

He walked fast, trying to sweep away the anger; but Cora's malice had struck home. "Back inside . . ." A coldness washed over him at the memory her words invoked. . . . Utter terror and loneliness in the midst of willing attendants—friendly, anxious people who could not begin to understand. . . .

Paul shuddered. Yes, Cora knew where to hit him. Always on hand to nag and deride and spoil his every chance of success, that was Cora. If it hadn't been for her he might have proved his theories by now. Then people would look at him with respect, not tap their heads as he passed.

He stood twenty minutes outside the pet shop window trying the usual routines, but there was no new reaction. The goldfish sneered at him with sleepy eyes, and the old grey parrot just fidgeted from foot to foot.

The bell jangled as he opened the door, and old Willie smiled up at him from under tufted eyebrows. "Hello, Paul. How are the experiments going?" he asked.

Paul didn't reply. His eyes were fixed on a newcomer, a forlorn Alsatian pup, much too big for its cage.

"Enormous, isn't he?" said the old man. "Not our usual line; he's about three months old. Bought him back from an owner who's suddenly gone abroad."

Paul pressed his face to the wire netting. *There's a big chunk of red meat behind your water dish,* he thought, mentally picturing it. The pup immediately perked up and turned to sniff behind the dish, pushing it around with his nose. Then he sat back clumsily and cocked his head, puzzled. Paul slapped his forehead in delight. *No, it's hanging from the roof.* The pup looked up, sniffing eagerly.

Excited, Paul asked, "Can I have a lump of meat for it, please? Very important."

"Well, I have fed him once.... Oh, all right." Shrugging, Willie shuffled out the back.

So far so good. It was imperative that the dog be rewarded immediately—encouraged to use its natural telepathy, to expect results. Paul opened the cage door to feed the animal himself. "How much?" he asked.

"The meat? Forget it, son."

"The dog."

"Oh, I'm afraid he's a bit expensive. Couldn't let him go under ten guineas."

Paul latched the door, "All right, don't sell. I'm just off to the bank."

Old Willie grinned. "You won't regret it. Pedigree as long as your arm. Ulric, they call him. Ulric von something or other."

On the way home Paul bought a newspaper. When he laid it, folded, on the pavement, Ulric eagerly obeyed his mental suggestion, picking the paper up in his mouth and proudly carrying it ahead.

The practical implications of this feat were stunning. This dog was going to learn in minutes things that would take weeks to get through to any normal animal. Instead of having to learn slowly, by trial and error, he would receive instantly a clear mental image of what was wanted—and act on it!

Such an exuberance bubbled up inside Paul as he unlatched the gate that he blew a kiss towards the window where he knew Cora would be lurking, head sunk between her twisted shoulders. At the back of the house he found his enemy Kate, the skinny tabby cat, asleep in the sun. Eyes bright with mischief, he bent to free the leash.

Ulric charged in, barking. In a second the sleeping cat became a spiky, spitting arch, then a fleeing blur. But Paul's laugh was premature, for an instant later it was the pup who fled, yelping, while Kate looked down smugly from her perch on the fence. Paul could find no scratch, yet the pup continued to nestle against him and whimper.

"A big dog like you, scared of a little cat?" *Rush him!* It was a command. The pup galloped at the cat again, but this time turned tail when only half-way across the lawn.

Paul stared thoughtfully as Kate

stretched a paw in the air, nonchalantly licking her hindquarters. There was something wrong about that cat. Something bad. He felt convinced it had telepathic ability, yet in any experiments it had always been uncooperative.

Subdued now, Ulric followed him into the study and curled obediently in a corner. Paul took down his current record book, turned to a clean page and headed it: "Ulric (German Shepherd Dog, three months)." He glanced through the window, suddenly longing for the wide green fields, the elm and oak and sycamore that lay just across the stream. "Preliminary tests indicate that Ulric is a powerful receptive telepath. Whether he can also learn to transmit remains to be seen."

Paul concentrated. *How would you like a nice walk in the country?* The pup immediately leapt up and began prancing around him. "No, no, don't show me; think your answer." Paul screwed his eyes shut and tried to get the idea across. Suddenly aware that the door had opened, he turned in exasperation. "Cora! Must you keep ruining my experiments? Must you . . ." His voice trailed away as he saw the man.

"This is Doctor Orwell from the hospital."

"What do you want?" Paul knocked his chair over as he jumped to his feet. "You've no business with me. I'm finished with the hospital. They discharged me sane. Sane!"

The tall man continued to stare at his feet for a moment. Then he looked up patiently. "I just wanted to ask you a few questions, Mr. Lambert. See how you are . . . adapting."

"Oh." Paul shifted his eyes about. "Well, I don't want her in here."

Cora raised her eyebrows at the doctor. He nodded, and she slunk out.

Paul moved his hands nervously about his face.

"I—I'm sorry, doctor, but she always comes along just at the most crucial point in my—— Lay down, Ulric; stop pestering me!" The pup continued to run to and from the door, jumping up at Paul eagerly. "I just promised to take him for a walk," he explained. "No! Later." *Sleep,* he thought. *Go to sleep.*

The pup curled at Paul's feet, but kept looking up resentfully and shaking his head.

"Well, Mr. Lambert, your sister tells me——"

"What's she been up to? Trying to get me certified again?"

Dr. Orwell's tongue appeared between his lips. Abruptly he nodded. "Yes, that's it. She's after a Reception Order. As you probably know, two doctors have to examine you independently and report on your medical condition. I'm one of them."

"I see. Well—aagh!" Paul's head seemed to explode with fireworks. Then the pain lifted, and his mind was no longer his own.

"Come on, Ulric! Sorry, doc, I've got to go."

"But——"

"Sorry"—Paul tried to halt his rush at the door, but the mental pull was too strong—"he insists." Then he was charging down the garden after the pup; for he had no choice.

Ulric's mind had gripped his, demanding that walk. He had no more resistance than a minnow on a hook. He vaulted the hedge while the pup wriggled through; then, with the awful knowledge of the doctor's eyes on his back, splashed straight through the stream.

After a few minutes the mental grip slackened. Then Ulric got interested in a rabbit burrow, and Paul's mind was free again. He stared down at the gleaming black coat, shaking his head. "You get what you want, then you drop me." He flopped in the long grass. "What power! Oh, Lord! No real intelligence, no direction, but what terrific power!'

He scrambled to his feet. "Come on, we've got to get back." If it wasn't already too late. . . . He strode away, his mind tensed for that shattering call again.

Ulric trotted behind, praise the Lord! Paul put out a tentative mental suggestion: *Meat when .you get home,* and increased his pace. He crossed the stream by the bridge, and that entailed coming up the street. As they passed the butcher's Paul felt that stab in his head again. Hardly aware of his actions, he dashed inside, scooped up a heap of mince and threw it out to Ulric. He was outside again before the pup, absorbed in eating, freed his mind.

Oh no! Paul ran back in and slammed two half-crowns on the counter. The butcher pulled a puzzled face.

"Sorry, ha-ha. Sudden urge. Couldn't resist."

Cora and the visitor were still gazing down the garden when Paul came in by the front gate. He overheard the doctor agreeing. "Yes, that's true. Schizophrenics commonly have delusions about telepathic control." Then they heard him and turned. The doctor stared at Paul's clinging wet trousers.

Cora spat out a single word with utter scorn. "Telepathy!"

"Wait!" Paul, desperately anxious now to convince the doctor, held up his hand. "Just hear me out. E.S.P. in animals is a subject for—for sane investigation. There's plenty of evidence. Everybody's heard about the dog that howls when there's been a death in the house. Well . . ." He bit his lip, seeing the doctor's patient, 'humour 'em' expression. "I know it sounds crazy, but this dog is a powerful telepath. He's more than that—No, no, don't write anything down yet. Here, let me show you. Let me prove it."

Cora folded her arms contemptuously. Dr. Orwell waited.

"Now watch. He's lying there quite at peace, isn't he? Without saying a word, I'm going to make him get up and walk round the greenhouse."

Ulric stirred, stood up. Paul eagerly explained, "I'm projecting a mental picture of a big bone behind there."

The pup took a couple of steps towards the greenhouse, then stopped. He looked timidly towards the fence to his left, where Kate was still grooming herself. Head hung low, he returned to the watchers and lay down again.

Astounded, Paul pleaded, "Let me try again. It's the first time he's failed

to respond." He concentrated. The pup just moved a bit, restlessly.

"That damn cat, that's what it is! That blasted spiteful cat!"

Then, aware of the doctor's hard stare, Paul stopped shaking his fist, bought his anger under control.

Dr. Orwell coughed. "And now, Mr. Lambert, I'd like to ask you those questions. Mind if we go inside?"

Paul was only half conscious of the interview, for his brain churned with the shattering implications of what he'd just been through. The pup's mental grip was strong beyond anything he'd imagined; and yet it was afraid of the cat. Could Kate really have some power over it, or was the dog just a coward? Or—or—this whole business was so fantastic—perhaps he was losing his reason again. No, no, no. But he could be, could be. No!

The front gate had barely clicked shut behind the doctor when Ulric sprang to his feet and went snuffling round the back of the greenhouse. Paul stared at Kate, and met only a bland, sleepy mask.

That afternoon and evening were the most exhausting and frustrating that he'd ever experienced. Ulric's demands were only normal for a young dog, but it had this power to enforce them—crude power without restraint. *Play with me. Feed me. Take me out.* Resistance was useless, indeed painful. The pup would just sit there puzzled, then turn the power up. In the rare intervals when Ulric was diverted Paul tried to think out some course of action, but his pounded brain was rapidly losing the ability to concentrate.

It was past ten before Ulric slept. Paul turned out the light and waited awhile, then quietly closed the study door on him. He found Cora hunched over a dying fire, Kate draped about her neck. Leaving the light out, he spoke softly, anxious for once not to irritate her. "Is Dr. Green the other one?"

She hardly moved, only her head nodding slightly. That was enough. Green was the family doctor, an old friend of Paul's. More than that, he shared Paul's enthusiasm for psychical research; and what Paul hungered for at this moment was a sympathetic listener, an ally perhaps against the frightening forces that entangled him.

He left the house as quietly as he could and strode out along the quiet, moonlit streets. There were buses into town, but he needed that half-hour's walk to clear his head. So active were his thoughts that it wasn't till he'd rung the doctor's bell that he actually noticed the moon—the full moon of the madman. . . .

Green opened the door himself, a book in his hand. His chubby face lit up in greeting. "Ah, come in, Paul. It's been a long time."

Paul followed him into the cosy sitting-room. "Cora tells me—"

"That's right, sit there by the fire." The doctor hurried through another door, but kept chattering. "Oh, I know. It'll be that certificate business. I'm supposed to examine you, you know, but we shan't worry about that. You're as sane as I am, Paul,

and I'll tell them so." He re-entered with a cup in each hand. "With cream; that's right, isn't it?"

Paul nodded and reached for his coffee. "They sent a doctor from the hospital. I'm afraid I gave him a very unfavourable impression."

"Oh?" Green sat opposite him. "Well, not to worry. This means the two medical certificates will be contradictory, and the judicial authority's bound to be dissatisfied. What happens next is that he gets us all together—you'll have a representative, of course—and thrashes it out. All you have to do"—he pointed his spoon at Paul's chest—"is behave rationally and convince this J.P. you're sane, and the petition's as good as dismissed." He leaned forward confidentially. "Now, what went wrong today?"

"I bought a dog this morning." Paul spoke slowly, finding it difficult to convey his incredible experience, even to an understanding listener. "It has amazing mental powers."

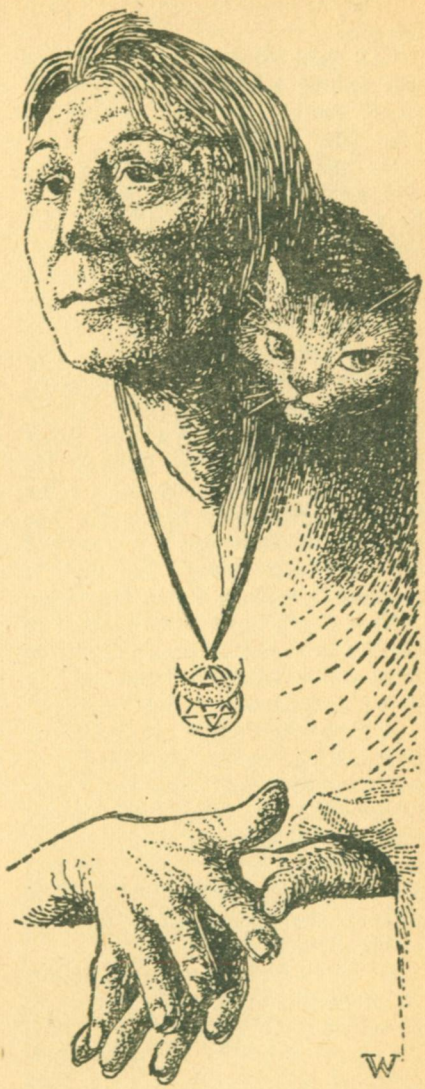
"Drop it, Paul." Green shook his head. "Whatever it is, forget it till this thing blows over. People just aren't sympathetic—"

"I can't." He bit his lip.

"Can't?"

"It's dominating me."

For a while the doctor's sharp pale eyes frowned at him. Then he stood and began pacing the room. "Paul, I want to help you. For your own sake say no more. Don't mention these del—these ideas to me or anybody else. And for heaven's sake get rid of that dog!"



"They're not delusions, Doc." Paul felt sad.

"All right, all right. But don't keep that animal a day longer. Now go, please Paul. I'm trying to stay on your side."

He had to go anyway. The pup was awake and pulling again. As he stepped into the street the call intensified. Two miles from home, and as strong as ever! Paul walked faster. Sweat broke out on his face as the call throbbed in his head. There was no particular directive; the pup didn't want feeding or walking—it was just missing its plaything. Hook! he thought. Minnow on a hook. Hook in my brain, jerking, jerking. He began to run. People waiting for the last bus turned their heads. The bus would be quicker—this he knew—but the force didn't work like that. It required immediate action from him.

Now Paul's hands were pressed to his face as he ran. *Please don't! Please stop; you're killing me!* But the pup didn't understand, or didn't care.

A bicycle swam into his nightmare, propped against the pavement outside a music-rocked coffee bar. Hardly breaking his stride, Paul jumped on and wobbled away. Behind him in the night the music welled out and a voice yelled, "Stop, thief!" Then these noises diminished in the wail of his anguish.

He didn't even see the traffic lights; the screaming in his brain had reached such a pitch that he couldn't hear the squeal of brakes. His front wheel smacked into something solid, then he went tumbling across the bonnet of a car, to crumple in the road with a jarring snap in his left forearm. Blinking against a dazzle of lights, he sat up and looked at his broken arm. Many hands raised him to his feet.

A voice shouted, "There he is! Hold that man!"

Desperately he crashed through the crowd and ran up a side road, the agony in his dangling arm matching the shriek in his head. This was the quickest way. He stumbled through the allotments, a jumble of sheds and bushes and chicken runs, all silver under the moon, and out across the fields. And there it was, the stream.

He dropped to his knees in the middle, and would have been content to rest there, lapped by the ice-cold water, if it hadn't been for the tug, tug, tug of the pup's mind. Up and on. He rolled over the hedge to drop, gasping, in his own back garden—to drop into peace as the clumsy Alsatian freed his mind.

For a moment, till the sting in his arm caught up with him, it was the awakening from a nightmare. He lay still, caressing the pup's silky coat, unable to feel hate towards it, only a deep sorrow.

Paul staggered across the lawn, across the flower beds to the greenhouse, Ulric bounding around him. Just inside the door he found what he wanted—an old carving-knife that had served a dozen uses, and a rubber ball. He threw the ball and, while the pup galumphed after it, touched the blade. Years of sharpening had left it slender and bright as a razor.

Suddenly he wondered: Who let you out, Ulric? Who woke you? He looked back at the house, where

several windows were now lit. The ball bounced on his feet. Ulric waited, panting. Paul threw it again, harder this time. All the while I keep you happy you leave my mind alone, he thought. You're my one chance of really proving my sanity, yet you just won't co-operate. . . . No use, no use. . . . Suppose you set up a mind scream while I'm in the middle of those proceedings next week? . . . And even if I survive the petition you'll still drive me mad.

Ulric dropped the ball again. Paul pushed him over, let him do battle with his foot. Then he bent to fondle the dog, rolling him on his back. His face was wet with tears as he raised the knife. "I'll never find another like you, son." And he thrust the blade deep in the pup's chest.

Ulric yelped, then simultaneously punched with his mind and fastened his jaws about Paul's broken arm.

Paul's other wrist was gripped. Arms restrained and lifted him, then dragged him towards the light.

Somebody said, "Will you sign an Urgency Order, Miss Lambert?"

"Of course," said Cora.

His mind was still buffeted, though weakly. How did they get there? he wondered. Did she phone? How could she have known he was going to attack the dog?

Behind him a voice said, "I think it's dead."

Paul knew it wasn't, though his mind was almost free now. Still, it was dying. The realization brought relief and hope flooding in. It was now or never.

"You can't hold me," he protested. "I can explain what happened. I was playing with the dog when it suddenly attacked me. Look at my wrist. It was self-defence."

The hospital official grunted. "We're taking you, all the same. You'll have a chance to see a J.P. in the morning."

Yes. And it was going to be all right; just so long as that dog didn't recover. Abruptly a thin, clear voice spoke in his mind. *I suppose you think your troubles are over now?* He looked up, to find the cat strolling towards him through the yellow-lit doorway, an enormous shadow before it. Paul shook his head. Could it be? *Ah, I see it dawns on you.*

"So it really was you!" he said softly. "You who made the dog refuse to walk to the greenhouse."

You are quite crazy, of course. Kate sat in front of him and looked up—grinning, he could have sworn it. *And I'll be around to keep you that way.*

"Shut up!" he shouted.

Arms tightened on his again. "Mr. Lambert, who are you speaking to?"

"That blasted cat, of course. Can't you——?" No, of course they couldn't. The voice was in his head. And it was impossible, he knew that. Even telepathically, no cat could talk. Suddenly very lonely and frightened, he twisted his head to stare up at the full moon. And as they led him away his eyes remained wide and staring and empty of hope.

Cora turned to her cat. "Stupid dabbler," she said. "But forget him, pet; for now we must fly or we'll be late for the Sabbat."

MERMAID BEACH

LESLIE VARDRE

Illustrated by Vera Jarman

E CAME upon the beach purely by chance one Sunday morning when we were motoring south along the Cardigan coast and Brett, whose turn it was to drive, became intrigued by the narrow sand road and impulsively swung the car to follow its tortuous way through the dunes.

We were barely out of sight of the main road when our new way narrowed into little more than a footpath. Brett stopped the car and the morning was filled with the muted and tempting sound of the sea. Following the sound on foot we came upon a broken-down beach hut with paint-stripped wooden walls and a sagging verandah. Despite the bright sunlight it looked uncanny in the way that lonely, desolate houses often do. I remember that I remarked about it, and Brett, made of less imaginative stuff, turned and grinned and passed some comment about highly desirable residences.

The beach was some fifty yards farther on, and we came on it almost unexpectedly, through a deep rift in the grass-covered dunes. Two small headlands were linked by a perfect half-circle of firm, tide-rippled sand on which the low waves broke in steady rhythm. It was the ideal spot for a bathe. Brett was so much taken with it that despite our original intention to carry on to Aberayron he would have it that we spend the rest of the day there. We went back to the car to collect all the essentials of comfort: blankets, towels, transistor radio, picnic-basket and cushions.

The water was warm and had a velvety texture. Although it was late September and the breeze held a promise of winter, the headlands and the dunes seemed to shelter the little beach, giving it a climate all its own.

Dusk was beginning to fall as we made our way back to the car. A few paces ahead Brett said back over his shoulder, "You'd think a beach like that would be packed. Even at this time of the year."

"It probably would be if the road to it was marked more clearly," I suggested as we came abreast of the cabin.

"Somebody else found it once, anyway," he said, stopping to look at the warped timbers. He mounted the verandah and peered through the one window. "It looks all right inside," he added, and set down his load so that he could try the door. It opened at his touch and he ventured inside. I followed him only as far as the threshold of the beach hut.

"In reasonably good shape," he decided, his voice echoing. Then he

came out again. "You know something, John? It doesn't look like it's been used in ages. We could use it for the odd week-end. I mean, we could come down on a Saturday and stay here right through until Monday morning."

"It would make a change," I agreed as we walked on to the car. "But even though it seems to be derelict it'll be somebody's property."

But apparently it wasn't. Brett, backing into the main road, stopped when he saw the old man, sack over his back, trudging steadily along. He wound down the window and waited for him to come abreast.

"You live in these parts?" he asked.

"Up by Llanffynnon," said the old man, "but a step. And thanking you if it's a lift you're offering, but not far to go."

Brett nodded backwards to the beach. "There's an old hut of sorts back there. Would you happen to know if it belongs to anyone?"

The other looked closely into Brett's face, shook his head and said slowly: "Empty for some time, now; ever since——" Then he stopped and was for going on his way. Brett called after him:

"D'you think anyone would mind if we made use of it?"

And at that the old man stopped and then came back, his face intent.

"You won't be wanting to use that place," he said.

"It looks all right. I grant you it could do with some paint——"

"That's Mermaid Beach that lies beyond," said the old man in such a way that it was as if he expected us to realize some significance.

Brett grinned. "I expected it to have some unpronounceable Welsh name. And what's wrong with Mermaid Beach?"

The old man muttered something in his own tongue and turned to go for the second time. Brett had to grasp at his tattered sleeve while he repeated his question.

"It is a bad place," said the other reluctantly. "Drownings there's been. Three of them that I'm knowing of." He watched our faces.

"A treacherous current?" Brett hazarded.

"Could be, sir; but that wasn't why——"

"Then what?"

"Folks don't generally go bathing at night. An' not when the wind's blowing in from the sea."

"And it was like that when these three handed in their dinner-pails?" Brett asked lightly.

Now there was resentment at the implied derision.

"They drowned and that's all there is to it. An' all at night. It's only at night when the wind's comin' in from the sea that you can hear her——" And then he stopped, biting his lip as if annoyed with himself for having been nettled into such an explanation.

"Good Lord!" Brett cried in delight. "A Welsh Lorelei. Is that why it's called Mermaid Beach?"

"The last one was washed up a bit down the coast. I was the one to be finding him. An' the one before, he came in about the same place. I saw him when they took him to Aberayron. The first was picked up by a trawler. They was all smiling."

And then the old man freed his sleeve and went on his way.

Brett was hugely amused. "They were all smiling, so they died happy. What a load of rubbish. You get a bay with an under-tow or something, and three men get drowned, and a legend is born. The night and the wind have been added as atmosphere. As if anyone in their right mind would go bathing in the dark when the wind's blowing in from the sea." He grinned. "I don't know about you, but it would take more than a female voice to drag me down to the sea if I didn't want to go. How about coming down next Saturday and spending the week-end here?"

Oddly enough I would have given a lot to have been able to produce some reason for not coming. But Brett and I work together and he knew that I would be free. And he had that faintly supercilious look on his face that would have exploded into open derision if I had refused.

Saturday was a prolongation of the Indian summer, warm and sunny with a nip in the air first thing. Late in starting, we reached the sand road about the middle of the afternoon. It took several journeys to transfer the stuff from the car. We had oil stoves, a hurricane lamp, two camp beds and a supply of canned food in addition to our usual bathing essentials.

The water was calm and warm. As we lay on the sand afterwards Brett said drowsily: "There's an under-

current all right. I felt it. Given the right conditions it could be nasty. That's what happened to those three. Inexperienced bathers. There's a place on the south coast that's just as tricky. To be on the safe side we'd better keep well inshore. And at the first sign of wind we leg it for the beach."

That night we both slept like logs, walking to a sunrise that promised another day of fine weather. But the breeze had a chill tang after lunch, so we did our basking in the shelter of the dunes.

The clouds must have built up inland, hidden by the headlands. The first we knew of the change was when a cold wind blew sharply, setting the fine sand swirling. And with it came the first spots of rain.

There was a few moments of scurry as we hastily gathered our things together and then set off back, the wind buffeting, along the steep path to the hut.

We had the two stoves, our beds and a good supply of blankets, so we were comparatively comfortable. The comfort was accentuated by the lowering sky seen through the solitary window and the soughing of the wind. Making up his bed, Brett turned and grinned over his shoulder.

"One thing at least," he said, "this wind isn't blowing off the sea and so we shan't be troubled with singing mermaids."

As we ate our tea the sky darkened even more, anticipating nightfall, and a new sound came to the wind. It was such a different sound that I went to the window, seeing now how the grass was being blown away from the direction of the sea. I turned to pass some comment, and Brett was poised, pillow in hand, listening. . . .

"Did you hear something?" he asked.

"The wind. It's changed round."

He shook his head impatiently. "No, not the wind. Listen . . ."

The darkness was coming down now as if a curtain was being dragged across the sky. I listened, aware of the thudding of my pulse. And then, as a gust moaned past the walls, I heard the other sound. A fragment of music, tossed and torn by the wind, seeming to come from far away. It went as suddenly as it had come.

Brett fingered his lip, puzzled. "I could have sworn . . ." He shook himself. "A trick of the wind."

There was another fierce gust that set the cabin rocking and as it died, so the music was back again, louder now and clearer. A woman's voice singing a snatch of melody that was at the same time strangely alien and yet nostalgically familiar. It rose and fell on the wind so that now it seemed to come from across the sea, now from outside the very door.

I remember staring at the dark square of window. I was frightened.

It came again while I stood there, the words now almost distinguishable.

Brett's face was white. "It's only the wind," he said, "and our imagination. It has to be."

And then suddenly he dropped the pillow and slapped his knee and burst into laughter, shaking so much that he had to lean against the wall. For

the moment I fancied it to be hysteria, and I started towards him. He found his breath as I reached his side.

"That damned mermaid," he gasped; "here we are, both scared out of our wits, and d'you know what it is? My radio. We tucked it under one of the dunes and we left it there when the rain drove us in. It's out there now, blaring its head off. We didn't hear it until the wind changed."

And then relief flooded through me and I joined him in his laughter. But my legs trembled and I had to sit on my bed. Brett started to put on his raincoat.

"You're not going for it?" I asked in surprise.

"You bet your life I am," he replied. "It's a new one. It's still all right by the sound of it, but once the rain gets to it it'll be ruined." Then he fought with the door and was gone, still smiling, out into the darkness and the wind blowing off the sea.

Alone, I laughed again at my fears and set about making up my bed. A mental picture of Brett, head down and struggling against the weather, took me to the corner where we had earlier dumped the things we had brought back from the beach. I could at least have two warm towels ready for his return.

And when I picked up the first towel, the radio tumbled out.

I started instinctively for the door and then stopped with my hand on the latch. The fear had come back again, stronger than before. I couldn't for the life of me have opened that door and stepped out into the darkness beyond.

I spent the long night sitting on my bed, shivering and listening and waiting. But the voice remained silent and Brett never returned. His body was washed up the next day a little way down the coast. I was taken to Aberayron to identify it. An echo of his laughter still clung to his lips. But then those others too had been smiling when they were found.

In sweet music is such art,
Killing care and grief of heart
Fall asleep, or hearing die.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE.

A solitary shriek, the bubbling cry
Of some strong swimmer in his agony.

LORD BYRON.

THE SLAVE DETECTIVE

THE CASE OF COTTA'S JEWELS

WALLACE NICHOLS

Illustrated by Juliette Palmer

SOLLIUS, returning alone from doing an errand for his master, Titus Sabinus the Senator, was limping along a short-cut byway between two of the narrow Roman streets when he was suddenly attacked from behind, and struck down unconscious. By luck, a certain freedman named Grosphus, making the same short-cut, stumbled over him, recognized him, and superintended his removal home.

Sabinus summoned his own physician, and everything was done for his favourite and famous slave. His self-esteem was hurt that Sollius, *his* slave, had been attacked at all, and he summoned Gratianus, the City Prefect, to hear the details as soon as the injured man was sufficiently recovered to give them. Gratianus and Sollius were old friends, and the

Prefect's concern was genuine and unaffected.

"A bad business, Slave Detective," he grinned as he took a stool beside the victim's pallet. "Who would want to kill you? Some relative of one you've helped me to catch?"

"Then why haven't I been attacked over and over again?" asked Sollius.

"Was it an intended robbery that this Grosphus interrupted?"

"Who would seek to rob a poor slave? No, listen, Gratianus. I have had time to think—and imagine—lying here. Tell me, is any special crime occupying your wits at the moment?"

"There is," the Prefect answered with a sharp glance. "In other circumstances I should already have called you in."

"It will be as I think," said Sollius. "I was attacked, not out of anyone's revenge, nor to rob me, but to prevent your using me to solve a crime. I have a certain reputation," he added slyly, "and this man feared my brains."

"It may be so," admitted Gratianus cautiously.

"Tell me of this case," said the Slave Detective.

"It is a robbery at the mansion of Titus Cotta on the Palatine—old family jewels of the most priceless value have vanished into air, some of them Etruscan, others the spoils of war in the East, a vast collection. There are no clues that *I* can find. The one thing that may appear to be a clue I do not trust: the finding of a small gem in the straw of a slave's bed in the house—to my thinking a falsely laid spoor. I've arrested the slave, but it is more a token arrest than anything else."

"What family is there?"

"Cotta is a widower, and he lives with his son and daughter. The young Cotta—oh, I thought of it!—is not in debt; he is a very estimable young man. The daughter is to be married to one of the Emperor's favourites, Junius Pomponius. The jewels were to have been her dowry. I'm utterly at a loss. Conduct the case, Sollius, from your bed. Tell me what to do, for the sake of Mithras."

"You will, of course, have looked for signs of breaking in? You will have interrogated the household slaves and the daughter's maid? You will have asked if any beggars or suspicious persons were about?"

"All that, my friend—and the result nothing!"

"I wish I had heard them as they answered. A voice reveals so much in an interrogation."

"I am a soldier; I keep the City's peace. I am not subtle in reading voices. Titus Cotta is an important man. Help me, O Sollius!"

"What can I do, tied to my pallet?"

"Use your good assistant Lucius, and I'll detail a soldier of the Urban Cohorts to lend authority to his nosings."

Sollius considered briefly, and then nodded. He was already puzzled by the case, and what puzzled him was always a challenge. Gratianus, reassured, returned to his city barracks. Sollius lay and brooded.

Next day he sent Lucius out, primed with one or two preliminary

questions which needed answering, and the promised soldier went with him. It was late evening when Lucius returned.

"The arrested slave," he reported, "is named Aufidius. He has a bad reputation for drinking and quarrelsomeness. Twice his master has ordered him a whipping. He is unpopular in the household."

"So," mused Sollius, "if it is an inside job any of his fellow slaves would be pleased to fasten the guilt upon him. Um! . . . Gratianus, a shrewd man, does not suspect him. What of the son?"

"I heard nothing against him," Lucius replied. "He appears very upset at the loss of the jewels. His sister's marriage depends on their handing-over as her dowry. She is no beauty, and they alone could set her off at the imperial court."

"How long?" said Sollius, "has old Cotta been a widower?"

"Some six or seven years."

"What could you gather about him?"

"A harsh master to all his slaves. He cares nothing for their well-being. With his own kind he is popular enough—an old dandy, in fact."

"Does scandal wag?"

"Not over women, but he is known for a gambler."

"Well, he is a rich man, Lucius. Only a rich man could negotiate such a match for his daughter. Nevertheless, he'll miss those jewels as a dowry for her."

"What do I do tomorrow, Sollius."

The Slave Detective was so long silent, with his eyes closed, that Lucius took him to have fallen asleep, and he was tiptoeing away when Sollius, his eyes still closed, asked:

"What do you know of Grosphus? Is he a clerk in a business house, or in business for himself, or in a patrician household?"

"I do not know," Lucius admitted.

"Then find out for me."

"Do you think *he* stole the lord Cotta's jewels?" asked Lucius open-mouthed. "But he saved your life."

"My mind works cunningly," said Sollius, and the lids fleetingly rose from his eyes.

The news that Lucius gathered the next day was to the effect that Grosphus had his own business: he was a seller of fruit and vegetables.

"Whose freedman was he?" Sollius asked. "I mean: whose slave was he, and who freed him?"

"I tried to learn that—but he sealed his lips."

"I wonder why . . ." Sollius mused. "It is worth the spade, Lucius, at his roots. Go to it tomorrow."

But for all Lucius's skilled probings the next day none of Grosphus's neighbours seemed to know. Gossip had apparently never been fed in that respect with even the scraps of rumour.

That same day Sollius was visited by his solicitous master, Titius Sabinus.

"I am relieved to see you so clear-eyed again, Sollius."

"Thank you, lord; I am mending."

"You must employ yourself," laughed Sabinus, "to find out your enemy. I will lend you to yourself!"

"I have another case in hand, lord

—and it may even be the same," Sollius murmured.

"I am too plain a man to understand that," said Sabinus.

"I do not think, lord," Sollius elaborated slowly, "that I was attacked to be robbed, or by an enemy to kill me —but to prevent my being called in by the City Prefect to help him in a new case, which is the theft of the lord Cotta's jewels. Someone fears my wits."

"So you are conducting a case from your bed here?" smiled his master. "Touch your mind with a mystery, and it cannot be idle."

"No, lord," meekly answered Sollius. Then his eyes quickened as he asked, still in a humble voice: "What can you tell me, lord, about Titus Cotta and his family?"

"I knew Cotta," Sabinus replied, "when we were both young men. He was then rather wild, a determined—sometimes a disastrous—thrower of the dice. But he grew, I know, more responsible later, and held a number of imperial appointments with conspicuous success. I did not know his wife. I hear his son is a most promising young fellow. His daughter? Of her I know nothing."

"Is the lord Cotta as rich as believed?"

"The Emperor's favourite clearly thinks so, for I'm told the daughter is none too well favoured," replied Sabinus cynically. "There was a brother of Titus, Decimus Cotta," he added after a pause. "A bad lot! They exiled him to Alexandria with a family pension two years ago. Perhaps the jewels disappeared with him and their loss is but now discovered. It is worth your rumination. Decimus was a confirmed gambler. So was the father, old Horatius Cotta. But that's old history."

On that Sabinus left him.

Sollius brooded through a restless night.

"If only I could discover that one fact I think all would become clear," he kept repeating to himself.

In the morning he would send a message to the City Prefect. That official might find out what Lucius had failed to discover from gossip. Gratianus had wide powers, even those of torture.

He was so eager to settle the question that was teasing his mind that he sent Lucius off to the Urban Cohorts' barracks at the first light. His surprise was great when Gratianus came back with him, storming into Sabinus's mansion, attended by two centurions, with a great bustle and rustling of his bronze accoutrements.

"I shall never understand your gifts," he burst out unceremoniously. "Does your intuition come from yourself or the gods? You send me an urgent inquiry about the freedman Grosphus, and I am already examining his dead body!"

"Grosphus dead?" ejaculated Sollius in surprise.

"And as murdered as great Caesar!"

"How was he found—and where?"

"The assistant in his shop, taking down the shutters, found him early today. He had been stabbed. No weapon was found."

"I should have trusted my thoughts

earlier," sighed Sollius. "I had a hand upon the weaving and let it lie idle, and then plucked the strands too late. Will the fact I needed have died with him? For again I would ask the same question: who gave Grosphus his freedom, and probably set him up in his shop, laying upon him such an obligation that he would turn criminal for gratitude? Any of the gods could be brought in to witness that I was attacked by order. Perhaps Grosphus, suddenly remorseful, did his best for me after. At least he had obeyed instructions to put me out of action."

"And by the same token drew off suspicion," cynically remarked the City Prefect.

"Find the master who freed him!" insisted Sollius.

"Some enemy of Cotta," muttered Gratianus heavily. "He has only too many of 'em—the fruit of his pride. He has treated me, the Emperor's representative in the City, as one of the paving stones on the Appian Way. I owe him no courtesy! But I've not stolen his gems," he added dryly. "Might it not," he went on with a sudden cunning thought, "be some enemy of young Pomponius, seeking to spoil his marriage with wealth? Might it not, Sollius?" he asked eagerly.

"Look for Grosphus's former master," Sollius insisted again.

"I believe you could give me the name," said Gratianus with a deep look.

"I believe I could," smiled Sollius, "but get that information—and then we'll both know."

Gratianus could not persuade him to speak prematurely, and he went grumbling away to set the right inquiries in motion.

"Do you really know," asked an astonished Lucius.

Sollius shook his head.

"Only," he answered, "if Gratianus drags into day *one* answer. If it is another, lying helplessly here I must admit myself defeated."

"You'll never do that," laughed Lucius.

All the next day Sollius was restless and querulous, signs that he was both improving in health and frustrated by his personal inaction in the case.

The day following, Gratianus came again.

"I have the person," he announced brusquely, "but I cannot believe . . ." and he whispered the name.

"Oh, you can believe it," asserted Sollius. "The problem is how to bring it home to him. You'll never get him for the theft, but you may for the murder. By the gods, I hope so!"

"Certainly the theft would be difficult to prove," agreed Gratianus with a quirk of the lips, "and the murder was done very neatly—too neatly! What is the story behind it? I am sure your tricky brain has grasped the truth. As for me, I cannot see a clue."

"What's in the blood remains in the blood," returned Sollius oracularly. "That is the clue."

"It may be," answered the dubious Gratianus, "but how am I to report? I was investigating a theft, and the case has dissolved in my hands, with

a murder which, though more important to the Law, is only incidental to a case that no longer exists! Who, in his right senses, would be Rome's Prefect?"

"There was certainly, as I take it," said Sollius, "no theft. To stake and lose jewels at dice, though it may steal from the family, is hardly legal theft when the jewels are your own. But to save face and to secure a desirable marriage for his daughter he had to invent a theft. Then, fearing that you would call me in to help you investigate he used a tool under special obligations to lay me aside. I do not think that I was meant to be killed. The rest is but a guess. Did Grosphus, perhaps, demand too much to remain silent, so the tool in the hand had to be broken?"

"How do you do these things?" asked Gratianus.

"Thoughts," replied Sollius, "are like to coloured stones in a mosaic. I seek to make a pattern out of all possible combinations of suspicion. I doubt, my friend," he went on with a mocking look, "whether you will be able to convict Cotta of anything, but I am equally sure that his crime has been in vain. Without the sufficient dowry of the jewels—whatever the excuse for the lack of them!—I do not think Junius Pomponius will now marry his daughter."

IT COULD HAPPEN TO YOU

RICHARD POWNALL

"EXCUSE ME, may I speak to you?"

Charles had thrown his brief-case and umbrella up on to the rack and settled back to read his newspaper and enjoy the half-hour run into Waterloo. Yes, he really enjoyed commuting. Something so satisfying about looking round at the others in the carriage: funny, grey little men, with faces either worried or unhappy, or just blank. Not a spark of real life among them as they shuttled drearily between their homes and offices.

But Charles, he knew he was different: he could remain apart from the others, above them, and smile to himself as he observed them. . . .

"Excuse me, may I speak to you? It's most important."

Charles turned from his newspaper to see who had whispered this unusual request in his ear. There was nothing remarkable about the man's appearance. A little like a spaniel, with that pointed nose, long hair, and large, sad brown eyes. Oh dear, thought Charles, what on earth can this dreary little chap want with me? Why can't he leave me to my paper and pester one of those corpses opposite? But he smiled politely, and the little man, encouraged, went on:

"Mortimer's my name—Meredith Mortimer. You probably think it's very strange of me to approach you —after all we're complete strangers— but, you see, I feel it's only my duty to speak to you, just in the hope that you'll listen." His voice sounded far from hopeful, but he continued:

"A lot of people I've warned in the last few weeks, but none of them seem to take any notice. One day they'll be sorry. Oh dear me yes, one day they'll be sorry." And he sat back, sighed, and gazed out of the window as if he had nothing more to say. Charles was hunting for some suitable comment when the man spoke again, now with a note of urgency in his voice:

"You must stop using this train, you really must!"

"I *beg* your pardon!"

"You must stop using this train before it's too late. The 8.03 is all right and so is the 8.43, but I have a duty to tell you not to use the 8.23 any more." The words were now pouring from him like water from a breached dam. "For me it's too late now, and I've no doubt it's too late for a number of others on this train, but for you there's still time."

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Mortimer, but I don't understand what you're trying to tell me. For me there's still time for what?"

The spaniel eyes looked mournfully at Charles, and the man shook his head as if already in despair of ever making himself understood.

"Time to stop using this train before . . . before . . ." and his voice

trailed away as he switched his attention to the suburban landscape.

"Now look," said Charles patiently, "please try to tell me what it is that's so wrong with this train. Do you imagine there's going to be an accident or something?"

"Oh dear me, no! I don't *imagine* anything, and as far as I know there's no special risk of an accident. No, no. What I'm trying to tell you is that there's still time for you to stop using the 8.23 before . . . before . . ." The whisper was barely audible, and the little man's hands were shaking violently.

"Yes, Clapham Junction," he croaked, "Clapham Junction. This is where it always happens—between Clapham and Vauxhall. It was just the same with the others—Simpson and that fair-haired fellow from Lloyds—but I don't suppose you knew them, though you may have read about them in the papers—and anyway, they've gone now, of course."

The man was shivering now from head to foot and his face was parchment; a great blue vein stood out on his forehead. "Yes, it's . . . it's always about here, on the up line."

"Tell me," asked Charles, concerned at the man's ghastly appearance, "Why don't *you* use a different train?"

"It's too late, don't you see. Once it *happens* to you there's nothing you can do about it. You may try to take the 8.03—I assure you *I* tried—but you see, you never get on it. You watch it come in to the station, and you watch it go out, but you can't move, you understand. It just won't let you move. And it's no good trying to be late for the 8.23—I've tried it."

There was all hell and agony in the dark spaniel eyes. "You try to fight against it, and at first you may think you're winning. But you're not, of course. You can never win—never. And it's just a question of time, then, until . . . until . . ."

The train was passing through Vauxhall, and the man sank back, exhausted, and wiped a bead of perspiration from a cheek to which a trace of colour was returning. Then Charles realised that he was speaking to him again:

"So all I can do is try to help others —young people like you—so that you may understand and escape before it happens to you."

The train was pulling in to Waterloo, and the corpses were coming to life, gathering their strength and their belongings for the underground.

"Listen," said Charles, "you *must* tell me exactly what it is that happens to all these people."

The man looked up, the panic still clear in his eyes, and Charles strained to catch the words:

'It happens without any warning. Silently. It *creeps* like a . . . like a . . . It's . . . it's . . ." and the words were lost as the man was hustled out of the door and lost in the crowd, and Charles went on his way feeling sorry for the little man, and wondering what on earth could have got him into such a state

* * *

The next morning Charles kept an

eye out on the 8.23, and was a little relieved to see no sign of his companion of the previous day. Let's hope, he thought, that the poor chap's realized there's nothing to stop him taking a different train if he doesn't like this one.

By the following day—a Thursday it was, no different from any other week-day—Charles had almost forgotten the incident. He had read the leaders and turned to the back page of his paper. His eyes wandered idly down the columns: 'Model cites daily help' . . . 'Opium haul at London Airport' . . . And then, suddenly, a paragraph jumped into brilliant focus:

'MYSTERIOUS DEATH AT WEST BYLINGHAM'

'Tragic end of amateur Houdini'

'Yesterday a man, presumed to be a Mr. Meredith Mortimer, was found dead in his lodgings at West Bylingham. The landlady, Mrs. Anne Jenkins, states that at about 8.15 a.m., the hour at which Mr. Mortimer usually left for the station, she heard sounds, as of a violent struggle, coming from her lodger's room. She went to investigate, but found that the door had been bolted on the inside. She telephoned the police, who forced open the door and discovered the deceased.

'It appears that Mr. Mortimer had secured himself by ropes to the bedstead, and, struggling to free himself, was strangled by one of the ropes. The most unusual aspect of the case is that when the police discovered the body it was already in a state of decomposition so advanced that physical identification was impossible. However, Mrs. Jenkins stated that Mr. Mortimer was alive and normal when she took him his breakfast less than an hour before. She afterwards . . .'

Charles's head reeled and the print swam before his eyes. He shook his head, willed the paragraph back into focus, and started to read it again. Suddenly, something made him glance up at the two inches of open window. He leaped to his feet and slammed the window shut, but even as he did so he knew that it made no difference.

This thing was already there in the carriage with him: it was writhing on the floor and squirming under the seats; it was heaving on the luggage racks and throbbing in the smoky air. And then he felt it, soaking through the pores of his skin and pulsing up through his veins. He fought it and it receded, but it surged back to the attack, stronger and stronger, seeping into the marrow of his bones.

Then at last the train clattered through Vauxhall, and Charles mopped his brow and sank back in relief. It was over for that day It had curled up inside him and gone to sleep, mustering its strength for the morrow. But Charles could feel that it slept with one eye open, always ready to guide him, surely, inexorably, day after day, on to the 8.23; always ready to wake and stretch and feed and fight for those few minutes between Clapham Junction and Vauxhall Station.

Each day after that it was the same, but each day the struggle more one-sided, until Charles knew that he could fight it no more. It had happened to him, and there was nothing, absolutely nothing he could do about it. So he made up his mind what he must do, for it was clear where his duty lay. Walking from his home to the station he planned exactly how it should be done, so that there could be no mistake, no misunderstanding. He chose his compartment carefully, and when the train had gathered speed he turned to the man on his right and whispered:

"Excuse me, may I speak to you? It's very important."

I seem to be in one great charnel-house,
And seem to scent the rotten carcases!
I seem to hear the dismal yells of death,
While the black gore drops from his horrid jaws . . .

WILLIAM BLAKE.

I know this breathing flesh must lie and rot,
Cover'd with silence and forgetfulness—
Death wons in cities' smoke, and in still night,
When men sleep in their beds, walketh about!
How many in walled cities lie and groan,
Turning themselves upon their beds,
Talking with death, answering his hard demands!
How many walk in darkness, terrors are round
The curtains of their beds, destruction is
Ready at the door! . . .

WILLIAM BLAKE.

THE SILENT KILLER

C. THOMPSON

Illustrated by D. C. Forbes

THE THIN BODY slumped to the ground in a pathetic heap and Mike Dolland surveyed his gruesome handiwork. On the grass lay an eastern man of indeterminate age, wearing a worn, faded, brown suit, with equally ancient shoes. The fragile, coloured man had presented little opposition to the powerful Dolland and the struggle had been a short one.

Mike Dolland was the reverse of his victim as far as physique went. He was big; five feet eleven, with matching width. His suit was slightly better tailored and heavier, being dark blue worsted. Crêpe rubber-soled shoes spoke of illegality. They did not match his suit.

For once, Mike was frightened. This was his first murder, an unplanned one at that and hardly excusable, considering the motive; which was rage. Having a somewhat

stormy temper, Mike generally preferred action first, which often proved disastrous.

The scene of the crime was the back garden of a large, detatched house on the outskirts of Hanley, the motor town. Owned by reputedly rich, recluse sisters, the mansion was walled completely by eight feet high, eighteen inch thick walls. The grounds were extensive; comprising a thick wood and uncared-for lawns and bushes. An ideal site for a murder and also for concealing bodies. Mike realized that inside ten seconds.

Dolland had spent weeks plotting the burglary, establishing probable entry points. Everything so far had been included in his schedule, but the "so far" was over. The little coloured man had appeared from behind a bush at the exact moment Mike was scaling a drainpipe. In his surprise, he had lost his hold on the rusting fall-pipe, thus grazing his leg, tearing his trousers and loosing his temper. A well-aimed blow had done the trick, much too much.

"Bury the body," were a few of the first words that tumbled through his bemused brain, then he remembered identity. Feverishly, he went through the clothing, but discovered no clue. Detective books avidly read had taught him that the police could trace people by clothes tags. He tore the makers name off the coat lining. All that remained of the visitor's possessions was a soiled pound note and a handful of small change. These went into Mike's pocket.

The thought of burial returned. Mike found the garden shed open, fortunately, and procured a spade. He hoisted the body on to his shoulders, picked up the spade and entered the wood at the rear of the house. Every now and then he paused for reassurance that the Hanley police force was not on his trail. It was not. In the densest section of wood, he lowered the body carefully and started digging.

Satisfied that the hole was deep enough, he lowered the body into the grave and returned the soil and sods. When he had completed his labours, he stood back to survey his work. Pretty good. No one would find that. Returning to the scene of the crime, he meticulously scoured the lawn for likely clues. There were none.

Like a cat, he slunk back through the grounds, reclimbed the walls and went home, the desire to burgle having departed.

After a drink in the cheap room of the equally cheap lodging house, he felt better, much better. After all, there are plenty of coloured men loose in England, with no fixed address. This particular man did not look as though he had anything permanent, least of all an abode. It might be months, Mike reassured himself further, even years before the decomposed body was discovered. Then what? Where would the police start looking? There was no apparent motive; simply no reason at all. Why should they look for him. He decided to sleep. He did, in his creaky bed with the framed motto above his head "Sleep in Peace".

Next day, during the tea break in the garage where he put cars right, he

paid particular attention to his newspaper. Apart from the headlines, all he usually took note of were the racing results, the day's runners and the strip cartoons. Today, he delved and was amazed to find how many crimes were committed. But his own, apparently, was not mentioned. He dug his head back under the bonnet of the current repair job and started fixing things again. Mike knew his job, which gave him ample time to think. His thoughts were easier. No body. No search. Life was improving.

The other fitter, a middle-sized, balding worrier called Jack Carlton, had said nothing, but had wondered. Their morning conversation consisted solely of inquests on horses or calculations of winnings; normally the former. This morning, Mike had not mentioned horses. Take away the horses from horses. The answer—no conversation. Lunch time was different. Carlton rapidly became engaged in talks of the day's big race and the daily vision of new found and easily gained wealth loomed large.

"What were biting you early on, Mike? Never known you so quiet. Had a hangover?"

"Naw. Just a bit of a headache. Gone now though." Mike dismissed the subject. The picture of the crumpled coloured man had not yet faded.

When the news came on over the garage radio, Jack was surprised when Mike asked him to shut up while he listened. They listened. Mike's spirits lifted again. All that the news-reader had mentioned as far as crime was concerned was the request for somebody to come forward to help somewhere else. Good. Mike returned to his work with renewed vigour and surprised his employer, the rotund, red-faced Mr. Geary, when he reported his work complete.

Back at his lodgings, he devoured the two evening papers as avidly as he ate his dinner. His landlady was amazed. Mr. Dolland did not usually read the whole paper, he was mainly concerned with the stop press or the part that said "Racing Results". My, my. Her rough lodger was getting interested in local and national affairs and becoming very cultural. For the first time, for as long as she could remember, Mr. Dolland listened to Radio Newsreel, from start to finish. He did not, as was his custom, request her abruptly to "switch the thing off". No, this was a new Mr. Dolland; very new. Not that she minded. The old Mr. Dolland had been rather surly.

In the local hostelry, an hour later, his associates were as amazed as Mr. Carlton, Mr. Geary and Mrs. Dodge. Mike became the life and soul of the dubious party well met at the Crown. They almost forgot to say "Thanks I will" when Mike offered to pay twice for drinks all round.

The television programmes produced nothing to upset him and by the time he was undressing, he was beginning to congratulate himself on his escape. He was clever. After all, most murderers got caught. Not Mike Dolland though. The police had met their match at last.

This mood of elation carried him through the next day and the day

after. He had one qualm only and that was when a police car rolled up to the pumps and a police inspector peered menacingly into the workshop. Mike's pulse did a steady one twenty for all of ten seconds, the time it took the policeman to glance round. The pulse rate dropped and Mike wiped the sweat off his brow when the inspector looked menacingly at the petrol pumps. He realized that this flatfoot must always look like that.

It was on the fourth day that he began to feel queer. He woke feeling groggy and put it down to the beer consumed the night before. This was a regular occurrence. When tea break came, he felt worse instead of better. This was unusual. He nearly always recovered by ten o'clock.

"You're not looking so cracky, Mike," said Jack, over his sandwiches.

"Oh, it'll pass, I expect. Maybe a cold coming on."

But it did not pass and even his boss noticed the difference. His landlady offered him her bottle of aspirins, but Dolland brusquely pushed them on one side. "Want to make me into a drug addict?" he asked, and tottered up to bed; at eight o'clock.

He was worse the next day and had to admit defeat. He would have to see a doctor. By now, the murder had gone from his mind. His illness was the thing that nagged him. What on earth was wrong with him?

"Maybe it's 'flu," suggested his mate. "I reckon you should be in bed."

Even his employer suggested that he go home at once. This last remark really made Mike feel ill.

During the afternoon, Carlton found Mike spreadeagled over his bench. Between them, Jack and Mr. Geary hauled the heavy frame into the garage office.

Ten minutes later, the ambulance swung into the workshop. An anxious Mr. Geary showed the attendants to his office and watched with Carlton as the two men expertly lifted Mike on to a stretcher.

"What do you think's up with him?" Geary asked one attendant.

"Dunno, but he looks rough, doesn't he? Look how flushed he is."

On the way to the hospital, Mike woke for eight or nine seconds, then went back into his coma. In the uncertain awakening, he knew little of his surroundings, but he was sufficiently alert to understand the conversation of the two ambulance men.

"Never found that Pakistani, did they?"

"No, but they'll have to. When a chap has what he has, you can't let it slide. They reckon that as a contagious disease it's a killer."

Mike heard no more. He did not wake either. He was dead by the time the ambulance reached the hospital.

An hour later, Mr. Geary answered the office telephone and learned of his employee's death.

"What had he?" he asked, after the news had sunk in.

"Pneumonia."

"But he went quick, didn't he?"

"Oh, he didn't die from that. He had a heart attack and died before they reached the hospital."

"SWEET DREAMS, SWEET ADA"

DAVID PEDDIE COWAN

Illustrated by R. D. Farley

TAD SAT DOWN and looked slyly at his auntie Ada, trying to gauge her mood, as she sat there mending his overalls. It was hard to tell with his auntie. Even in repose, her face looked tight, like a fist clenched in pain.

Auntie Ada was one of those lean, hard-working, middle-aged females. She wore all the world's troubles on her face. He watched her as she sat there stabbing her needle through. Some small worry was niggling at the back of her mind. That worry would grow, he thought. It would become too big, and suddenly, it would spill out all over the place and he would be in the dog house again. Auntie Ada had made his uncle Clarence a very happy man, he thought bitterly. She had left him. Tad sighed.

Auntie Ada looked up at him challengingly with her sharp eyes.

"I'm goin' to quit the garage, auntie," he said tentatively.

She threw him a long, grim look. "You'll do nothing of the sort," she snapped.

He sat a minute, thinking out his argument carefully. He was determined not to get angry about it.

"As if you hadn't been in enough trouble already," she said bitterly.

He felt a quick spurt of anger that scattered his marshalled thoughts. She was always bringing that up. "I can always go back to rag sorting," he said with mean deliberation.

She gave him one of her long, bleak looks. "Over my dead body," she said and continued with her sewing.

O.K., all right, he thought. That's just the way it might be. He sat there, silently hating her.

"You'll stop at the garage and that's final," she told him grimly.

He bowed his head in his hands holding himself in. Ever since he had been a nipper, his auntie Ada had looked after him with a grim uncharitable charity, for better or for worse.

It had been all right when they were up north with his uncle Clarence at the smallholding. He had liked it there. But when she had come into that little money and had left his uncle and taken him south to live in the town, it had mostly been worse. His troubles had really started then. My God, he grieved, he was nearly eighteen and big for his age. Why could she not let him run his own life. The miserable old bitch, he thought. Some day, I'll do her, so help me I will, he promised silently.

She looked at him darkly. "You'll only get into more trouble with that lot. You know what the Probation Officer said."

"Aw, auntie, be your age," he said. "I've finished with that probation lark now. I can take another job if I feel like it."

She sewed on in tight lipped silence.

"All for a measly fiver a week an' no pickin's. I'm quittin', I tell you."

"Huh," she snorted. "You and your pickin's. Why can't you keep your hands off other folk's things?" She raved off at him for a full minute until her voice was drowned by the opening music of a western on television. Auntie Ada could talk anyone to a frazzle, but she couldn't compete with the telly, it was nice and loud. He set himself to watch the show, ignoring her grim face.

The music faded. "And another thing," she said.

Here we go again, he thought.

"You never lift a hand to help. Those logs, they're still in the washhouse. Not one chopped, 'though I asked you a dozen times."

"Give over, auntie," he said testily. "O.K., I heard you."

She raised her voice to a higher pitch and screamed abuse at him. She was properly wound up. He just sat back, listening with one half of his mind, tapping his foot, as if he was on the panel of Juke Box Jury. When she paused for breath, he let out a sound like a klaxon, turned his thumb down and said: "Miss."

That really got her. She rose and went out of the room slamming the door behind her.

He had lost the thread of the

western completely. He couldn't pick it up again with all that rage against her boiling up inside of him. The tension passed, and presently he thought about the heap of logs in the washhouse. They had been there so long, that threads of cobwebs were beginning to form on them. A small niggling doubt stirred restively in the back of his mind. He got up slowly. "Damn the logs," he exploded.

He carried all the logs out into the yard. He found the axe jammed behind the old mangle against the wall.

The logs split nice and easy under his anger. He began to enjoy it. Every time he brought the axe down, he imagined that his auntie's thin neck was on the block. "Sweet dreams," he would say. Smack. "Sweet Ada," Smack.

He enjoyed it so much that he was unaware of time passing. Suddenly, there were no more logs and he had a great heap of kindlings. He put the kindlings into a box, threw the axe in the washhouse and went in. Auntie Ada had come back into the living room. He looked down at her and smiled, waiting for her to say something. She avoided his eyes.

"If you want any supper," she said grimly, "you can get it yourself. I'm off."

My God, he thought. It'll take her days to get down from that high horse of her's.

She rose and shook a bony finger at him. "You'll see," she said. "You'll soon wish I was back."

"Aw right, auntie," he said. He had heard all this before. She would feel better about it in the morning. She gave him a final cold look and went upstairs.

"Sweet dreams, sweet Ada," he said wearily to the closed door.

He sat listening to her walking about upstairs. Then he heard her come down and go along the passage. The front door opened and closed with a slam. She'll be back, he told himself. She's off to cry on Alf Bessant's shoulder and tell him all about her delinquent nephew.

Alf was a sort of friend of auntie Ada's. He worked at the abattoir. He was always bringing her odds and ends of liver and tripe and even pigs' feet. Alf had known his auntie a long time ago up north. They were always talking about liver and things, and black pudding; especially black pudding. Tad hated the sight of the man. He had such big, crooked, discoloured teeth and he was always smiling. Tad couldn't think what Alf could find to smile about working at the abattoir among all that offal.

To hell with her, he thought. He went upstairs, changed into his new fawn jeans and chisel-toed shoes. He took a pound note out of his savings box and went down to the "Bloody Dragon".

There weren't many people in the bar. A lone young man was seated at a table in the corner. "Double Martini, dry," said Tad to the barman.

The barman looked at him in sour surprise.

"Want to see my birth certificate?"

"Double Martini," said the barman glumly as he got the drink.

Tad took an experimental sip and pursed his lips. He didn't think much

of it, but he decided that he would have a few more presently, just to give it a fair trial. After he had a few, he began to feel better.

"Go easy on that stuff," advised the barman sombrely.

Tad gave him a cold look. Damn middle-aged square, he thought. They were all the same. Once they turned forty, they were experts on everything; always pouring out advice, like dirty water down a drain.

To show what he thought about it, Tad had a vodka. The barman was a proper old sourpuss, he thought, and wiped him out of his mind. He thought about auntie Ada.

"To hell with her," he said to his drink. "She's the one person I don't need around."

"Woman trouble?" asked old sourpuss.

Tad smiled. He was feeling a lot better. "Naw, women don't bother me." He waved an expansive arm. "Nothing bothers me." He turned his back on the barman, holding his glass comfortingly in his hand and leant casually back against the bar as he had seen the relaxed young men do on the telly.

Across the room, the lone young man still sat at the table, a half-full pint glass before him. An aura of sadness rested on him, touching the three empty chairs with a sort of forlorn grace. Just like life, thought Tad. You were always coming across little dark corners that were littered with debris and loneliness.

As he watched him, the door opened and Tad saw the young man start a little. He looked round. Detective Sergeant Luggy Mullins swam into the room with all the snooty arrogance of a well-fed shark ignoring morsels of carrion. The sergeant leaned on the bar with studied casualness and spoke to old sourpuss for a few moments. He downed a half pint in two gulps, raised a hand and moved towards the door. His eyes rested disdainfully on the young man as he passed.

Tad floated over to the corner.

The young man looked mournfully at his drink. "Big head," he said softly.

Tad smiled down at him and waved an expansive arm towards the door. "There but for the grace of God, goes God," he said feeling very pleased with himself. He felt a warm alcoholic glow of fellowship. This young man had such a nice round, bewildered, baby face, but nice. "I know your friend," he said archly.

Babyface breathed a long disconsolate sigh. He took a sip of his drink and put the glass down carefully on the damp ring on the little pad before him. "Friend nothing," he said. His face took on a beautiful, petulant, babyfaced scowl.

"I'll say, he's a big head," said Tad. "I hate his guts."

With a visible effort, Babyface pulled himself together with the air of a man who has been foolishly indiscreet. He took a couple of quick drinks from his glass as if he was about to leave.

Tad laid a restraining hand on his shoulder. "Relax, brother." He leaned closer. "I have a record myself."

The young man sat fidgety and un-

comfortable on the edge of his chair. He didn't say anything. Tad looked him over carefully and wondered what Mullins could have on him. He didn't look like a petty crook. The drinks had set the maggots of perception crawling in Tad's brain. He could look right into this young man and know what made him tick. Babyface was a false pretence merchant, he decided. A con man. That beautiful babyface would deceive the Lord Chief Justice himself.

"What sort of record?" asked the young man.

"Arson, larceny, take and drive, wounding," said Tad, blandly adding a little to his record.

Babyface looked down his nose. "Huh," was all he said.

Big-head, himself, thought Tad. He leaned over drunkenly. "I got a sweet little job lined up for tonight," he whispered.

"What sort of job?"

Tad waved his glass at him. "A sweet little job," he repeated. "Might be a little bloody, but sweet."

"What are you drinking?" asked Babyface taking Tad's empty glass.

"Martini," said Tad. He waved an arm, nearly lost his balance and sat down at the table.

Babyface made some sort of secret sign to the barman and suddenly, there was a full glass of Martini before him. Tad looked admiringly at the glass and took a clumsy sip. Babyface certainly had a pull with ol' Sourpuss, he thought.

"What sort of job?" asked the young man again.

"Nosey, ain't ya?" said Tad.

"I thought you wanted to talk about it?" said the young man like a sulky child.

He's lovely, thought Tad. A beautiful baby man. Suddenly, he wanted to put out his hand and stroke the hurt, round face. He restrained the impulse and said tipsily: "Keep it under your hat, brother." He told him about the wooden box his auntie Ada kept under her bed. "She has a stack o' fivers in there. An' ya know what? She keeps the key on a string round her neck."

"How will you get it?"

"Dead easy, brother. I'll just wait till she's asleep an' slip the ol' box from under her bed."

"But the key?"

Tad waved a nonchalant hand. "To hell with the key. She can keep that. I'll take the ol' box down to the washhouse and smash it open with the axe." Tad took a sly peek at Babyface and saw doubt fluttering in his eyes like a frightened bird, but he was taking it all in. His ears were like radio telescopes tracking a satellite.

"What if she wakes up?"

Tad looked at Babyface grimly. "Then I'll have to make sure she don't ever wake up again, brother."

Babyface looked at him a moment with round shocked eyes, then he rose and went to the bar. Tad laughed. "Sweet dreams, sweet Ada," he said and laid his head on the table enjoying the fun. When he looked up again, Babyface had gone. Tad got up and went to the bar.

Just then, Alf Bessant came in and asked for a half pint. Auntie Ada'll be back now, Tad thought. "How's

the ol' peasant?" greeted Tad as if he had found a long lost friend. Alf was just getting over his surprise at seeing him there, but he gave Tad a wide stupid smile, showing his big crooked teeth like a neglected cemetery. Tad scowled and remembered that he didn't like Alf.

"I got something for Ada," said Alf.

"I bet it's bloody offal," said Tad and laughed.

"A real treat," said Alf full of suppressed mystery. "Something she's been wanting for a long time." He smiled again, downed his half pint and went out.

Tad stood swaying. Thinking about offal made him feel sick. He made unsteadily for the door. Outside, a fine rain was falling. The tarmac shone wetly under the street lamps. Down the road, he could see the orange crossing lights throbbing with the slow pulse-beat of the sleeping town. Far away on the river, a foghorn sounded mournful and lost. Tad suddenly felt the whole world go sad on him.

The back door was locked. "Key's in the washhouse," he muttered. He hesitated, feeling a twinge of disquiet. He didn't like going into dark places.

In the washhouse, the dark shadowy bulk of the old mangle against the wall loomed misshapenly through his drunkenness. A heavy sickly smell, like death, came to him. He didn't feel so good. He lurched against the rickety table just inside the door and it went over with a crash. He got up off the floor in a bemused panic, wiping the dampness from the floor on his jeans and groped along the wall for the key.

He went upstairs with slow alcoholic care and flopped down on his bed without undressing. In a few minutes, he was asleep. He was down in the washhouse. Auntie Ada was standing over him with a whip in her hand. She was about three times her normal size and she had changed into a negress. "Chop them logs," she commanded and cracked the whip.

He tried to pick up the axe, but it was jammed under the old mangle. Crack, came the whip again. "Push on the mangle till I get the axe out," he whimpered in terror. Auntie Ada pushed against the rollers. He sprang to the handle and turned it.

Auntie Ada screamed blue murder and went back to her normal size. He wound the handle till her arms came through the other side. He had to stop her yelling. He pulled the axe free and hit her with it and the blood ran all over the place.

A great gust of revulsion shook him. He tried to throw away the axe, but he couldn't let go. He awoke. It was daylight and he was standing on the stairs holding desperately on to the banister rail. Suddenly, he let go and fled into his room.

He lay on the bed quivering. It's only a dream, he kept telling himself. Dreams have no meaning. They don't mean a thing. After a little, he stopped shaking. He looked at the clock on his bedside table. It was half past six.

He got up and went to his auntie's room. She was not there. In a blind panic, he rushed downstairs. The house was silent and empty. The hor-

ror of his dream built up like a thundercloud. What if it wasn't a dream? The very thought of going out to the washhouse swamped his mind in terror. He sat down and sobbed shakily.

Detective Sergeant Mullins came to the station early in the fond hope that he could catch up on some of his paper work. He was sitting at his desk when Jengo Watson, the new Detective Constable, came in. Mullins sighed. "What now, Jengo?" he said wearily. Jengo told him.

"You mean Tad. Mrs. Grundle's nephew?" asked Mullins pursing his lips thoughtfully. "Didn't know his auntie had any money." He looked up, "But it's just about his weight." He sighed. "Well you know what to do?"

Jengo's baby face looked unhappy. "I don't know where he lives," he said.

Mullins rose. "All right, get the car round."

The Sergeant had an enquiring mind. He approached the house from the rear. He opened the washhouse door. "Stone the bloomin' crows," he gasped. "He's done her in all right." The washhouse floor was awash with congealing blood. A red-stained axe lay in the middle of the floor and there was a bloody imprint of a hand on the wall. He closed the door before Jengo's horrified gaze. "Stop here," he said.

The back door was not locked. He walked softly through into the living room. The curtains were still drawn. He switched on the light. Tad got up from the settee and stood swaying and blinking. He looked at Mullins with bloodshot eyes. "What do you want?" he asked.

"Where's your auntie?" asked Mullins, looking Tad over with studied care.

Tad felt a surge of panic. "You know all the answers," he said bitterly. "Suppose you tell me?"

The Sergeant came in close. "What's that on your pants?"

Tad looked down at his new fawn jeans, now sad and wrinkled. The legs were spattered with dark stains. There was an ugly red smear on his right thigh. He looked foolishly at his hands. On his palms were traces of dried blood. "Oh my God," he breathed. "Auntie Ada." He looked hopelessly at the Sergeant's grim face, swayed and sat down on the floor.

"Hey, Jengo," called Mullins over his shoulder.

Babyface came in his eyes round.

Tad sat up and stared at him. "A lousy copper," he breathed. A lousy copper." He broke down in bitter sobs.

"We'll want those jeans for the lab," Mullins was saying to Babyface. "Better get on the air for the photographer for the washhouse. Oh, and let the D.I. know what's on."

Tad got shakily to his feet and saw his auntie Ada come in behind them. He stared. "Auntie," he screamed.

Mullins turned quickly. "Hold it, Jengo."

"Mrs. Grundle," said Mullins. His large ears went red. "I thought, I thought—" He stammered into silence.

"You thought what, Mr. Mullins?" asked auntie Ada, looking stern.

Mullins looked at her foolishly, his ears scarlet. "I thought you were—gone?"

"Well, Sergeant, if it's any of your business, I've been to see my husband. I'm going back to him in two weeks." She looked primly at the Sergeant's red ears. "That is, of course, if you have no objections."

She looked brightly at Tad. Your uncle has a new place now and he's doing real well." She removed her hat and put it carefully on the sideboard. "He's got some real work for you too." She turned. "Has Alf been?"

"Alf?"

"Oh you are dim, Tad," said auntie Ada with a touch of her usual asperity. "Alf Bessant. Did he bring some blood for black pudding? He said that he would put it on the table in the washhouse if I was out."

She looked closely at Tad, noting his tear-stained face. A soft wistful light came into her eyes. "Oh, Tad," she breathed. "You really did think I was gone for good."

Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell;
And in the lowest Deep a lower deep
Still threatening to devour me opens wide,
To which the Hell I suffer seems a Heaven."

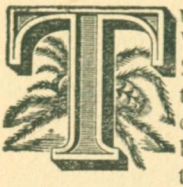
JOHN MILTON.

The beautiful blue heaven is flecked with blood!
The sunshine on the floor is black! The air
Is changed to vapours such as the dead breathe
In charnel pits! Pah! I am choked! There creeps
A clinging, black, contaminating mist
About me . . . 'tis substantial, heavy, thick,
I cannot pluck it from me, for it glues
My fingers and my limbs to one another,
And eats into my sinews, and dissolves
My flesh to a pollution, poisoning
The subtle, pure, and inmost spirit of life!

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY.

A HANGMAN'S ROPE

LES SHYMANSKY



THE MAN from the Watchtower Bible Society was the first to die. Towards his end he did not speak, but howled all the time. We buried our heads in whatever rags there were in the cell for we preferred to be choked with stinking cloth rather than listen to his screams.

Schmidt had a different feeling. Often he opened the door and listened, his eyes half closed. Despite the fact that he bragged his love of music, I think he fancied screams more than Wagner.

Occasionally he cast a quick, stealthy glance at the inmates. We knew he was looking for the next victim. So long as the Watchtower man was dying we did not feel worse off. After his death we all began to fear for ourselves.

For the next few days Schmidt did not single out anybody. He would come for a chat and talk about himself and ask about our families. We knew he was not interested in getting anything out of us. Everyone had had his interrogation and was waiting for the transportation to the concentration camp.

Meanwhile Schmidt had done with us in the psychological sense, for Schmidt was a psychologist. He beat us, but not for pleasure. I always had the impression that it was the most unpleasant part of the experiment for him. No, Schmidt was a master in creating atmosphere, an atmosphere that would break a man and drive him to suicide. For different people Schmidt had selected different methods with the passion of a woman choosing new shades for various lamps.

The Watchtower man was Schmidt's first defeat. The religious fanatic was not to be daunted by tortures. In fact, he died the sort of death he had been dreaming about. We could only envy him.

Schmidt was not disheartened by this setback. He still had within his grasp a few intelligent people, and he intended to relish this. He wanted to solve us like a crossword puzzle. In this sense, the death of the Watchtower man was a good introduction as it showed the survivors the torment of the dying.

A week later Schmidt picked out his next victim, Professor Wolski. Schmidt beckoned to him with his finger.

"Come here."

The professor approached him uncertainly. The holes in his coat showed his dirty yellow shirt. The light from the bulb in a wire net flattened his features.

With a gesture of his hand, Schmidt indicated the professor's hollow stomach.

"Do you have a belt?"

Silence answered this absurd question. Immediately upon arrest not only the belt but the shoelaces were removed from the prisoners. Schmidt did not wait longer. He pulled from his pocket a small ball of parachute string and flung it at the professor.

Schmidt then went away. We were looking dully at the professor. Slowly he bent down and picked up the ball with an awkward movement. In spite of ourselves a relaxation bordering on joy overwhelmed us.

So it was the professor's turn now.

All the afternoon I wondered if I should give him my portion of bread. Finally I did not. I was afraid of his reaction. We all tried to behave as if nothing had happened. At night we lay awake listening to the professor twisting on his place.

During the day, whenever footsteps from outside approached, we stood up as under orders. The professor, however, was not summoned. Schmidt looked in after supper and again spoke of his wife and children in Hamburg and of his love for them.

All the time he kept an eye on the professor. He left us before the night roll-call, bidding us good-bye. When we woke up in the morning, we saw the professor with a noose around his neck hanging from a bar of the high windows. The moment he got the news Schmidt was on the spot. He ordered the string to be untied and put it in his pocket.

"The string by which a man has been hanged," he observed, "always brings good luck."

That time we had only two days of peace. On the third day immediately after breakfast Schmidt called an architect named Busch. When the latter approached him, he received a heavy, unexpected blow on the nose. The blood gushed at once. Busch stood stunned, terribly pale, the red lines dabbing the corners of his mouth. Without a word Schmidt threw a ball of string at Busch's feet and left. Busch was motionless for a moment before he picked up the string.

Busch was a self-made man, the son of poor peasants and not much gifted. He had had hard times before he got established socially and financially. He had no intention of killing himself.

The same day Schmidt called him to his office. When Busch returned to the cell, we noticed he was without his teeth and one eye. He mourned all night, not like the Watchtower man, but silently. His moans had more fright than pain. He did not speak to any of us and we ourselves were too faint-hearted to talk to him. They took him away again after breakfast.

That night Busch did not come back. He had been put in the solitary confinement cell. It was a large vault with a damp, stony floor. Nobody could last there long.

Schmidt himself told us where Busch was. He did not give details. That was also his method. He allowed room for one's imagination. Busch was absent a long time.

Schmidt stopped his visits during this period, but at last he came to us. He brought out the dirty ball of string from his pocket, tossed it on

his palm and we knew Busch was dead.

In the horrifying silence his eyes were scrutinizing us. My heart was pounding against my chest, but this time Schmidt did not take long to think. He called me at once and with a friendly nod handed the string to me.

"After two hangings it should bring you luck," he said.

He stayed with us long after the evening roll-call, but I did not hear anything he said as I coiled and uncoiled the string around my fingers.

When the lights were off I realized I was in the same spot. I had sat down when Schmidt had passed me the string. Fumbling among the legs of my companions I reached my place on the floor. Nobody shouted at me.

I knew no one would be able to sleep that night. Nor was I able to. My body became so sensitive that even the touch of the blanket was hurtful. Beneath my closed eyes I witnessed terrible scenes, and I now understood why the professor had groaned before having been called to Schmidt.

In the morning, I found I was still clutching the ball of string. My hand was numbed. I was called for by Schmidt after supper that night. He smiled on seeing me. Two *männer* were standing sentry.

"Sit down. Stand up," he commanded. "One, two, three . . ."

To the beat of his dry orders, I did the countless knees bend.

A terrible pain was piercing the muscles of my legs. My heart almost burst and I could not breathe. Schmidt asked me to come forward. He had taken a small mirror out of his pocket.

"Look," he said.

A blood-covered face looked back at me. A narrow strip of red emerged from my nostrils. The eyes were bloodshot.

"And now to work again," said Schmidt.

I fainted.

They revived me with cold water. They went on beating me and forcing me to do fatigue exercise. From the mirror which someone held before my eyes a deathly white face kept peering at me.

They stopped at last and I was conveyed to the solitary confinement cell. While bringing me back to my senses, they had broken my nose. A dull pain drilled into my skull. But the worst torment was inflicted by my thoughts for I knew there was no escape from Schmidt and that today's treatment was only an introduction.

This was not the type of torture for extracting a confession or information which, like purgatory, has to stop some time. It invariably culminated in death by suicide, or torture beyond endurance.

When I lay on the wet, concrete floor of the solitary cell, death seemed to me to be beautiful. A reward for suffering. The fear of death, minimized by the greater fear of torture, went out of my thoughts.

Only now did I understand the professor and Busch. Solely my moral code checked me. But in spite of it the window bars tempted me.

Torment or suicide? The dilemma was driving me crazy. Furthermore, the beating had given me a fever. I threw away the ball of string and then I groped on the floor for it. I found it but cast it away again.

I repeated that all night, then in the morning the *wachmann* brought me back to our cell instead of to Schmidt. Schmidt had hanged himself during the same night. He had received a telegram that the bombardment of Hamburg had destroyed his family.

To this day I still have with me the ball of dirty string.

ARCHIE

A STUDY OF A PARANOIAC

R. G. BOWER

Illustrated by Roy Jackson

THE SODIUM STREET lamps glowered red against the winter sky, and the shoppers crowding the stalls spilled into the road like litter, like the chip papers that were blown under the car and smacked to the ground.

"Put your foot down, Archie. See what she'll do."

"Not with all these people, I daren't."

"You worry too much. No need to worry when I'm here."

Archie who had the same christian name as myself clapped me on the shoulder. I love him to do that. It makes my worries float away so I don't care what I do.

"O.K. Hold your shirt on. Here we go."

While Archie kept his thumb on the horn I coaxed the old car up to thirty-five, then forty-five, then fifty. People scattered, shouted at us from the pavement, hundreds of faces looking at us. Just one old man was talking to his wife, oblivious of us.

"What's up with them?" said Archie, annoyed at this.

"Traffic's held up ahead."

"Turn back through the crowd again. Will she go any harder?"

I stopped and turned in the road.

"She was going flat out," I said.

The policeman's head was large at the window, his helmet touching the top of the door.

"What's the noise?"

"Horn got stuck," Archie said, hooting to show it was free now.

"Know you're breaking the law?"

He looked all round the car, narrow-eyed, and straight at me but I looked down at his black collar.

"Watch it," he warned, "or I'll book you."

He stood back in the growing darkness, malevolent.

I restarted the car and drove off.

Archie grinned. "Speed her up. He can't hurt you."

"Might hit someone."

At that moment out of the corner of my eye I saw the shadow of death. I couldn't breathe from the wall of cold air around me. I felt sick and my hands trembled on the wheel. When I turned to look there was only a group of people talking outside a shop window; but I knew IT had watched me.

"What are you moaning for?"

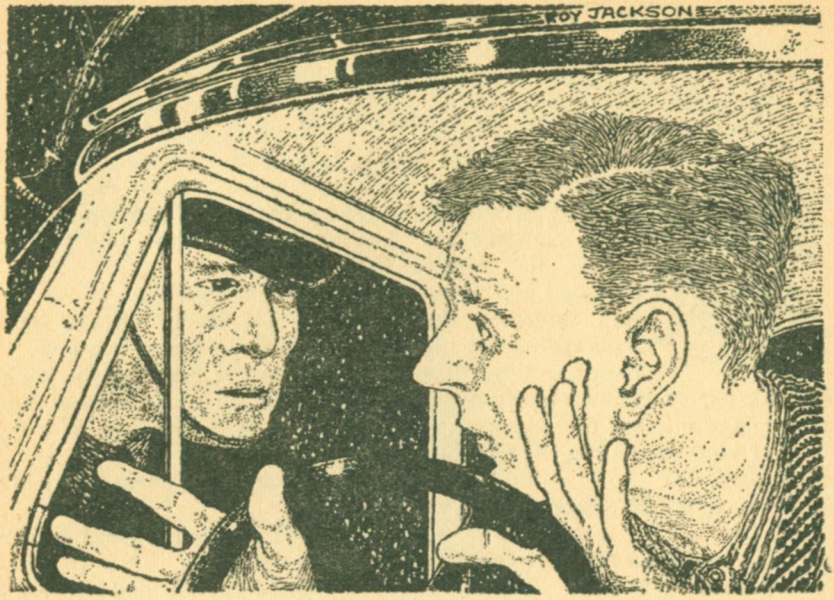
"Something scared me—something black."

"Don't you like black?"

"Not all black."

Then he gave me a friendly punch on the shoulder. "Come on, speed her up. Come on, let's have some fun."

My fear lifted like a dream.



The road was yellow by now. Archie hooted, scattering the people out of the way and we leaned out, jeering, as we rushed down on them.

I would have missed the old couple if they had kept going but he turned to help her carry the shopping basket and then they groped forward again, wavering, like insects on sand. As we sped towards them Archie hooted continuously, yet they stood there, staring at us. It seemed Archie pulled the wheel to go in front of them but I wrenched it back, intending to shoot between them and the kerb.

"Don't stop," shouted Archie.

In the mirror I saw people running.

"It's all right, boyo," Archie said. "Think they're hurt?"

He shrugged and looked back. "Nobody following. We'll ditch the car in East Street."

I went by the dimly-lit side streets to the part of the town where we lived.

"Outside the shops where the others are parked," said Archie.

We slammed the doors as if we owned it.

"See you," said Archie.

I walked quickly to my parent's house, anxious now I was alone. I saw my mother's long worried face, grey behind the flame-coloured curtains, hovering like an old grey moth. I stepped along the crazy-paving on my worry-slabs, the ones I walked on when I was upset. When I was happy

I used a different set; it was only when I was in a temper that I stamped on the flowers.

"Where have you been?" demanded my father.

"Looking at the shops."

"And you leave the office at five? You'll bring your mother to her grave."

She came in from the hall, her mouth quivering.

"Archie, you treat us like dirt. I suppose you've been with that friend again?"

I looked at the door, wishing it would fly open so I could escape.

"I didn't mean to worry you; I've got the key of the door——"

"Twenty-one is no age, dear. He leads you astray, I know he does. We want you to promise you'll never see him again."

"Are you going to promise?" asked my father.

"You do love us, don't you?"

"He's the only friend I've got."

"A boy's best friend is his mother. I can't stand much more of this worry, Archie."

I looked at the clock, waiting for the hand to cover one whole minute.

"Archie! Please!"

"I'm counting," I snapped.

When it was exactly on the mark, "I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you, Archie. You won't regret it."

I pushed her away as she came forward quickly to hug me.

Before the flames reached my room I was dressed and safely in the garden. From the lawn I watched the smoke rise crimson from the blazing roof, blacken, and uncurl into the night. The garden and the nearby houses glowed orange, warm and pleasant as on a bonfire night; and then people came, shouting, and trampling on the plants.

"Keep off the garden," I said.

"Where are your parents?" they asked.

"Don't know. Keep off the garden."

Two men dashed to the back door through pieces of blazing wood dropping from my bedroom window. They burst the door in; the smoke hung thick and still beneath the ceiling. Then, with a crack the room burst into flames and the men were thrown down.

The screams; first one, then another, layers of screams. My mother was in my bedroom, her hand to her throat, peering out from behind a curtain of flame, her face long and frightened. The crowds shouted to her to jump, that they would catch her. She looked around the room and her high voice rose above the roar of the flames.

"Archie! Where are you? Archie-e-e!"

There was a roar, a sudden sheet of white and yellow flame, and the floor, and my mother with it, plunged down to the kitchen below. The crowd groaned and tightened, unable to go closer because of the heat.

"Not your fault, boyo. No good worrying."

I turned to see Archie, fully dressed, standing on a flower bed.

"No one to moan about the garden now," he grinned.

The fire-engine had arrived, hoses were uncoiled, and water soaked into the brickwork.

"Been here long?" I asked.

We walked to the bottom of the garden where a bird-bath stood among the rose bushes.

"Saw it start."

"Where?"

"Among the linen. Is that a policeman?"

Mrs. Vachey, a neighbour, was pointing in our direction.

"Can't stand cops," said Archie sidling off. "See you."

This policeman spoke gently. I liked talking to him. Archie Wright had seen it begin with the linen round the fire; I didn't know his address, although I'd known him about two years. I was the only son, we were all happy together, there were no relatives nearby. I would go to the station if I could remember anything else.

He squeezed my arm as he left.

"Good night, dad," I said. "I mean —good night."

Mrs. Vachey's eyes were red with tears and smoke.

"You look exhausted, Archie. Come in ours tonight. You can stay as long as you want."

I shook my head. "I'm going to walk about and forget it," I said. "I don't want to remember anything about it any more."

She bit her lip. "Your poor mother." And then her face was shapeless with crying.

The fire was almost out. Steam hissed up where the fireman hosed the glowing inner walls, the shrubs and neighbouring houses had receded into the darkness, and quietly the people went home.

At dawn I returned for a last look. Rubble on the sodden carpets, bits of burnt furniture, blistered door-frames, the bath upside down where it had fallen, and roof-tiles everywhere. Water dripped down the blackened walls and the air smelt burnt. In the lounge, by some freak, one flame-coloured satin curtain hung untouched from its rod over an unbroken window.

I found lodgings in a nearby city, down a road near the cathedral. The room smelt comfortable as though friendly people had lived there, and the windows overlooked a river.

"Those green domes you can just see in the distance," said the landlady, "belong to the lunatic asylum. You'd be surprised at the people who go there. Oh, mind the cover on this armchair. There's a rent in it. It only wants a stitch."

Waiting each morning by the wall of the close for the bus to the printing firm, where I worked as a dispatch clerk, I gradually became accustomed to the other passengers; even though I never spoke to them I felt secure because they were the people I always waited with under the protection of the great grey steeple. Presently I got to love walking the six hundred and twenty-five steps to my waiting stone, the fourth one along from that in which was embedded the bus-stop pole with its four white and three black bands. And when the bus majestically drew to a halt I smiled

and rubbed my hands with pleasure. I listened to the convulsed shudderings of the engine, and endeavoured by the seventh throb to have my foot on the platform; I knew that success in this would make the day go well.

Opposite me most mornings sat a quiet, friendly young man; he didn't attempt to speak, seeing I preferred to do my counting undisturbed, yet there were times when I felt he was observing me.

One day as I handed the conductor my fare some of the coins fell on the floor. Immediately the young man leaned down and searched for them.

"Threepenny bit and three pennies?" he asked, handing them to me. "I can't find any more than that."

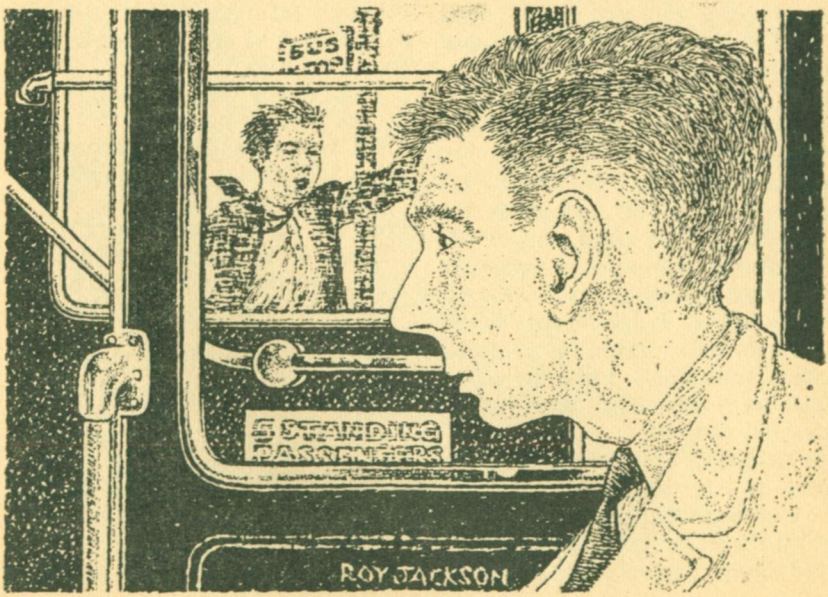
"That's right," I said.

Before I had time to turn to the window to count the cyclists we overtook, he asked, "How are you settling down?"

"All right."

I was confused. I knew everyone was looking. I turned back to my window but I was too flustered to concentrate. If I'd thought about it I would have pretended not to hear; but, nevertheless, I felt excited.

The next morning he was not in the queue. I was aware that something was wrong. The grey shoulders of the cathedral loomed above the close wall, loomed like a threat, like the news of the death of a neighbour. The bus trundled to a halt. I heard



the sound of running feet and saw him dashing towards us. He leapt on and sat down beside me.

"Made it," he gasped. "There isn't another hospital bus for half an hour."

Although he didn't say much to me I was glad he had chosen me to sit beside; I felt as I had many years earlier when the cat, after prowling round a roomful of people, had leapt up on my lap to sleep.

Shortly before we had to get off he leaned confidentially towards me.

"Where do you live?"

"Thirteen Devonshire Road."

"By the river? Nice to walk along there in the evenings."

I ran happily up the steps to work, looking forward to an evening stroll.

A feeling of horror sank upon me. My skin was cold and my lips tight over my gums. I knew I was again being watched. A figure dressed entirely in black slid like a shadow behind a bus waiting opposite. I gazed, immobile with fear. When the bus moved away the pavement was empty. I looked up and down the street but the figure had gone. It was unthinkable that such a nightmare could have boarded a bus; I was content to believe it had vanished, and with this belief my courage unaccountably returned. Little the worse, apart from shivering, I went in to a good day at work.

I had finished my evening meal and stood at the window, idly watching the river and the dusky bridge across which the traffic crawled like bright-eyed beetles, musing about the young man, wondering whether I would see him if I went for a walk.

And then I knew I was not alone. Someone had come into the room. I realized I could become hysterical, but I restrained myself, even remembering to breathe regularly, and resolving to turn suddenly on the fifth breath and confront the intruder.

Sprawling in the armchair was Archie Wright.

"Hiya," he grinned, toying with the rent in the flowered cover.

"Mind," I warned, putting my hand out to stop him, "it only wants a stitch."

There was a long deliberate ripping sound as the cover fell away exposing the shiny horsehair beneath.

"Look what you've done!" I said, amazed at the damage.

"Can't let that old dragon rule everybody," he said, ripping it right across the back.

I could only stare, helpless.

"She'll throw me out."

He shrugged and lounged round the room, idly kicking the furniture.

"Couldn't stick this place. I'd go nuts. Let's go out somewhere."

I pulled the pieces of the cover together, wondering whether I'd be able to stitch them so the landlady wouldn't notice.

"Come on," he said, making for the door. "There's a sports car along here —do a hundred."

The river slept coldly under the mist that smudged the street lamps of the far embankment into glowing balls, into a luminous blur.

"Along here," said Archie.

It was a super sports. I shuddered

to think of myself at the wheel and Archie urging me on faster and faster. Then I saw a figure, a man striding briskly, the light jogging on his overcoat as he approached. At the next lamp I recognized him as the young man on the bus.

"I know him," I said.

"You would!" Archie growled. "Can't stand company."

He turned away before I could stop him. The young man seemed in a hurry.

"Going for a walk?" I said.

He glanced at me sharply. Then he smiled. "Nice evening."

Archie had disappeared.

"By yourself?"

"Now, I am."

"I've just got to deliver something at The Grange along here, then I'll walk back to the main road with you. If you don't mind?"

We arrived at the house and, telling me he would not be long, he went through the gate and tapped at the door. Light gushed for a second from the doorway and I was alone.

The railings were rough and cold and bit into my palms, yet I knew if I let go I would be unable to control my trembling. I knew what was behind me. I felt it detach itself from the night to punish me.

Against my will I turned and there, under a street lamp, the river mist swirling behind it, was the spectre, black and merciless. I alone was the object of its malevolence. This was no effect of mist or imagination; it was too evil. Even as I gazed I felt an overwhelming wave of hatred; I moaned and covered my face; then it turned and walked away with almost a human gait.

Light flared from the house and the young man rejoined me. I gripped his sleeve.

"Did you see it? Look!"

But by this time it had merged with the night.

"You're shivering like a leaf! What's up?"

As we walked towards the main road I told him what I had seen. His eyes gleamed deep beneath his brows. Then he looked straight at me so penetratingly I turned away; and then he compressed his lips. Yet the action was as significant as the roar of flames or the ripping of a chair cover. Something final had occurred and I was filled with a strange excitement.

He said, "How about a coffee? My flat's just over the bridge."

At the gate he paused and felt in his pocket.

"You haven't a knife by any chance?"

"No."

"Not even a penknife?"

"No."

"Doesn't matter. Mind the step."

His rooms at the top of the stairs smelt cold and unlived-in. I sat on a stool at the kitchen table while he put the coffee on and got things ready. He switched on the fire.

"Soon warm up," he smiled. "Can you get a couple of spoons from that drawer?"

Four spoons, a carving knife, three forks, three knives.

"Have some crisps," he said, taking the spoons. "They won't keep."

"I know. They go soft."

"You like them? Another packet here. Excuse me a moment, I have to make a phone call. Keep an eye on the coffee."

He closed the door behind him.

I sat still, looking about me. The coffee gave a faint hiss as it began to warm. Everything else was silent, the black uncurtained windows, the large broom-cupboard, the electric light bulb, the plain wooden furniture silent, tense, quivering.

The skin on my face tightened and my throat closed with horror. Downstairs the outside door opened and then closed. I knew what had entered. My throat was so tight I was unable to moan; my tongue was thick with fear. I heard the soft menacing tread on the stairs, slow, vengeful. My bones were as weak as spaghetti.

I sat slumped over the table, staring at the door, my heart thumping, my hands cold. The footsteps had stopped at the top of the stairs. The knob turned and the door opened.

Black, horsehair black, and tall. It came towards me in utter hatred. Slowly the spectre removed its mask. It was this that caused me to slither from my chair and lie helpless.

"What's up? Are you ill?" asked a voice.

The spectre darted away.

"In there!" I pointed feebly to the broom-cupboard. "Don't go there!"

He helped me to my feet.

I knew it was waiting for me. I tried to get strength to move away.

He went towards the cupboard.

"Don't open it!" I shrieked.

He ignored me, and it was then that I understood the reason for his asking me in. He was a mental patient in league with lunacy, and there was a conspiracy to destroy me. He was about to force me to see the spectre.

"Not easy to open," he muttered. "But I'll prove to you it's empty."

As he struggled with the catch I leapt forward, the carving knife in my hand. I would go insane if this torment continued.

The knife was deep in his back. He pressed himself to the cupboard, then twisted round, doubled up, and pitched forward to the floor.

Still crouching, I saw the feet of the men who rushed in, but I scorned to move. I had already triumphed.

An arm was flung round my throat and I was dragged backwards to a chair, and my wrists bound together.

Both men examined the body. The man with the beard stood up.

"Poor old David! I told him not to risk it. He told me he'd checked whether the fellow had a knife."

"I'll ring the police," said the other. "Why did David ask him in?"

"Thought a bit of case-study might help him at the clinic. Wanted my opinion of this paranoiac acquaintance. He left the phone to see him, that crazy murderer!"

"The murderer's in the cupboard," I whispered, "Don't open that door!"

"What! In here?"

He wrenched the door open and out tiptoed Archie Wright.

"Be seeing you, Archie Wrong," he grinned. "Can't stand company."

Watched only by me he strolled between the two men, across to the open door, and away down the stairs.

A WITCH OUT OF GUBBLECOTE

HAROLD ADSHEAD

IT WAS THE YEAR 1751. In an upper room of the local inn at Gubblecote in Hertfordshire an elderly man lay propped up on his bed so that he could see out over the winding lane that led from Tring. Along this lane came a strange procession, headed by a huge, red-bearded man who carried on his broad shoulders a terrified old woman. Her husband was hustled along behind by two burly men, and they were followed by a crowd of several thousand people, lurching, singing ribald songs and cursing, in their drunken frenzy.

The bedridden man in the inn gloated at the expression of fear on the face of the old woman, Ruth Osborne, for he attributed all his present misfortunes to the brief encounter he had had with her six years earlier.

At that time he had been a prosperous dairy farmer without a care in the world, but one sunny summer afternoon as he was standing outside his house, an elderly woman came down the lane. She looked like a gipsy and Farmer Butterfield had little time for beggars of any sort.

"Could the kind gentleman spare a little buttermilk for a poor old soul?" quavered the woman in a wheedling tone.

"Get off my farm, d'ye hear," shouted the farmer. "My buttermilk goes to feed my hogs, not any idle wastrel that comes round here."

The old woman stared sullenly with a glint in her smouldering eyes. "The Pretender's on his way south to help the poor," she muttered, "and he'll take you and your farm and all your buttermilk too." Then she turned and shuffled off down the lane.

Butterfield laughed scornfully and went back into his house; but from that moment disasters began to accumulate. It was not long before his calves contracted a serious disease and had to be slaughtered. After many other similar troubles Butterfield had to give up the farm and he decided to become a publican, taking over a small inn in Gubblecote.

However, misfortune still dogged him. He began to suffer from severe fits and though he tried doctor after doctor, they could afford him no prospect of a permanent cure. Wondering what jinx had brought him such a run of bad luck, Butterfield suddenly remembered the muttered curse of the old woman on that hot summer afternoon some six years before. Most of his time was now spent in bed and he became obsessed with the idea that he had been bewitched for his curt treatment of the old beggarwoman, and that she was responsible for all his misfortune and illness.

He called neighbours in for consultation and, presumably following the

saying "set a witch to catch a witch", he was advised to visit "a wise woman out of Northamptonshire", a powerful "cunning" or fortune-teller, who was by way of being a practising witch herself.

His doctor gave him permission to travel and Butterfield set off in a coach to make the short but arduous journey to the "white witch". After due deliberation, and having pocketed her fee, the sibyl confirmed his suspicions that he was under the spell of a witch. She instructed him to set up a guard of six men, armed with staves and pitchforks and each wearing a charm about their necks as talismans against the evil eye, to keep watch on the inn night and day.

But Butterfield's health continued to deteriorate and he had to keep more and more to his bed. In desperation, he sought fresh advice and this time an avaricious neighbour hit on an idea that would attract a large crowd to Gubblecote (where money might then be lavishly spent in the inn) and at the same time bring vengeance upon Ruth Osborne.

A request was therefore sent to William Dell, Town Crier of Hemel Hempstead, that on Thursday, 18th April, 1751, he should "cry" a notice in the market-place. It read: "This is to give notice that on Monday next a man and woman are to be publicly ducked at Tring for their crimes." It was also read out in the neighbouring towns of Winslow, Leighton Buzzard and Tring, and so came to the notice of Matthew Barton, Overseer of Tring.

Barton was a kindly and humane man, and guessed that the notice must refer to an old couple named Ruth and John Osborne, known to him as poor, simple, honest people. He decided to warn them of the impending ordeal and give them shelter in his workhouse. But when the fateful Monday arrived, the overseer was alarmed to see a great horde of people, estimated at some 5,000 people, coming into Tring.

He quickly decided to move the old couple out of the workhouse into a place of sanctuary in the vestry room adjoining Tring Parish Church. Unaware of the manœuvre, the mob began to besiege the workhouse, pulling down the palings and smashing doors and windows in their frantic search for the old pair. Since they could not find their quarry, they seized the workhouse master and threatened to burn him and fire the town unless he revealed the hiding-place.

Sick with fright, he blurted out the information, and the rabble swarmed off to the vestry, where they broke the door down and dragged the terrified couple triumphantly out. They were tied in a sheet and taken to an appropriate testing-place.

This was the strange procession that Butterfield saw from his sick bed. He was not, however, to remain an eye-witness for long, as it was soon found that no suitable pool or stream could be found in Gubblecote to "swim a witch". The crowd then swarmed on to Marston Green, where there was a large pond suitable for the implementation of their rough, improvized "justice".

After a travesty of a trial, Ruth Osborne was stripped naked and her left thumb was tied to her right big toe, her right thumb being similarly fastened to her left big toe, so that the arms and legs formed the sign of a cross. She was then lifted up and flung into the green slimy pond, and dragged by ropes through the muddy water.

Then out of the gaping crowd lurched a drunken chimney sweep, Thomas Colley, who had appointed himself ring-leader. He waded into the shallow pond, brandishing a horse-whip with which he began to belabour the now almost unconscious woman.

As she floated on the surface, Colley callously turned her over and over with a stick.

The old woman did not sink and finally some members of the crowd reluctantly dragged her out; but the mob were not to be cheated.

By hoarse acclaim, she was flung contemptuously a second time into the pond. Again she failed to sink, and was dragged out like some inanimate flotsam. The crowd set up a monotonous chant of "three times a witch", and so for the third time, she was pitched into the water.

The mob, by now morose and sullen, saw her pulled out on to the bank, and a man on horseback solemnly announced with a pseudo-judicial air that the "witch" had "survived" three trials and should now be released. But it was too late for the old woman, who died of shock and exposure by the side of the pond, surrounded by the hostile, jeering mob.

The crowd were unmoved and turned their attention to the husband.

He too survived the three "trials", to emerge bruised from head to foot and almost dead.

After the brutal exhibition was over, Colley had the effrontery to strut round the crowd, brazenly making a collection for "his trouble in showing them such sport".

Meanwhile the man and his dead wife were carried away to a nearby house, tied together, and flung on a rough bed.

Colley reeled off highly satisfied with his little day of glory; but the persecutors had not reckoned with the inexorable majesty of the Law which began to exact stern retribution.

Because of information they had received, the authorities caused a search to be made for the body of Ruth Osborne, and when it was found, an inquest was held immediately. The Coroner brought in a verdict that Ruth Osborne had been wilfully murdered by Thomas Colley and twenty-nine other persons.

Less than three months after the crime, three of the mob-leaders were arrested and charged with the murder. On 30th July, 1751, Thomas Colley, William Humbles and the man known as Red Beard, now prosaically arraigned as Charles Young, were placed in the dock for trial at Hertford Assizes. After a scrupulously fair trial, Colley was the only one of the group to be found guilty of the actual murder.

He was sentenced to be executed and hung in chains at the scene of his crime. The inhabitants of Marston

Green, however, petitioned against the hanging outside their homes, so it was decided to carry out the execution at Gubblecote Cross.

To guard against any attempt at rescue, the condemned man was brought from Hertford by a military escort. On Friday evening, Colley spent the night in the local jail at St. Albans. At dawn the next day, he was aroused and put in a one-horse chaise with the appointed executioner as his companion. As they passed through Tring, Colley was permitted to say a last farewell to his weeping wife and daughter.

Butterfield, now bitterly ashamed of his part in the circumstances that had led up to such a ghastly denouement, saw from his bedroom window a very different procession from that he had seen three months before. A grim cavalcade of one hundred and eight men of the Horse Guards, seven officers and two trumpeters accompanied the horse-chaise in an impressive display of authority, which was reported to be "slow, solemn and moving".

On this occasion a small and sober crowd had gathered to see Colley receive the sacrament before ascending the gallows. By his special request, a written declaration he had made expressing contrition for his evil action and recanting his belief in witchcraft, was publicly read out by the Vicar of Long Marston. The Law then exacted the supreme penalty. In accordance with the barbarous custom of the age, the body swung in chains for many years above Gubblecote Cross.

The unfortunate John Osborne eventually recovered from his own dreadful ordeal, but though strong and able despite his age, he was not able to obtain any work as he was still regarded as a "wizard" by the superstitious peasantry. The Parish of Tring, therefore, kept him in their workhouse for the rest of his life.

Occasionally, on a summer's day, he would trudge over to Marston Green and sit for a while in silent contemplation by the quiet green pond. As he walked back along the road to Tring, he would pass Gubblecote Cross where Colley hung. Later, when the winds and rains of winter came, the corpse would gyrate in a perpetual *danse macabre* like some fantastic puppet a stone's throw from the inn where now the bedridden invalid dare not look out of the window.

Marston Green and Gubblecote,
And out from Tring beyond,
They seize a witch by the throat
And fling her in a pond.

Gubblecote and Marston Green,
And Redcoats riding there;
One man left to haunt the scene,
Dancing on the air.

THE SHORT CUT

FREDA L. COOKSON

IT SEEMED AS though the trees were holding hands slyly above her head. As though they had deliberately fluffed out their lacy sleeves so that no gleam of sunlight could steal through to the path below.

The girl shivered despite the sultry heat.

The wood was just the same, she thought. Just as frightening as when she had come here as a child. But she mustn't start thinking about that now. If she did, she wouldn't dare to go on past that old, grey, lichen-covered rock in the clearing.

But perhaps it would be better if she didn't? Maybe if she returned to the main road, she could thumb a lift into town? It was stupid not to have tried that as soon as she found the bus had gone, instead of deciding to take this short cut.

Fear and exasperation wrangled together in her mind.

There might still be time even now, if she ran all the way. But there was seldom very much traffic on the road and at this hour it would be almost deserted. Besides, some drivers were so cagey about giving lifts.

No, there was nothing for it but to carry on, now that she had come this far. If she were late, Nigel might wait ten minutes for her. Even a quarter of an hour, perhaps. But he wouldn't wait any longer. Why should he? He could have any girl he wanted.

She bit her lip. It was all that wretched driver's fault. He must have been early. She knew perfectly well she had reached the stop in time. It would serve him right to be reported. Perhaps Nigel would do it for her? He was good at that sort of thing—couldn't half make people look small if he was in the mood.

Anyway, she'd tell him about it when they met—*if* they met!

Fear of missing him quickened her steps. But as the silence of the wood wrapped itself more closely round her, she needed an additional spur. So she forced herself to think of him waiting for her by the drinking-fountain in the Square.

She loved meeting him there. There were always so many other girls hanging around—hoping. And when she walked up and took his arm, their glances slid quickly away, as though they hadn't so much as noticed him. But that didn't deceive her for they could never hide the envy in their eyes.

Only supposing this time she arrived too late? Supposing he wasn't still waiting for her?

Then another thought edged its way into her mind. A thought she had been trying hard to ignore. There was still the grey rock to pass. And someone—something—might be waiting for her there, too.

The colour drained from her cheeks so that they looked empty and

lifeless above the strident scarlet of her jacket.

But it couldn't happen again, she told herself firmly. Not after fifteen years. Besides, it might not have happened then. Not *really* happened, that is. After all, she had only been a kid —six or seven, was it? So she might easily have fallen asleep under a tree and had a nightmare, just like everyone had said.

But if so, it had been a very vivid nightmare. So vivid that she had never set foot in the wood since. Never—until now.

It had been afternoon that other time, not evening. But there had been just this same stillness and silence, as though every leaf and twig was made of limp rubber.

She hadn't felt afraid at first, though. The excitement of slipping away from the family picnic had been too heady a stimulant. Fear had come later, when she had neared the centre of the wood and seen the first unexpected gleam of sunlight stabbing through the trees.

It must mean there was a clearing, she thought. And according to her favourite fairy stories, that was where something frightening usually lurked.

Supposing a witch lived there in a tumbledown hut? Or an ogre? Or, worse still, a horrible man with an animal's face, like the one she had seen at the fair? The very thought of that made her skin prickle with gooseflesh and for a moment she wanted to run back to the homely safety of the picnic.

But she didn't. She had to see what was there, just like she had to see what was in the forbidden tent that day at the fair.

So she went on slowly, reluctantly, her fear growing with every step, and finally she left the path altogether and crept through the undergrowth. That was so she could peep into the clearing through a gap in the bushes without being seen herself, just as she had looked through the hole in that tent.

But when at last she did peer through the parted leaves, there were no witches or ogres waiting for her after all. Only an ugly rock covered with dirty, grey moss. Nevertheless, she continued to stand there, strangely loath to explore any farther.

Then suddenly everything went blurred as though her eyes were misted. And when they cleared, there was a man leaning against the rock. He was looking towards the path she had just left, as though watching for someone. And she knew without a shadow of doubt, that he was bad. It made her feel cold just to think how nearly she had come that way herself.

But just then he moved a little farther round the rock and she could see he had some big numbers printed on the back of his overalls. So, for a moment, surprise overcame her instinctive fear.

Then all at once he stiffened as though he could hear someone coming. And his lips drew back, showing horrible, yellowish teeth which reminded her of the milk-boy's ferret. Yet although she strained her ears, she couldn't hear a sound herself.

Nevertheless, someone *was* coming, for the next moment a girl stepped into the clearing. She was dark and

pretty like the one who served in the sweet shop, and she walked slowly towards the stone.

But there was no time to shout: "Stop! There's a horrid man there," for he darted out of his hiding-place almost at once. And a second later he grabbed the girl's handbag and threw it to the ground. But when his dirty hands closed round her throat, everything went misty again.

By the time she had rubbed her eyes and could see properly, there wasn't anyone in the clearing at all. And the wood was no longer silent. Birds were singing and leaves were rustling. And through the trees, she could hear her Dad's voice calling: "Shirley! Shirley, where are you?" And everything was safe and normal once more.

But she had never been able to remember very clearly what happened afterwards. She had told Dad about the man and girl, of course. And he had sent for a policeman who had asked all sorts of questions. And who had later grumbled about kids letting their imaginations run away with them, and leading folk on a wild-goose chase.

That hadn't half made Mum furious. "What about the number on the man's overalls?" she had demanded. "You can't tell me she imagined that."

But he had just shrugged and said they had rung up the prison straight away, and that none of the convicts was missing.

However, the fuss died down eventually and everyone said it must have been a nightmare. At least, everyone except the woman next door. She swore there always had been something queer about that clearing. And that there was more than one grown man who wouldn't care to cross it after dark.

"There's been a murder done there, you mark my words," she said darkly. "And the police ought to dig around until they find the body. Nothing makes a spirit walk like not being buried decent."

But naturally the police hadn't dug around. They had more important things to do, such as catching poachers and booking courting couples for parking their cars without lights.

So the body—if there was one—must still be lying in the wood.

The girl's glance swept uneasily over the path, but shied away from the undergrowth. A whole graveyard full of bodies could lie there, hidden for ever under those dead, damp leaves and matted branches.

Then she pulled herself together. So what? The dead couldn't hurt you—it was only the living you had to watch. And anyway, the ghosts hadn't harmed her before, so why should they do so now?

Only the other time she hadn't walked straight into the clearing, she reminded herself. In fact, it must have been somewhere near here where she had left the path. But there was no question of making a detour this time, for in fifteen years the brambles and shrubs had grown into a solid, thorny mass.

So she walked straight on along the narrow path. And soon she saw a pale

shimmer of sunlight ahead, and knew it must be coming from the clearing itself.

In another moment she would have crossed it and left all those childish terrors behind, she thought. But later she might tell Nigel about it. It was the sort of thing that would amuse him.

Now she was actually there and could see the rock—lichen-grey and still oddly menacing. Fifteen years had not changed that.

She shuddered as the sight of it brought everything back to her with terrifying clarity. A clarity that hardly seemed possible after so long a time. She could see again the girl entering the clearing, just as she herself was doing. A girl whose face gleamed whitely above a scarlet jacket. A face which now grew more familiar with every passing second.

And then panic rose and clawed at her in horrified realization. For suddenly she knew the girl she had seen so long ago—was herself!

Terror welled up in her and she tried to run. But it was too late. The man had already darted from behind the rock. A man whose lips curled back over yellow broken teeth. A man who was flesh and blood—not a shadowy ghost from the future.

There was no sound in the clearing now save the harsh intake of breath. But somewhere, beyond the wood, a warning siren wailed. And all those who heard it knew that there was a convict on the run.

THE LONG EVENING

CONSTANCE MILBURN

THE DOOR CLOSED behind him with such finality that Edward Lengton never expected to see it open again.

Plunged suddenly into complete darkness, he dropped the bucket of hot water, which he had been holding, and felt carefully for the side of the fridge, cursing at the same time as he felt dampness soak through his socks and his trousers.

Groping, he found the door and tried to open it, wondering how it had managed to close. For the last twenty years he had been cleaning fridges, ever since he had started as a butcher boy at fifteen, and this was the first time the fridge door had fastened him in.

When he realized that the door was locked on the outside he began to sweat. Someone must have shut it intentionally, but who?

He began to wish he had never decided to clean and defrost the big fridge this evening, but there was nothing worth viewing on the television and when Molly said she was going out and had suggested that he do the fridge he had thought it a good idea. The shop was really too busy for them to find time to do it during the day.

Then he laughed. What a fool he was to have forgotten the safety catch. Quickly he felt for the knob and pushed it with all his might, but still nothing happened. That meant whoever had shut the door on him must have jammed the lock on the outside.

For a moment he stood helpless before panic seized him.

"Open the door, let me out, *let me out*," he screamed, banging with his plump fists on the side of the fridge.

He stopped as quickly as he had started, knowing it was useless. If there was anyone there to hear him it was obvious they didn't want him out.

He tried to think rationally. The fridge wasn't working. He wouldn't be frozen to death but eventually he would suffocate. The air already was beginning to smell musty.

Wiping the sweat from his face he gave a hollow laugh as he thought of the weight he must be losing, extra pounds he had long wanted to shed. Even his clothes were damp with sweat.

Again he flung himself at the door, banging and screaming. He was a big man, but big or small, he was no match for the heavy, bolted door.

"Don't panic," he told himself aloud. His voice sounded different in the confined space like the voice of a stranger over the telephone.

He glanced at his watch. Thank God it was luminous. Only ten to

nine? Molly wouldn't be home for another two hours at least.

There wasn't much in the till for the burglar, for it must be a burglar, but upstairs, in the flat above the shop, was just over two hundred pounds, half the week's takings which would have gone to the bank the next day.

Perhaps he would be all right if Molly found him when she got home, but no, she would never look in the fridge. He wished he knew how long the air would last.

Suddenly that was the least of his worries. The slow whining noise of a motor told him the fridge had been switched on. God, someone was trying to murder him.

For a while he didn't feel any different and then he began to feel the cold seeping through his clothes and into his body. He stopped sweating and began to rub his hands together frantically. His feet were cold so he jumped until he was exhausted.

Looking at his watch again he saw it was still ten to nine. Blast the thing. It had stopped. There was no sound except the ticking, or rather thumping, of his own heart and soon, like the watch, that would stop also.

His hands and feet were numb and not finding the strength to move them he sat down on the upturned bucket and closed his eyes. They would find him in the morning, dead. It would be a shock for Molly but she would be well provided for. He had been successful these last few years and then she would have the insurance policy.

He wondered if she would keep the shop. It would be a shame to sell it when he had built up such a good business. Jack Woodly, his manager, would run it for her no doubt. Jack had been with him a long time. They had always been good friends, all three of them.

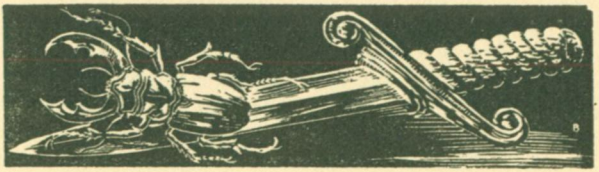
He was cold. His body no longer felt like his own and his mind suddenly seemed empty.

* * *

Jack Woodly found him the next morning, stiff, frozen, dead.

There was an inquest. The final verdict was suicide. Only Molly knew the real truth. She didn't keep the shop but sold it and six months later she married Jack Woodly. They went to live in California because Molly complained of the cold, but even in California she didn't feel warm.

She spent the rest of her life and all Edward's money trying to stop herself from feeling cold.



"POLLY—PUT THE KETTLE ON!"

H. L. DRAPER

Illustrated by Buster

"HE'S GOING TO DIE!" The slow conviction grew on Polly, awaking a fierce joy. The gnarled tree was stricken at last! Her father, lying curiously shrunken in the wide bed, would never again pass down the steep stairway to raise his bullying voice to her, or Johnny.

"I suppose I'd best send for the doctor quickly," she said, at last.

He looked at her with a malicious smile. "Aye. And while you're about it you can get old Mathews here too."

"Mr. Mathews—the lawyer? What for?"

"Never you mind, my girl. Get below and put the kettle on. I could do with a cup of tea. And tell that son of yours to give an eye to Lily."

Polly rose, her work-roughened hands pulling at her worn dress.

"You know Johnny will look after her—he loves all the animals," she said.

"Maybe, but he needs an eye on him. He's liable to go wandering off after butterflies or birds else. Lord, what have I done to be burdened with a bird-brained daughter and a half-wit for a grandson!"

"Johnny's not a half-wit!" Polly was roused to anger as always in defence of her boy.

The old man's eyes had closed. "Get out, get out!" he muttered.

Down in the old-fashioned kitchen with its scrubbed red-brick floor and the back-breaking kitchen range, she automatically filled the kettle and put it on the hob. She pushed back a strand of her lank black hair and looked around her. The bright sunshine spilled through the open doorway showing up the dust. Things needed doing but they'd have to wait. *He'd* never be able to pass his finger over furniture and call her a slut!

Polly moved to the open doorway, and called, "Johnny?"

"Coming, Mam."

Her eyes softened. Her darling Johnny! so good-looking, with his bright curls and blue eyes. And kind too. Wouldn't hurt a fly, everyone said so. Polly did not want him changed. If he had been different, more like other boys, he would have learned to treat her with contempt as her father did. To look on her as a mere drudge—a beast of burden. As it was he was her own dear son. Allies they were, against a common foe.

He came in now, treading lightly. Johnny never got dirty or smelled unclean like other boys.

She smoothed his golden hair, and he smiled at her with the trusting, innocent look of a child of nine or ten. He was eighteen years old! No one knew why the light of intelligence had gone out in Johnny.

Polly said, "Johnny, get out your bicycle and ride to Dr. Crown's house. Tell him to come quickly, grandfather is dying."

"Dying," echoed Johnny. His face puckered. "Will they bury him in the garden, Mam? Like old Shep? I shouldn't like that."

"No. They'd take him away," promised Polly.

"I'm glad then. We'll be happy together, won't we, Mam, when he's gone?"

She kissed him. "Yes, we'll be happy. We'll go away together, and live in a little house of our own."

"Can I take Puss and Lily, and the others?"

"We'll see. Now run along. Be a good boy and don't forget the message."

"Come at once. Grandfather is dying," he repeated obediently.

She hesitated, then she said, "Go now, Johnny."

No use to burden him with the message to Mr. Mathews. She'd get the doctor to tell him.

Polly waved as Johnny wheeled out the old bicycle and drove, bell-ringing, away. Then she went back into the house.

What did the old man want the lawyer for? There was only herself, and Laura. Pretty, fortunate, sister

Laura, who had run away to Canada. *She* wouldn't want to come back. Polly went about her work, but unease remained, nagging at the back of her mind like something forgotten.

The pounding of the old man's stick brought her back to his bedroom.

"Where's my tea?"

She brought it to him in silence, and he tasted it and spat it out.

"Pah! What are you doing? Trying to poison me? Can't you even make a decent cup of tea now?"

"How long is Johnny going to be with the doctor? Stopped to pick flowers, I dare say. Did you give him the message about Mathews?"

"No, I didn't."

"Why not?"

"It would only confuse him. You can write to Mr. Mathews, or I will. Doctor'll take it. He's a kind man."

"Fond of him, eh? Well, it's not likely he'll look at a scrawny old maid like you! Not that you *are* a maid of course. Though what John Purviss saw in you I'll never know. Beats me, always did!"

"Don't speak of him father," she said through stiff lips.

Her father's piggy eyes grinned at her under his bushy grey brows.

"I suppose he was bored. Him being laid up with a sprained ankle, and Laura wouldn't look at him. So he fell back on you!"

"It's not true," Polly cried. "He never wanted Laura!"

"They all wanted Laura. Still, he was ready to shoulder his responsibilities, I'll say that for him. Wanted you to take Johnny and go out to Africa after him. I wrote and told him not to be a fool. Man doesn't want to saddle himself with a woman and child when he's starting a new life! Specially one that's not all there!"

Polly's hand was at her mouth.

"And I never knew. Why? Why did you do it father?"

"I needed you here," he said brutally. "To work. That's all you're fit for!"

"If only I'd gone years ago," she cried wildly.

"Where would you have gone? Couldn't have kept Johnny with you the way he is. No, I reckon it's worked out all right the way it is. You should think yourself lucky!"

"You're a wicked old man," Polly said at last. "I wonder you're not afraid to die."

"I did it for the farm. I never cared for anything else. And I'm going to do what's best for it now. That's why I've sent for the lawyer. Laura's a widow now, did you know?"

"How should I?"

"Well it's true. She wrote to me. She wants to come home. Her son is a farmer too. She reckons we'll get along fine."

Polly could only stare at him.

"You mean, she's coming here?"

"That's right. I cut her out of my Will when she left me, but I'm going to make a new one now. It'll all go to her son, if he's the right stuff. That's providing he's willing to take my name and carry on here. And from what Laura says, I gather he'll know where his interest lies. Be some changes here, I shouldn't wonder."

She spoke stiffly, "What about me, and Johnny?"

"Oh, I've not forgotten you. I'm making it a condition that you both stay on here. I dare say Laura can do with a bit of help."

So she was never to escape. Polly's brain whirled. All her life a slave in this hateful house. And now a household drudge to her sister and this unknown son of hers. And Johnny! They'd make fun of him. Call him a village idiot likely. Threaten to have him put away if she didn't do as she was told! She saw an endless vista of suffering stretching before her, her only release death. And if she died, who would look after Johnny then? Doctor said he might live to be old. Something about his strength going to his body! Death! It was the old man who should die! Now! Before he could injure them further. He was lying back now, exhausted by the last effort of malice. She looked at her strong hands, strengthened by the years of hard toil, and came to the bedside. He opened his eyes as she pulled out the pillow. A look of horror came into them and he struggled to speak.

"Don't do it, Polly! How will you live alone? Wait——"

"I've waited long enough, Father," said Polly as she brought the pillow down. "There's no more to say."

As she came downstairs she heard the doctor's car and went to the door.

"You're too late, Doctor," she said calmly. "He's gone."

"Polly," he began, and stopped. He had known and pitied the woman before him for many years—she and her son.

Polly was looking past him.

"Didn't Johnny come back with you? I need him to see to the animals. Did you get the message?"

"What message?"

"But you've come about Father? I sent Johnny to tell you he was dying. He went on his bicycle, an hour ago." She looked at the clock. "Doctor, what is it?"

He put his hand on her shoulder. "I didn't know about your father," he said gently. "I came about Johnny. He must have been going down the hill too fast, and swerved. There was a lorry coming up—"

She shrank away. "Dead?" Her voice sank to a whisper.

"I'm afraid so. The driver was very upset—he couldn't avoid him. He says the boy had a bunch of bluebells in his hand—he must have stopped to gather them for you, Polly. They were strewn all about him."

She turned away from him almost indifferently.

"Johnny's dead and I'm alone," she said softly. "Father, what shall I do?"

The doctor said, "The nurse will be here to help you." He went on talking, kindly, sympathetically, but Polly did not hear him. She had turned blindly to the hearth.

"I'll put the kettle on," she said. "You'll want a cup of tea."

QUICKSAND

DOROTHY GARRARD

I OPENED my study door and stopped dead. My wife Agatha, stupid woman, had smashed the china pen tray. She had no business to be in my study at all, poking her nose among my papers. She'd never dared to before.

The pen tray had been with me for years, and although I'm not really superstitious, I felt that this object with its queer designs had brought me luck ever since I first laid my pens in it and filled the china pots with ink. I hate these modern ball-point things. My stories and articles began to sell immediately, and I stopped trying to rehash old ones. I was full of new and bright ideas. My first successful novel put me in the higher income bracket some six months afterwards, and all the reviews were favourable except one, who wrote:

"This novel is undoubtedly brilliant. Nevertheless, quite apart from the somewhat unsavoury subject matter, it has a faint flavour of evil which one cannot pin down to any particular incident or character. I put down this book with the feeling of having been entertained by something sinister."

What did I care? The very mention of evil was enough to send the sales rocketing. I didn't bear the critic any malice, the man had done more towards selling the novel than all the other critics put together. Everything in the garden was lovely until I went into the study that morning and found my wife tearfully picking up my pens from the floor. The pen tray was in smithereens among a large pool of ink.

The cat was there too. It may have been the cat who leapt on to the desk and pushed the pen tray to the floor. But my wife took the blame anyway, and I knew why. She knew I hated cats and might take the view that a cat is expendable and a wife is not. She's only half right.

The cat looked at me, fur on end, legs stiff, green eyes shooting sparks. Then it shot out of the study, closely followed by my wife when I began to storm and threaten. Silly, stupid woman, my one mistake was to imagine that her charms would last into middle-age. It seems to me that I jumped out of the frying-pan into the fire when I discarded Amy and married Agatha. Not that they're at all alike, mind, Amy was a shrew, a hell-cat, she wasn't scared of me like Agatha. When I met her, Amy was already the wife of an acquaintance of mine, also a writer. I fell for her because of her ravishing appearance, and she didn't show her seamy side until she had me under her thumb. Soon after I stopped seeing her, she disappeared. Her husband found himself under suspicion, went downhill rapidly, and eventually shot himself. I went to the sale of his effects hoping to acquire some object from the study where it happened, but my train was

delayed and when I got there the sale was over. A lorry was just turning out of the drive piled with the unsaleable objects, probably destined for a junk shop. I waved to the driver to stop, but he took no notice.

Yes, I was well rid of Amy—and then I went and married this insipid, witless creature. I must have been out of my mind.

After cleaning up the mess in the study I tried to finish an article I was writing about witch hunting, but it was no use. My ideas had all fled. At last I put down my pen, screwed the cap on the ink bottle, and set out to look for another pen tray.

I walked round the big stores with no intention of buying. I like old things which have belonged to someone else. They seem to become impregnated with the owner's personality and it's like possessing a part of someone about which they know nothing. So I ignored the shiny chromium and grained wood affairs, and turned my steps in the direction of a small second-hand shop I had once found tucked away in a back street. I had first come across it quite by accident at a time when I was utterly dejected by the continual return of my literary efforts and was willing to give anything for a measure of success—a good big measure. I wanted money and the things it could buy. I hated each unimpressed editor in turn and was busily hating my wife for her continual nagging at me to go out and get a proper job, when I suddenly noticed this shop I'd never seen before. The pen tray in the front of the window attracted me immediately, I felt a kind of affinity for it. In the shop, I asked the old man who came forward to serve me if the design of pentagons and triangles had any significance, and if he knew anything about the previous owner. He pursed his lips and peered over the top of his spectacles.

"The previous owner came to a sad end," he remarked sorrowfully. "He was murdered."

A sort of thrill went through me, making me shiver.

"But I see you're not the sort to be made use of—you would be a user of things—and people," he added, and a little smile played round his lips. He made this rather odd remark sound like a compliment and I accepted it as such, for it was true.

And now the pen tray was broken. I felt sure the old man would know what I needed, and I looked along the back streets for the little shop which I hadn't been near since I bought the pen tray. I was just beginning to wonder if I had remembered the locality correctly, and there it was.

The owner of the junk shop did know what I wanted, for he nodded and pursed his lips in the way I remembered.

"A pity it got broken. It was the only one of its kind."

I felt a pang of dismay. It was rather like breaking a limb and going confidently to hospital, only to be told there was nothing to be done.

"Haven't you anything remotely like it?"

He shook his head again. "Pity. Great pity."

And yet he didn't seem to be really regretful. Suddenly I disliked him and again I felt hatred well up inside me.

"It was the cat," I said venomously. "The cat pushed it off the desk. Or my wife did it on purpose."

Not that I really believed she did—she wouldn't dare. But I like to hate, it seems to charge me with power.

The old man's expression didn't change, but his hooded eyes suddenly pierced me with a look which made my emotion seem pale and lifeless by comparison.

"Oh well, if you haven't got a pen tray. . . ."

I turned away from the counter, but lingered by an assortment of articles in the corner. Junk fascinated me.

"What a minute," he said. "It's not often people find me twice, it would be a pity to send you away empty handed. Here's something which might interest you."

He groped among the pile of articles and produced something which he placed on the counter. It looked like a battered waste-paper basket of closely woven cane. It was also two-thirds full of a pale, sandy substance which looked like foam rubber.

"What's that?" I asked, and put out a finger to prod the rubber, but he caught my wrist in a vice-like grip.

"Don't do that," he warned, "ever."

"I haven't said I'll buy it yet." I tried to jerk myself loose but he seemed to enjoy holding on.

"You'll find it very useful."

"A waste-paper basket, nearly full already?"

With his free hand, he reached for some crumpled pieces of paper and tossed them into the basket.

They sank into the 'rubber'—and vanished.

"Think of it, never having to empty your basket," said the old man with a mocking smile.

"But it must get full—saturated, or something," I said, fascinated. "What is that stuff, anyway?"

"Let's call it a kind of quicksand." He smiled slyly.

"Do it again—throw something else in."

A handful of rusty screws followed the paper.

"What about something big—bigger than the basket?"

An old rusty coal-scuttle stood near by. He lifted it with one hand—he seemed remarkably strong for his age—and wedged it inside. It was top heavy at first, but not for long. Soon the rubber-like surface was smooth again and there was no sign of the scuttle.

There were pictures in my mind. Which part of a cat would you put in first? Head or tail? And after the cat . . . ? I became aware that he still grasped my wrist and that it was considerably nearer the basket.

"Let go," I said, more firmly than I felt, "and I'll pay you for the basket."

His fingers slid away reluctantly, I thought. He named the price.

"But that's fantastic!"

"So's the basket," he pointed out.

That was quite true. It had endless

possibilities. I paid with every note in my well-stuffed wallet and picked up the basket.

"By the way, how is it that the basket itself isn't absorbed?"

"Oh, it looks like cane, but it isn't. It's special stuff, the only thing that will resist absorption. Don't put anything in you might want out again, will you?"

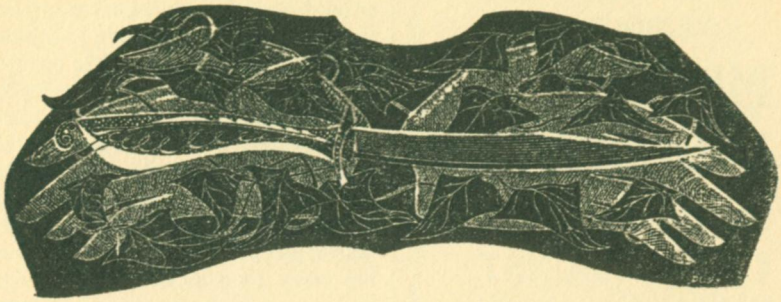
The cat was to have been first, but I couldn't catch it. We stalked each other round and round the furniture, until seizing his chance, the animal fled into the garden. I couldn't find my wife. Out shopping, I supposed, though how she managed it on the pittance I gave her, I didn't know. She was too terrified of me to ask for more money, and while I got fed well, what did I care? I worked myself up to a pitch of excitement waiting for her to come home. It didn't matter about trying it on the cat first, I had seen it work with my own eyes. When I heard her in the hall, I called to her.

"Come here, you!"

She came, trembling. She was wearing a hat that I hadn't seen before and the sight of it suddenly sent me off at a tangent. How dared she buy herself a new hat out of housekeeping money? What if she had saved for it penny by penny, it was still housekeeping, wasn't it? I shouted down her tearful protests, and beside myself, I snatched it from her head and threw it into the waste-paper basket.

Sanity returned. That had been a foolish thing to do. I wouldn't get her in there now—or ever get near her—quietly, when she saw what had happened to her hat. It must be done quietly. She walked slowly to the waste-paper basket and stared into it. The ribbon on the hat was last to disappear. She reached out a hand. A wide grin split my face, she was going to feel inside for the hat and save me the trouble of doing anything at all. But I was wrong. And I was wrong to have considered her stupid all these years. Swiftly she picked up the basket, turned it upside down, and jammed it over my head.

The first thing I met in Limbo was a hat, then I fell over a coal-scuttle. After that—well, you'd be surprised what some people throw away. But I do wish Amy's husband hadn't knocked her out with that iron bar before he tossed her in. She hasn't even got beauty to recommend her now, and in other respects she hasn't changed a bit.



CROOKS IN BOOKS

A review of some recent crime, mystery and detective books

STEVE AUSTEN

"HOPJOY WAS HERE", by Colin Watson (*Eyre & Spottiswoode,* 15*s.*).

I remember noting with enjoyment Mr. Watson's *Bump in the Night*: his latest offering is—and I say this with all the humility of a jaded critic—one of the funniest books I've read in a long time. Witty, refreshing, satirizing the fantasy world of Security with as impartial a sharp instrument as he uses on the bogus realism of human frailty, the author of Hopjoy gives excellent value for time and money. Ah, ha, I can hear one of *my* putative critics exclaiming, but has he a plot, has he a crime, is it thrilling? Yes, to the first two questions. A question mark answer to the third: what do you mean by thrilling? For me, it was a splendidly enjoyable book, but to be honest—even if it hurts—this book, like so many others these decadent days (or is it merely that I'm getting older?), begins to fall apart towards the end: not much, but after all I'm paid to criticize. Nonetheless, this in enjoyment terms rates an alpha.

"COVER HER FACE", by P. D. James (*Faber & Faber,* 18*s.*).

This is a first novel and it has two thoroughly welcome characteristics; first, it is as near to a thoroughbred whodunit as you are likely to get among the new generation of crime writers, and, secondly, which re-enforces the impression, it is a contemporary return to the country house murder. On these grounds alone Mr. (or perhaps Mrs. or Miss) James deserves encouragement. However, there are other reasons for recommending the book. There is a tolerably credible detective inspector, for example, a goodly gaggle of mainly

upper middle-class suspects, and enough social and sexual complications to keep them talking and jumping. But if the plot is a little obvious, the punches tending to be telegraphed too far ahead, this to a large extent is redeemed by the style (literate, neat, unsoiled) and the characterization (apt, intriguing and if not subtle at least skilfully revealed). No masterpiece this but a most encouraging essay by a newcomer into what had seemed to be an obsolescent genre.

"No Dust in the Attic", by Anthony Gilbert (*Crime Club*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

Anthony Gilbert is always competent, always readable. The new Arthur Crook crime story is well up to standard; the irrepressible Crook speeds hot foot to the rescue of a rather dim girl on the run both from a gang of criminals and from the police. More chase than detection and now and again my attention slipped, but not often and not for long.

"Diving Death", by Charles Forsyte (*Cassel*, 13*s.* 6*d.*).

A detective inspector from the Special Branch goes on his hols. to the south of France. A millionaire amateur archaeologist is there on his yacht organizing an underwater "dig": he gets killed. In between rhapsodic passages on skin-diving (and these become a trifle repetitive) the crime, and the suspects, get sorted out. Quite amusing, quite able, quite readable: but maybe the sub-aquatic world lacks the oxygen to set the plot

afire. Good-average, and probably rather pleasant for a mid-winter reading list.

"BLIND-GIRL'S-BUFF", by Evelyn Berckman (*Eyre & Spottiswoode*, 16*s*.).

This book is set in that rather uneasy no-man's-land between the suspense story and the straight novel and is not quite satisfactory as a result. The standard of writing is high, the characters so good, so *almost* alive, that it comes as a shock when they act in ways and from motives that are not real at all but simply necessary for the mechanics of a crime story. It is scarcely credible, for example, that a man like Bernard Kelso, sensitive and intelligent as Miss Berckman wishes us to see him, should have adopted his own daughter by another woman and concealed her paternity from his wife. On the other hand, Angie, the adopted daughter who sets out to discover her real mother's identity and then the reason for her suicide, is not only believable but a very alive, rather touching character. It is she who makes the book convicing and, for a lot of the time, gripping. A good, cosy read for a winter evening.

"THE CYPHER", by Alex Gordon (*Boardman*, 12*s*. 6*d*.).

Another archaeologist, but this time an American professional, specializing in the middle east, and far closer to penury than wealth, gets involved in the mayhem following a Levantine *coup d'état*. Sad, asthmatic, unsuccessful academically, bothered by a

marriage almost beyond hope of repair, the hero somehow emerges sympathetically, one of the failed almost faceless but intelligent men who, invoking unexpected reserves of energy and courage, save someone else's bacon to lose their own. For those who worry about the title, the hero spends a devil of a lot of time trying, under extreme duress, to solve a cypher he doesn't want to solve. When he does, he can't. Such is life. A by no means uninteresting book, worthy of a fireside hour in your favourite armchair.

"HAND - IN - GLOVE", by Ngaio Marsh (*Crime Club*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

The new Ngaio Marsh is cheerfully and excellently done, with some nice, loathsome characters and some nice, nice ones. Mr. Pyke Period, writer of letters of condolence to the bereaved, and prospective author of a book on Etiquette, is an excellent Marsh character; so is the dog, Pixie, the manservant, Alfred Belt, and Desirée, Lady Bantling. The cast has a pleasantly P. G. Wodehouse flavour but the book is none the worse for that and, if the wit has a slightly arch, old-fashioned flavour, it makes it all the cosier for readers over thirty. I suspect people under thirty don't read this sort of detective story anyway. It's their loss.

"UNTIMELY RIPPED", by Mark McShane (*Cassell, 13s. 6d.*).

The Macbeth quotation has an added, and unpleasant, twist, as befits the times. Good idea with a thoroughly nasty (in its implications)

ending, this is not a book for those who combine imagination with a weak digestion. Its provincial urban background, its anthology of characters, its policemen, all combine to make an excellently readable book and one that (with the above reservations, plus gently nurtured aunts) is well worth putting on your reading list.

"TRIALS AND ERRORS", by Belton Cobb (*W. H. Allen, 18s.*).

Mr. Cobb, well known to crime fiction addicts, here takes a look, instead, at fact. He dedicates his book, a collection of what he calls miscarriages of justice, to judges, magistrates and jurymen as a warning, and he sensibly quotes the dictum that it's better for a guilty man to escape punishment than for an innocent one to suffer. At any rate, Mr Cobb assembles eleven cases for your interest, many of them familiar, and perhaps ends up by reminding you that there but for the grace of God go you—or me.

"BLOOD MONEY", by Peter Malloch (*John Long, 12s. 6d.*).

From a somewhat undistinguished beginning, and out of a not very brilliant style, Mr. Malloch has constructed a taut and exciting whodunit. Narrated by a working crime journalist who is fortunately, or unfortunately, depending on your viewpoint, affianced to a murderee's daughter, the book is well-knit, and somewhat nastily, in fact, integrated into a series of murders. The trick ending, perfectly logical in context—

but it has been done before—strengthens, if anything, the plot. A slightly grisly theme but, in several senses, well executed.

"DOUBLE FINESSE", by Hartley Howard (*Collins*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

I have in the past been less than enthusiastic about some of Mr. Howard's Glenn Bowman books and I should like now to redress the balance. This is a thriller without Glenn Bowman—and indeed it's quite different from Mr. Howard's more usual P.I. sagas—and it is a rattling good story. A clever plot, well-constructed and not falling apart either at the seams or at the tail-piece, with several well-concealed tricks up its sleeve, and a handsome rogues' gallery of characters, ensure that this is a highly readable book. But in addition there is a kind of concealed passion, or at least a sense of thorough engagement, that lends an extra dimension of both life and excitement to the writing. I do not always go for Mr. Howard's style but *Double Finesse* impressed and intrigued me and I would give it a strong recommendation, a *beta* double plus. More please, Mr. H.

"DOUBLE CROSS PURPOSES", by Kenneth O'Hara (*Cassell*, 15*s.*).

A good, fast-moving, Ambler-type thriller set in a European state just this side of the Iron Curtain in which the neo-fascist Drabshirts and the Communists are manœuvred in its own interests by Fyrst, the largest armaments industry on the Continent after Krupps. Bron Arnime, who

figured in *Underhandcover*, to which this book is a sequel, is sent back to the country by the British Secret Service; he is also coaxed back against his will by a luscious lovely, Eva, his one time mistress and the present wife of the Chief of Security, Kessel, on trial for a two years old murder. What happens when he gets there makes a good, gripping story in which Buchan's influence is discernible as well as Ambler's; the book is intelligent and perceptive as well as exciting and, though set in an absolutely modern Europe, the nameless state has an agreeable Ruritanean flavour. Worth underlining on the library list.

"THE LETHAL SEX" (*Crime Club Anthology*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

This is a collection of stories by women crime writers and, if you can bear to read on after the awful, arch introduction—"Honestly, girls, I'm not *really* terrified of you, *en masse*" —you will find it a cosy collection of chilly little pieces. *Item*, a cheerful piece of nastiness by Christianna Brand; *item*, a good, if solidly ordinary story by Anthony Gilbert; *item*, a peculiarly unpleasant weirdie by Margaret Millar. Others by Margaret Manners, Ursula Curtis, Jean Potts. . . . Nothing really outstanding here, but all perfectly readable; suitable for a short, jerky train journey or a bedtime book when very weary.

"DEADLY DOWNBEAT", by Jonathan Burke (*John Long*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

This is a light, entertaining crime story told in an amusing, lively style, the world being seen through the eyes

of a jazz musician, a pianist whom people appear to try to shoot but not because of his chords. Good fun, with the occasional crime chill, for the long winter evenings. A Welsh jazz festival, not quite outdoing Beaulieu, provides the background and sometimes I even believed in the music.

"VEIN OF VIOLENCE", by William Campbell Gault (*Boardman, 12s. 6d.*).

Brock (the Rock) Callahan is an engaging Californian P.I. whose strength lies in brawn and a cultivated kind of non-intellectualism. No smarty he, Callahan believes in honesty, honour, and all that—except in sex, where, as every adolescent knows, things are different and all's fair. A silent days star, a retired oomph girl, now turned into an eccentric old trout, gets herself killed just after selling her gothic palace to a Texan millionaire who has conveniently married Callahan's aunt. A gallery of *passé* Hollywood boys and girls drift through the mock-baronial halls and most of them hide nasty little secrets. Callahan, ably assisted by the police, sort them out. A slightly below average (for Mr. Gault), but easy, read.

"THE WANDERING WIDOWS", by Elizabeth Ferrars (*Crime Club, 12s. 6d.*).

Miss Ferrars is always skilful; she is always readable; and yet, for me, she never quite hits the jackpot. Somehow, and not in any obvious way, because her plots are always well finished and decently tied up, I find myself losing zest before the end of the book. And so it was again with this one, which has an intriguing plot, a splendid setting and an excellent cast of characters, while a rather pleasing little romance hovers in the wings, letting murder occupy the stage. All this is not to say that Miss Ferrars' widows are below par. The book, is more than competent, but the lift is lacking, that extra quality which raises a book from the better-than-average rank to the good. Meantime, a good many readers will enjoy this tale of the holiday widows, near-widows and grass-widows getting involved in murder on the Isle of Mull.

"THE BROTHERS OF BENEVOLENCE", by John Cassells (*John Long, 12s. 6d.*).

Superintendent Flagg and his team in a highly skilful and complex brew of organized crime and mystery. A good plot lives up, very nearly, to the excellence of the idea of the Brothers and the basic situation. All thoroughly well exploited: a workmanlike book. You should guess who did it—and there's no butler.

"JADE FOR A LADY", by M. E. Chaber (*Boardman, 12s. 6d.*).

Re-enter Milo March, a fairly likeable, above-average intelligence and culture quotient private investigator. International jade thefts bring March to Hong Kong. Les girls, with and without slits in their skirts, and the crooks, with various shaped eyes, take over: until the end. Slightly touristic but Hong Kong tends to bring out the holiday brochure writer in all of us. Competent, beta minus stuff.

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Editor: Norman Kark	,, ,,
Business manager: Noel E. Williams	,, ,,

2. The owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a partnership or other unincorporated firm, its name and address, as well as that of each individual member, must be given.)

Name	*Address*
Norman Kark	77 BROOK STREET, LONDON, W.1

3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (**If there are none, so state.**)

Name	*Address*
NONE	

4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner.

5. The average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the 12 months preceding the date shown above was: (This information is required by the act of June 11, 1960 to be included in all statements regardless of frequency of issue.)
76,000.

NORMAN KARK
(Signature of editor, publisher, business manager, or owner)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 11th day of October, 1962.

(SEAL) H. M. CARTER, Jr.
Consul U.S. Embassy.
(My commission expires , 1962)

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