LONDON MYSTERY

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QUARTERLY

No.
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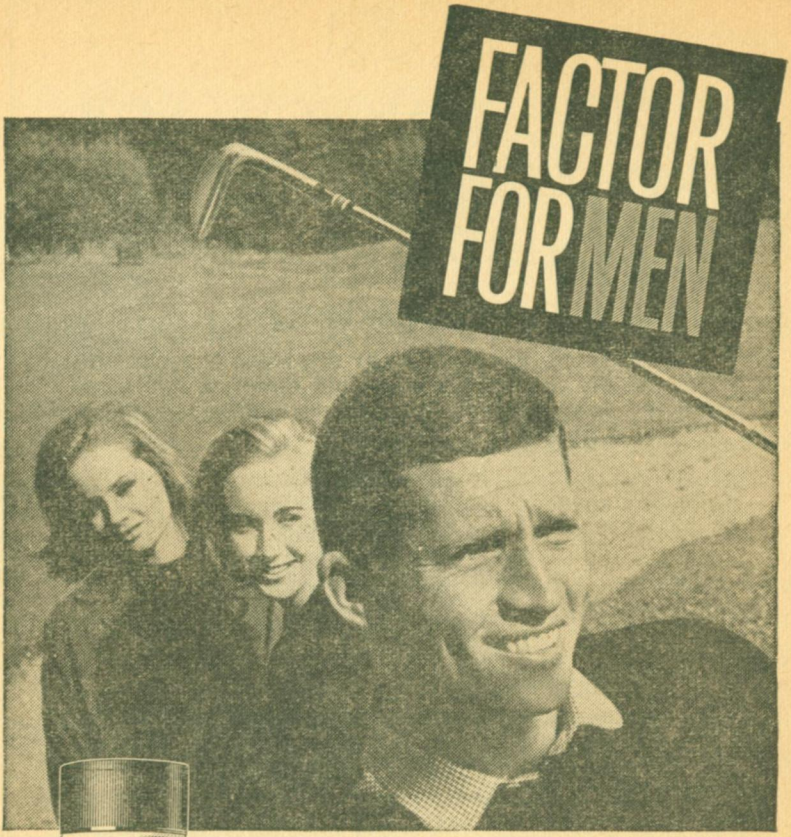

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THE LONDON MYSTERY SELECTION

It might just as truly be said "All mankind loves a mystery". In a scientific age many beliefs, pleasant and unpleasant, are shattered, but some teasing ones remain without a completely satisfactory answer. Some people prefer a reasonable explanation to their mysteries, and others are ready to attribute them to forces and powers beyond man's understanding. One expedition to the Himalayas hoped to come back with the explanation of the legend of the abominable snowman. While they did not prove conclusively that the creature was a bear, they did not prove that it was an abominable snowman either, so . . . "you pays your money and you takes your choice".

There are some people who prefer to ignore scientific evidence and maintain that the world is flat. How else, they ask, do you explain the fact that so many people disappear completely, never to be seen or heard of again, if it is not because they have walked off the edge of the world? LONDON MYSTERY does not propose to enter into these controversies, but whether you prefer to read stories in which apparently mysterious events can be attributed to human agency or given an unusual but reasoned and scientific explanation, or those in which supernatural forces play a part, you should find something to please you in this selection.

EDITOR.

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

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

GOLAND

LEWIS JONES

Illustrated by Jennifer Gordon

THE MAN'S HARD fingers unlatched the lighthouse door. His seaboot heeled the door open, and he looked out into the morning. Only the churning sea, and the mainland like a smouldering rag in the distance.

He kicked the door shut. "Where's the boat?"

His young wife Gavina sat quietly at the scarred wooden table, knowing she was not required to answer.

"Half an hour since, we should have been off this damn rock. What's the matter with them?" His tight fist ground up and down the side of his face, as if to plane away the rasping hair of the black beard. "Half an hour, and not in sight yet."

Gavina said, "There's to be a storm."

"Hah! You make it sound like one of your prophecies."

"It's too rough for the boat."

"They've come out before when it was rough."

"They won't come till after the storm."

"There isn't a storm."

She ran a quick, nervous hand across her yellow hair. "Shall I make some tea?"

He booted one of the chairs so that it rattled and writhed across the stone floor. "Make some tea."

Gavina got up, her palms smoothing out the clean print dress he had bought her when they married three years ago. As she stooped to put a match to the stove, she heard him clump to the door again and fling it open. The match blew out, and the sweetness of salt air caught at her nostrils. It had the sharpness of an indrawn breath, as if the lighthouse itself had drawn the air in through clenched teeth. And it carried with it another world. It brought the froth-green smell of the prowling seawinds, and the far booming of caves. In her mind the colours of sea and sky ran together, so that up and down had no more meaning. Air-sacs budded in her bones. It was then that she knew.

"Goland," she whispered, "it's time."

The door slammed shut, and she stood up, flustered. The ringwalls of stone held her bound again, and the smell was of cold stone and oil and brass polish. The man stood watching her. She went to him on quick feet, holding the burnt-out match between finger and thumb as if it were still alight. "Where's Goland?"

His face softened into contempt. "The boy? In the house."

"No. You locked it. It's empty."

"Outside then. Let him stay."

"No. I should be with him."

"Why?"

"I—he might—be afraid——"

"Of what?'"

"You never know what might happen. He's only a boy."

"It's three years since you brought him here. He knows the places to keep away from."

"But he could slip, out there on the rocks."

"Let him learn. We all learn by mistakes."

"I have to look after him. He's my child."

The man's face tightened again. "Yes. He's yours." He walked past her to the stove and scooped up the box of matches.

She looked at the dead match in her fingers and gave a little apologetic cry.

"If you want a thing done," he said, "do it yourself." He rasped a match-head into flame.

Caught between door and stove, she looked from one to the other and said anxiously, "I'll just get him in."

She hovered for a moment, waiting for argument or refusal, but the stooped back of his thick blue jersey offered no indication. She dropped the match carefully into the tobacco-tin that served as an ashtray, and half-ran to the door. The iron latch had always been resentful to her fingers, and now she piled her two thumbs on to it and squeezed down with both hands. The latch opened with an impatient snap, and Gavina hauled open the heavy wooden door.

Again the sea-tang, and the sadness and excitement that went with it. The wind had stiffened, and Gavina took two steps outside, keeping one hand on the doorpost for balance. There was no one in sight.

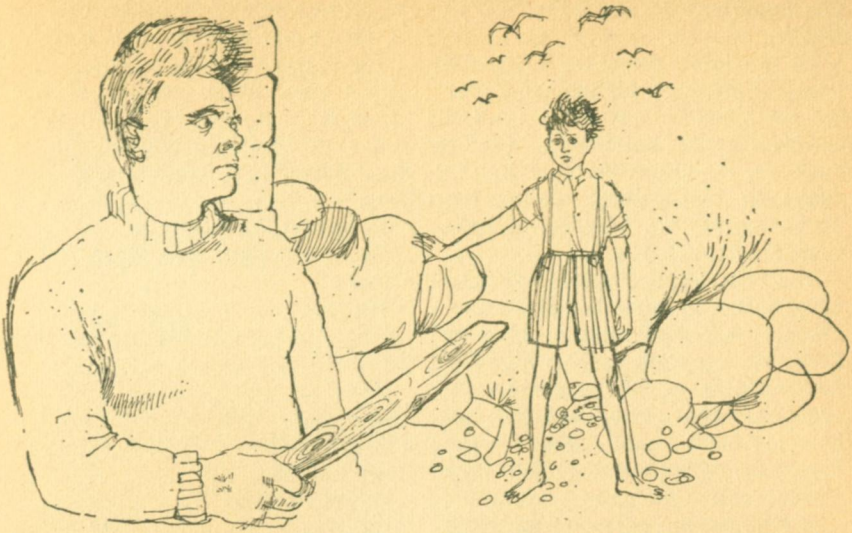
She took a deep breath and shouted, "Goland!" The wind took the sound and drove it back down her throat. She coughed, her head bent down. She called again, "Goland!" The waves drowned the name in thunder.

The man pushed her aside so unexpectedly that she stumbled. He waded into the wind till he was well clear of the lighthouse, then stopped and looked off to the right. The squat house huddled close to the lighthouse base. The door was padlocked. The uncurtained windows showed the two rooms inside, stripped of cloths, sheets, all human comforts. The padlock would never know a key again. Beyond the house, the brief, sloping plateau, meanly covered with crew-cut turf. No boy.

The man turned to the left. The two pinnacles that the sea had hungrily detached from the island over the centuries. The tops chalkwhite with the droppings of birds.

The man faced the lighthouse and made his way round the base. When he could view the seaward side he stopped. Rocks were strewn down the steep slope like bad teeth. This was where the sea was closest to the hundred-foot pencil of stone. And this was the side that showed the dangerous crack in the outer wall. The crack that had made the lighthouse a hasbeen; the crack that was responsible for the three of them leaving for good.

This was the last day. Everything packed. All ready to go when the



boat came. The man's eye followed the fault in the stone, seeing the places where it had crept in slow hours, unsure, changing its course by the inch. And the places where it had leapt in a straight rift of ten feet and more.

He picked up a length of driftwood and smashed it against the lighthouse base with a crack like a whip. From the rockpools hidden by the boulders, a cloud of gulls exploded in living thistledown, their screams jangling like harpsichord strings ripped by a claw. From where they had been, Goland's head rose quickly into sight as he stood upright. Man and boy faced one another without movement, the man backed by the stiff white lighthouse with its crazing fault-mark: the boy's head set against the ripple and run of the changing sea. The man, his eyes still on the boy, flung his haft of driftwood off to the right, where it clattered against rock and after a moment went with a slap-thunk into the sea. He turned and went back inside.

Only when he was out of sight did the boy seem to come alive. The head dipped, and bobbed again. His hands were held tall and wide, as the bare feet crisscrossed from stone to stone. Arms seesawing, Goland tightrope-walked up the slope. Over his head, the gulls wove their white patterns on the loom of the winds.

He sprang to the top of the slope in one last leap, and stood for a moment looking up at the birds. He was tiny, even for his five years. And the sloppy jersey did not hide the hump behind his shoulders. The deformity was noticeable when he stood still, but not when he was on the move, his quick head and body giving

you no chance to assess the lines of profile.

He ran lightly round the lighthouse base. At the door, his mother waited for him. She gathered him up and carried him smiling inside. Leaning back on the door to close it, she spoke to him softly, rubbing her cheek against his. "Goland, I have something to tell you."

The man whittled a piece of dead wood with a bonehandled jack-knife. Gavina looked about the circle of floor, seeking some place where she and Goland could sit alone. She could have gone out to the house, but it would have meant asking for the key of the padlock, and explanations and excuses.

A few wooden boxes lay scattered about, with their clothes and some of the kitchen things packed inside. She picked her way among them and came to the bottom of the steps leading to the lighthouse top. The steps were of stone, and they spiralled up the walls, with no banister or support of any kind on the inner side away from the wall.

Gavina looked up at the narrowing tower, and then glanced towards her husband. After a moment's indecision, she began to mount the steps, keeping close to the wall, so that one shoulder grazed it all the while. Her footsteps sounded different from the way they did on the solid floor. The man spoke without looking up. "You know the rule I made."

The footsteps halted. "It's the last day," said Gavina.

"You know the rule."

"It's only once."

"Break a rule once, it's broken."

"He's never been up there. Never."

The man offered no reply.

"He may never get the chance again. It's not everybody that does. Not even once in a lifetime. Unless they've lived in a lighthouse, like we have."

"I said no."

"Is it the glass and things you're afraid of?"

No reply.

"He won't harm them. I'll vouch for that."

"No."

"I'll carry him. All the way. Up and down. And all the time. He won't touch a thing."

Again no reply.

"When we've gone from here, there'll be new people. School for him. You know what children are. When they know he's come from a lighthouse, it's one of the first things they'll ask him—'What's it like from the top?' If he doesn't know they won't believe him. They'll think he made it all up. What will he say?"

She could have bitten out her tongue. The words were out before she could stop them. She knew what she'd have to face now, and she flattened against the wall, clutching the child and waiting.

"*Say*?" said the man, turning to face her. "*Say*? He'll say nothing. You bring me a dumb child for a dowry and ask me what he'll say? Look at him. Apart from what anybody can see with one eye, the kid's a mute. What's he now, five? If they don't talk before now, they never talk. There's one thing you needn't worry

about all your life long, and that's what he's ever going to *say*. He's a dumb hunchback. A dummy with a hump——"

A slow scream was rising. Gavina thought it was in her head. Then she recognized it, and came down the few steps and across the floor. She swung the whistling kettle off the stove and the screaming stopped.

By late afternoon the boat had still not come. The sea had been whipped into foam, and the casual suck and slap of the water between the island and the pinnacles had become an angry drumming. A violet storm-flush had tinted the sky; the big thunderclouds were being rolled forward for battle. Daylight was faltering hours before its time, and Gavina was lighting oil lamps.

Since morning, the three of them had sat with hardly a word spoken. There were occasional drinks of tea from big enamel mugs. There had been cheese and bread and the last of the pickles. But not a proper meal. Goland had skipped and played with quick, birdlike movements, while the man made it a point not to see him.

Gavina had tried to be useful; and her husband had gone to the door so often that it had become no more than a habit. Now she was weary of the waiting and the watching.

"We're going to be here all night," she said. "I'd better put the sheets back on the beds."

She waited for him to give her the key to the padlock on the house door. He looked as if he were searching for a reason for refusing, and not finding one. He reached into his pocket and brought out the key. She took it and went out to the house.

The boy was still and watchful, as he always was when only the man was with him. The man too caught the uneasy quiet. Hs fidgeted a while, then stamped up the steps to the top of the lighthouse.

The boy sat quiet. Suddenly he turned his head. Into the still room, a star-distant bird-call had fluttered like a blown leaf. Goland sprang to the small, square window set in the lighthouse wall, and pressed his face against it. He looked out on his Island of Gulls.

His eyes followed them as they banked high against the storm-clouds, and coasted along high shores. One hung without motion, letting the world turn beneath. One stayed poised, dropping and lifting on the end of a spider-thread. Another slipped sideways down unseen glaciers of air; checked, tilted and slid again.

They floated down sky-rivers that wound among the mountains of the wind. The gulls were ribbons of white paper. Tatters of wedding veil. Streaming silver silks. A burst of feather-confetti. Splashes of milk running and trickling on the clouded skylight. Nougats floating in rain.

And then—making you catch your breath in delight—one that sailed slowly alongside the window, almost touching the glass, like a dreaming shark in an aquarium. The brown eye quiet and secret: a cinder set in snow.

The door opened wide and Gavina

came in on the seawind. She saw the flicker of white before the window became bare again, and she stood still while her dress flapped and her hair blew into a halo of yellow butterflies. Goland watched her turn and fight the door shut. She looked quickly round the empty room and up to the lighthouse top, and then went across and knelt in front of the boy.

"Goland."

He looked into her face, searching and trusting. She took both of his hands and held them to her mouth; then placed his fingers to her temples, so that his palms blinkered her, and left a private corridor between their eyes.

"Goland. Today—today is special. You've lived here nearly all your life. Do you remember anything before—before I brought you here?"

He shook his head.

"You've played here as a child. You understand that, don't you? Till now, you've been like other children. But you've never been off the island. You love it here, don't you?"

A nod.

"Goland. From today—it can never be the same again. Not ever. I want you to know that, and not be afraid of it. You're not like other children, Goland. Do you know that? There are so many children in all the world. More than you could ever guess. And you're not like them, Goland. You're very, very different. From today, you'll know that. But you mustn't be afraid. You mustn't be afraid. There's something you have to know——"

"What does he have to know?" The man's voice crackled like razor-shells dragged by the tide.

He came down the last few steps, then across the floor, walking loose and catlike, in spite of the big sea-boots. Gavina was on her feet in an instant, bracing the boy's shoulders against her. Outside the rain had come, thrashing the lighthouse with water-whips.

"It's between us," she said.

"Between you? The two of you have been hole-and-cornering since I brought you here. Whisper and laugh among the rocks like a courting couple. Has he ever come to *me*? Even once?"

"I understand him."

"He knows a soft mark."

"Is it so strange for a child to come to his mother?"

"Don't forget where I found you. Beachcombing. With a kid of two. No home. I don't know where you came from and I haven't asked. Don't forget that I took you in. Both of you. I didn't need you."

"You needed a wife."

"Don't talk as if *you* were doing the favour."

"You *said* you needed a wife. That's all I meant."

"And this one"—he pointed down at the boy—"hardly a hand's turn since he came."

"He's always done what he could."

"Which isn't much."

"He's five. And he's not strong."

"That much I can't argue with. And not a word out of him. There's been times when I've wondered about that."

"Wondered?"

"About not talking. He could be having me on. Who's to know he doesn't prattle to you when my back's turned, and shuts up like an oyster when I'm about?"

He dropped sharply on one knee and thrust his face into the boy's. "Is it a game, boy? Is that it? Is it just me you don't have words for? Would leather across your back change your mind? Would that be the end of the game?"

A water mountain hurled its green shoulder against the seaward wall, and the lighthouse jarred as if some underground titan had adjusted the foundations with a clumsy hand.

Gavina snatched the boy into her arms. The man rose and grasped her shoulder. "I won't have you take him when I'm talking to him. Put him down." She looked into the boy's eyes as if for a sign, then slowly set him down.

The man dropped on one knee again and grinned at the boy. He reached out and took the boy's hands. He opened them and pressed the soft palms against the sides of his bearded face. "Nice, eh?" Keeping the hands in place, he opened and closed his jaws. As the spiky bristles moved against the flesh, the boy flinched and tried to pull away, but the man pressed harder, grinning.

"Want to talk to me yet? Got some words for me?" The man's knuckles tightened, and the boy's mouth began working open and shut, with paling lips. "That's right. Say something. Come on."

The woman's voice broke in like a gentle wave. "Let him go. He can't speak. I'll tell you. Then you'll understand."

The man looked up at her, bright-eyed, then shut her out of his attention and looked back at the boy. "We're nearly there, aren't we? Come on. It's coming, isn't it? What are you going to tell me?"

By now his thick hands were bunching the boy's knuckles, buckling the fingers into an ugly tangle. Goland's hunched body was twisting in pain.

Gavina's flat hand smashed down on the table top as she shouted "No!" The sound caught the man unawares, and in the moment that his mind assessed it, the boy pulled free.

The sea struck like a gun shot, and rivers ran down the outside walls.

Gavina swept the boy to the stone steps and pointed up. "Go to the top."

The man paused in the act of rising, caught by the sound of command that he'd never heard before. The boy stood open-mouthed.

"Go," she said, her voice like a storm-bell. "When you get there, you'll know why. Now!" Goland turned and skipped up the steps.

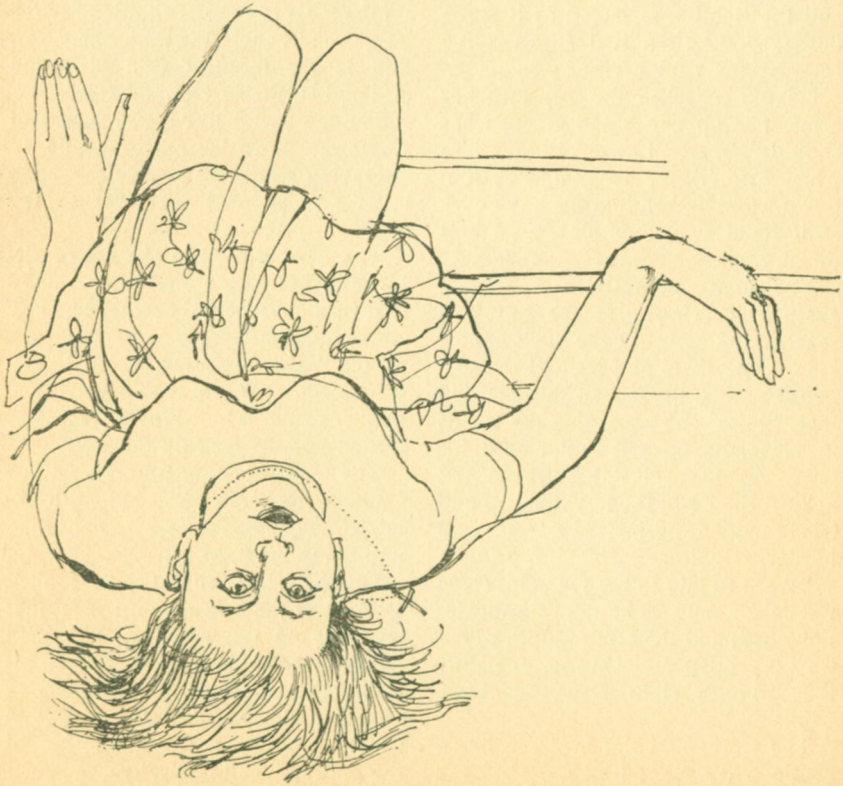
The man suddenly found his voice again. "Boy!" The boy halted, looking down. "Back here" The man pointed to the floor.

Gavina spun round and looked straight at the boy without speaking; he went on up, running. The man loped across the floor, the cords in his neck as taut as wire. Water exploded again, and suddenly there was a trickle drooling down the inside of the seaward wall like saliva.

The boy faltered and went on. The man stared at the water, the breath sucking between his teeth. Then he broke into a run and pushed Gavina so as to get past her. She was firmly braced on the third step, and he misjudged the effort. He tipped off-balance in mid-stride, and caught the inside of his right knee on the edge of the step. The stone corner ripped the trouser-cloth and bared the skin, leaving a deep scratch that instantly oozed into blood beads.

Gavina stooped and stretched out a hand in quick sorrow. He clawed at the wrist and wrenched sideways with all his force. As she toppled past him, he heard the reflex gasp from her shocked lungs. Both her feet were snagged by his bent knee, and her free arm had no time to buffer the fall.

As he bounded up the steps, he had a blurred impression of her head bouncing on the big wooden packing case. He stopped and spun round,



in time to see the head crunch on the stone floor, the yellow hair tumbling over her face. He made a move to go on up. then turned and came back. His two hands pushed aside the hair as if he were drawing back curtains.

The wide eyes were wide open and still. He was feeling for the wrist-beat when something about the eyes caught his attention. There was no movement, but something in them stirred.

He bent close to her face, and saw in both pupils an identical white fleck, like a flower bud. Far down, deep in the pupil-pools, were twin images of the boy's face. The two tiny mouths blossomed open, and the long scream poured down on the man like an ice-fall.

He looked straight up, and there, a hundred feet above him, was the boy looking down. At that distance, the face seemed to show no emotion; only the open mouth screaming like a seabird.

Smash went the sea against the wall. *Smash.*

A diagonal rift leapt across the wall about half way up, and water cascaded in. For the first time, the sounds of the storm slammed their way inside. Rain slashed and clawed at the walls. From the pinnacles came the singing of the storm winds as they flung themselves through narrow channels and streamed through crevasses. And behind it all was the sea. Pounding the black rocks. Felling the weakened columns like stone trees. Shattering and destroying.

The lighthouse floor was awash, and Gavina's head was being rolled from side to side as if it had no connection with the shoulders. The man splashed across to the steps and looked at his only witness. The boy's head drew back, and the man sprang up three steps at a time.

The boy's numbed fingers scrabbled at the door that opened on the catwalk round the lighthouse top. The old wooden doorknob was loose in its socket. He clamped the knob tight in both hands and felt it shift idly, like a head on a broken neck. He held his breath and twisted, first to the right, then to the left. There was no answering movement from the door catch.

The sea clouted the lighthouse with thousand-gallon fists, and Goland felt the world juddering beneath him.

It was then that he saw the big black key sticking out of the door an inch or two above his head. With left hand on top of the iron ring and right hand on the bottom, he ground the key round and heard the metallic clack in the thickness of the wood.

As he grabbed at the doorknob, the man's hand lunged at him from his left, and heavy-nailed fingers gouged at his jersey. Twisting away to the right, Goland felt the doorknob turn in his hands, and the door was battered wide open by the wind. The door edge struck the man's arm and tore away his grip. The boy felt the whoosh of cold air stream along his back as the thick wool jersey ripped open.

The man stumbled, and smashed into the silvered mirrors. Shards of glass slithered across the iron grille

floor of the lamp room, and careened down the length of the lighthouse in a jagged waterfall. Goland sprang out on to the catwalk and looked up at the sky.

Gulls. Silver swallows of the sea, keening at their sky wake. They swooped past him, screaming and urging.

The boy shut his eyes against the sting of the spray, and for an instant he saw the fardown sparkle of a summer sea, and felt the ache of the young bird to fling itself off the rock shelf and plunge into maturity. The sea's artillery boomed and cracked, and the lighthouse staggered, and began to buckle, slowly, regretfully.

Goland dived out into space.

As the man lurched at the tilting door, his wide eyes saw the boy's hump shift and rustle, and his shoulders burst into wings. Goland breasted the wind and made for the open sea. He was going home.

VENGEANCE IS MINE

GRAHAM DALE

E HAD BEEN searching for Logan for over a year now and finally, after many disappointments, knew exactly where to find him. The moment he set eyes on him he would shoot him dead. No matter where or when, he would empty the gun into Logan's belly, and if that didn't kill him he'd beat his head to pulp with the empty gun and strangle him on top of that if need be.

To him Logan was little more than a stranger. In fact, he had only seen him twice, and both times indistinctly at that. Whatever the consequences following this killing should be he was prepared to suffer them. No, not prepared, he told himself, as he sat in a small café on Main Street, just uninterested. He had been in this café several times during the past week. As a matter of fact, it was here in this café he'd accidentally discovered the present whereabouts of Steve Logan. And in a few minutes he would finish his coffee, walk out of the door, across the street, into the apartment block opposite, take the elevator to the eleventh floor, and then in Room 112 he would slay, yes, slay, he thought, much more appropriate for the occasion than kill. Much more appropriate, he chuckled to himself quietly.

A man sat down at the opposite side of the table, and as he drew up his chair smiled affably. I wonder if he'd smile if he knew what I was thinking, he thought; six to four he'd bolt like a jack-rabbit.

He finished his coffee, left a quarter beside the empty cup and headed towards the door. Through the glass door he could see the rain falling heavily, beading the door and the large plate-glass window of the café. The street lights made the wet road shine and passing cars threw up the rain in sprays from their wheels. It was a cold night. Once outside, he stood in the café doorway for a few moments, lit a cigarette and pulled up the collar of his top-coat. He was bare-headed and water dropped on to his forehead from over the doorway. Shuddering, he crossed the street. When he reached the other side he looked at his watch. It was a little after nine o'clock.

He rode up alone in the elevator to the eleventh floor, walked along the corridor and stopped outside Room 112. He stood outside the door for a minute or so and felt the cold steel of the gun inside the pocket of his top-coat. Inside the room he could hear someone talking. Evidently there was more than one person there. But how many he could not tell by listening through the door. What difference does it make how many people are in the room, he thought. Besides, I can't take the chance of letting him get away this time.

Gripping the gun more firmly now

inside his pocket he slowly drew it out, unclicked the safety catch and booted the door open with a tremendous kick from his right foot.

Logan was over by the window. He turned quickly, startled.

"What the hell!" he cried, reaching for the gun in the shoulder-holster he wore.

"Drop it, Logan. Careful now. No tricks."

"Stop that bangin', will yer," a woman's voice rang out from the other room of the small two-roomed apartment.

"Shut yer trap," Logan called to her. "An' come on in here." He dropped the gun on the floor.

The man holding the gun on Logan cautiously closed the door behind him. The other door opened and the woman came in. Apparently she had been taking a shower. All she wore was a bath-towel around her middle.

"Hey, what's the big idea . . ." When she saw the gun she gasped and stopped abruptly.

"Shut up. Sit down here," the man with the gun said, indicating a chair close to him. She sat quickly; a blonde in her early thirties; tall, slim, good-looking and very tanned.

She eased herself into the chair rather dexterously, he thought, for a girl wearing only a bath-towel.

"Who the hell are you? What do you want?" Logan snapped.

"The name's Lawrence. John Lawrence, Chicago."

"So?" Logan inquired. "I ain't been in Chicago in over a year." He eyed the slender-built young man with the falling, tousled, light hair scrutinizingly.

John Lawrence had, until now, intended killing Logan on sight. But, never having killed anyone before, he was now a little hesitant. He had to make sure that Logan was the right man. It was evident that Logan was nothing more than a cheap, petty hood.

He tried exceedingly hard to remember the man he had seen on those two occasions. The build was undoubtedly the same; thick, heavy set, and rather taller than anticipated from any distance. The hair was dark. This must be the man, he thought. And the name. Still, he realized, there must be hundreds of Steve Logans in the United States. Maybe that wasn't even his real name. I must be sure, he thought gravely. I must be sure of my man.

"Still bustin' up gas-meters, Logan?"

"Wise guy, hey?" Logan sneered, looking down at the gun on the floor.

"Don't try it, punk." The man with the gun over-emphasized the word "punk". Exasperated, Logan yelled spit and words together.

"Listen, bud," he threatened. "Nobody calls me a punk, see. Nobody. So I needed a couple of bucks badly at one time.

"So I busted open some gas-meter. So what? What's it to you, anyway? You gonna shoot me first for takin' five bucks out from some rotten old gas-met——"

Suddenly there was a loud bang. A .45 slug tore open the white shirt across Logan's chest. Two more fol-

lowed almost simultaneously. Blood oozed out of the jagged, newly-acquired holes in the white undulating silken material. Logan coughed, spat blood, his knees buckled. The look on his face was that of a man who could not believe that this was actually happening to him.

The floor came up revolving nightmarishly and slapped him hard, full in the face. He tried desperately, frantically, to wake up, until the nightmare subsided and he lay dead in a pool of blood which the carpet had already begun to absorb.

Shoving the gun back inside his pocket, John Lawrence turned slightly to where the blonde sat rigid, stupefied.

The shots, so sudden and unexpected, had brought from her, seconds before, only a short, sharp shriek. Now she looked him in the face nervously, apprehensively.

"You his wife?" he asked quietly.

"No." Her voice was weak, tremulous.

"Get dressed. And beat it."

Her face lit up. In two minutes flat he was alone in the apartment. He could hear people outside in the hall. Someone knocked on the door; probably the hotel manager. He visualized a perky, bald-headed little man tapping apprehensively on the door.

He picked up the 'phone and dialled.

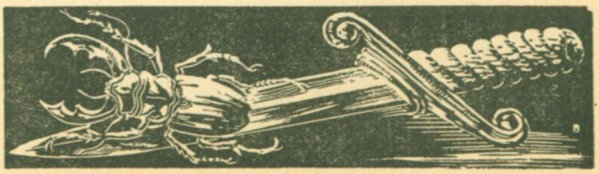
"Police Department? Better come over here," he said composedly. "I just killed a guy. Jefferson apartments. That's right. Main Street."

* * *

As customary in all police stations, delinquents on entry are searched and relieved of their possessions. Among many odds and ends taken from John Lawrence, one such article was a small newspaper clipping dated back a little over a year.

It read:

"Early this morning neighbours found Mrs. Julie Lawrence and her ten-month-old baby daughter Julie Bernadette dead in bed in their gas-filled apartment. Police are trying to trace the occupier of the apartment below, registered as a Mr. S. Logan, where a gas-meter was found to be ransacked. Owing to the damage to the gas-meter, a pipe leading to the above apartment, on examination, was found to be fractured, thus causing the leak. Mr. John Lawrence escaped with his life due to the fact that he was out on night work."



MAGNIFICAT

JOAN FORMAN

Illustrated by Woodward

THERE WAS SILENCE on the moor—grey silence. The greyness swirled round and round in damp swathes, shutting off the sky. Mist and silence drifted in together—mist like a tenuous ghost rose in the bracken and slipped insidious white arms around the rocks. Hard lines of rock and boulder were softened and their outlines smoothed away into nothing, sucked into the mist and disintegrated. Mist lay on the heather, gemming its bells with silver. Sheep and the moorland birds were tenderly wrapped round by the glistening blanket, and their cries fell into the silence and were lost. The whiteness grew; it oozed from the rock crevices in waving scarves, and rose from the ground, enveloping and sinuous.

The man and woman stood still, listening. There was no sound in the mist; stream, sheep, birds, wind—the creatures of sound had dissolved away: there was nothing real save the ground on which they stood. The girl plucked at her jumper with cold, stiff fingers; her hair hung wet and limp by her face and her mouth turned down at the corners. The mist condensed in little beads on eyebrows

and lashes, and her face was filmed with moisture. She turned to the man at her side.

"It's getting worse, Martin," she said, and her voice wavered a little.

He nodded and frowned. He stood quite still, hands thrust in trouser pockets, thin, soaked shirt clinging to his shoulders. He thrust his head forward, peering into the mist, as though by an effort of will his eyes could penetrate the drifting curtain. The girl at his side moved suddenly, and bent to ease the shoe from her blistered foot; she straightened slowly, for every muscle in her body was stiff and aching with the cold. She slipped her fingers timidly through the man's arm, and moved closer to him.

He did not look at her, but kept his eyes averted, searching the baffling opacity which surrounded them. His body, which had been warm and glowing with the exertion of their climb, began to feel damp and chilled now, and he shook himself suddenly in an attempt to discard the apathy which was stealing over him. He had a sudden clear mental vision of their being found by some shepherd, lying stiff and frozen in grotesque attitudes on the wet hillside, when the mist had cleared, and he shuddered involuntarily. He wiped the picture from his mind, and looked down at the girl beside him; she was watching him anxiously, and a little nerve in her cheek twitched.

"If we bear right," he said, "We should reach Blue Ghyll Tarn."

His voice was steady, but carried no conviction. Blue Ghyll Tarn. The name was as remote as Avalon or the Islands of the Blest—nothing in this drifting white world could ever be blue—nothing could have any shape; all was formless, white and moving —shifting and inconstant; tenuous and clinging.

They began to move forward again, hand in hand, stumbling into unseen obstructions, now ankle-deep in bog, now slithering over rocks. Now and again a bramble flung out a strangling arm, and clutched at the girl's skirt with a hooked black claw, ripping her legs: each time, she paused to detach the tentacle before forcing her aching limbs into fresh movement.

The stiffness began to creep up her spine, and a cold sickness had settled in the pit of her stomach. It seemed to her that the moor and mist were full of a gigantic evil spirit, watching them stumble in ever-narrowing circles until they died; she imagined a goat-footed creature sitting on a mist-hidden rock, and grinning with sardonic amusement at their helplessness. The sickness surged through her suddenly, and her knees began to give way beneath her. She clutched at the man's arm for support.

"I can't go any farther, Martin," she said, and her voice rose high and hysterical into the muffling silence.

His arm went round her, and they paused, standing close together, trembling with cold. His face was drawn and grey, and when his voice came, it sounded unreal and faint.

"We can't stay here, Jane—we must go on until we find an outcrop of rock: we can't stay in the open . . ."

the words died away, leaving the sentence suspended in the saturated air. His mind completed it, and he forced his limbs into movement to banish the thought, pulling the girl with him in the circle of his arm. Her feet stumbled helplessly against the tangled heather roots, and again and again only his supporting arm saved her from falling amongst the wet bracken.

They blundered on for what seemed like hours, cold and aching, and with no purpose save to maintain the circulation in their chilled bodies. The mist grew denser, and the air more cruelly cold. They were now too frozen and exhausted to be aware of what they did, and stumbled on automatically, tearing flesh on hidden briars, bruising shins on invisible rocks, forced on only by the instinct to preserve life, to keep moving as long as they could.

They had reached what was apparently a slight decline in the ground, and the man was half-supporting, half-carrying his exhausted companion forward down the slope, when suddenly the girl cried out.

"What is it? For God's sake, what is it?" his voice cut sharply through the mist.

"There's something in front of me," the girl said. Her voice caught in her throat, and she began to weep unexpectedly. Her words came thick and muffled with sobs. "Something hard . . . I can feel it. Oh, God! We're going to die . . . I know we're going to die." She began to whimper, and the tears rolled uncontrollably down her cheeks on to her soaked jumper. Her face worked miserably, and she stood quite still, like a small child, twisting her handkerchief round and round in her hands, crying.

Martin looked at her and opened his mouth as though to speak, but there was nothing he could say, and he turned away. His thoughts echoed her words. Going to die. He put out his hand absently towards the obstacle which stood in their path, and his fingers encountered a tapered piece of wood, fixed upright in the ground, and with a bent staple in the side; attached to it were other pieces of wood of similar size and height. His throat contracted suddenly, and his voice when it came, was husky.

"It's a fence, Jane. A wooden fence!"

She didn't seem to hear, but stared ahead of her into the greyness, eyes blurred with tears, and twisting her crumpled handkerchief in her fingers. A tear trickled over her mouth and she brushed it away mechanically with a wet hand: she sobbed convulsively, then was silent again.

Martin shook her arm in his excitement, irritated that she had not grasped the great significance of his discovery.

"Don't you see?" he ejaculated, "It's a fence—a garden fence—there must be a house here!"

The word "house" penetrated Jane's consciousness, and she blinked back the fresh tears which had risen at his tone.

"A house?" she said. And a sudden warm vision swam before her eyes, compounded of all the houses she had known—a warm fire with

yellow flames trailing up the chimney, gleaming silver and polished wood, cups of steaming cocoa, hot buttered toast and the smell of logs burning; a soft bed with a green silk eiderdown. Her heart lifted a little, and her mouth turned up at the corners: then she sighed.

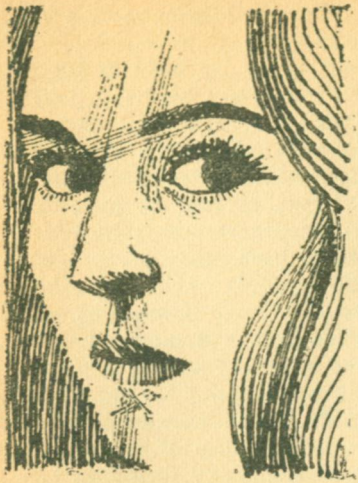
"There may not be any house," she said.

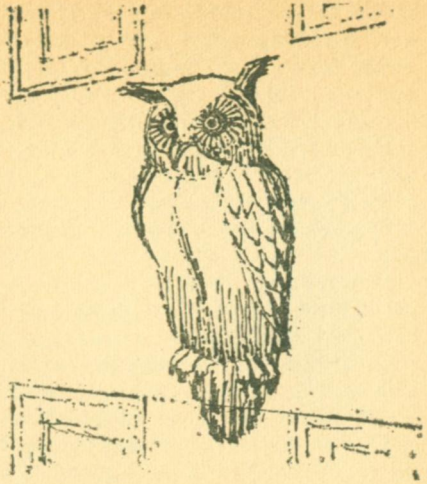
Martin shook his head impatiently, but made no reply. He took hold of her elbow, and propelled her along in front of him, feeling along the fence with his free hand. Presently, his fingers touched the metal hinge of a gate, and after he had fumbled along the rough wood for a catch, the gate finally swung away from them with a creak. They hesitated for a moment, before walking through, each feeling that the fence might cordon off a cliff top, and the gate lead to a precipice. Martin moved forward, pulling Jane after him by the hand. He counted his steps, carefully, ridiculously . . . two, three, four, five . . . his foot struck something solid, and a small squat shape loomed up at him out of the mist; he ran his fingers across the top of it, then laughed in relief; it was a sundial. So they were in a garden. Twice they stumbled over low stunted bushes, and once a tree branch brushed Jane's hair, causing her to jump backward with a little cry. Then, quite suddenly, they stood before a door. It was a dark brown shiny door, with a bright brass knocker, in the shape of an owl. The bird stared out at them with round metal eyes; it seemed to change its shape as they watched it, but it was only the mist filtering across the brazen surface.

Martin raised his hand to knock, then hesitated with his hand poised over the knocker. There was a strange stillness about the house, almost an unearthly stillness—even the mist couldn't quite account for the atmosphere of concentrated quiet which emanated from the place. Jane sneezed suddenly behind him, and he shook off the foreboding. He raised his hand and rapped smartly with the owl knocker: the metal felt clammy to his touch. They waited. For a while there was silence, broken only by the stealthy drip of water from the house eaves, and their own laboured breathing. Then presently a footstep sounded on the other side of the door. Their eyes swung to the turning handle; then the door opened inwards, and a tall dark woman stood regarding them.

Martin drew in his breath slowly. For a moment, he forgot he was standing in the mist, and was cold and soaked to the skin: there was an impression of warmth about the woman before him which drove such considerations from the mind. She was tall and beautifully built, the head being well set upon her shoulders, and with neat hands and feet. The face was tapered, with high cheek bones beneath large dark eyes, and the pallor of the skin was offset by a thick coronet of black hair coiled round her head. So much he observed before she spoke.

Then, "You are lost," she said, and the voice was deeper and more cultured than Martin had expected.





There was no question in her tone; she had made a statement of fact, as though she had been waiting, and their coming was no surprise to her. She opened the door wider, and they saw the glow from a fire reflected in polished brass and gleaming wood. She waved them inside.

"Come in," she said, and the tone was calm and matter-of-fact, with no special welcome or solicitude in it. Jane glanced a little apprehensively at Martin, but he was staring around him at the tiny panelled hall, with its brass warming pan hanging against the stairhead, and its Indian rugs, pale and delicate on the dark floor. His head felt light, as though it were full of mist, which the unexpected warmth of the house were turning to steam. He felt as though he had stepped from one dream into another; this world of warmth and elegance seemed equally as unreal as the moving world of mist outside. He made an effort to pull himself together.

"My sister is very tired," he said, and his voice sounded flat and colourless in the quiet house. Jane laughed a little nervously, but was glad of the opportunity to speak.

"I thought we should die out there," she said. "I thought no one would ever find us." Her breath caught a little, and suddenly she didn't know where to look.

The woman turned and looked at Jane, unsmiling. It was a quiet, penetrating gaze, which pierced the chilled surface to the creature underneath. She did not speak. Jane felt as though her true value were being calculated, her faults and virtues assessed and measured against each other; she felt for a moment, like a small creature under a microscope; then the woman glanced away.

"You may stay until the mist lifts,"

she said. She turned, with a curious graceful movement and walked ahead of them towards a flight of stairs. "I will show you your rooms," she said, throwing the words down to them over her shoulder, without looking at them. They followed meekly; the cold and dampness had already re-asserted its presence in their bodies, and for the time being the only thought in their minds was the need for warmth and dryness. Their hostess paused on a small carpeted landing, and indicated two doors on her right. "You will find dry clothes in there," she said. "There will be supper downstairs when you are ready." And she turned away, without looking at them, as though her business with them were finished.

Martin opened his mouth to thank her, but the words died in his throat, for she was already half-way down the stairs, and there was something about the atmosphere of the house and its owner, which discouraged platitudinous conversation. He gazed after her, until presently they heard the soft click of the downstairs door, and he turned to Jane.

"Thank God we found this place," he said. She nodded, but without conviction, and the uneasiness she had felt when they first entered the house prickled restlessly at the back of her mind. She stood for a moment staring at the nearest door knob unseeingly. There was some mystery which she could not fathom. (She heard Martin open his door.) There was something strange—inexplicable; her mind fumbled amongst its doubts to find the source. Then suddenly she knew: the clothes; why had she said there would be dry clothes? Had she expected them? How did she know? She lifted her head quickly. "Martin . . ." she said. But Martin had gone into his room, and from behind the closed door, she heard him whistling "The Kerry Dance", spasmodically and out of tune. She shook her head, and turning the handle of her door, went inside.

* * *

In the downstairs room, the firelight cast strange shadows on the cream walls, and drew a red glow from the bricks of the old fireplace. The floor was dark and highly polished, and an amber reflection from the flames slid along its smooth surface; two or three Indian rugs lay on the floor, their rose and cream softness darkly islanded. A deep-armed easy chair stood by the fireplace, covered in rose-pink cretonne, and curtains of similar material were drawn close across the room's one window; an old dresser, black and solid, filled one wall, and an assortment of china relieved its dullness. Cups of china-blue, white-spotted Cornish pottery hung suspended from nails, and their companion saucers were propped against the dresser back; a blue Spode jug swung beside an old lustre tankard, and a squat Toby jug leered derisively into the room.

The centre of the room was occupied by a thick oak table, its sturdy legs carved in a design of lotus leaves and eagle's claws. Its black surface was hidden now by a spotless damask cloth, which in turn bore plates and dishes of cold ham, veget-

able salad, bread and butter, pastries and honey cakes. The room was filled with firelight, and warm comfort. The inanimate objects glowed rosily in the firelight, and everything was subdued and quiet with waiting. A fat little clock ticked contentedly on the mantelpiece, and on the wall above it hung a beautiful reproduction of a Raphael Madonna, surrounded by clustering cherubs. The shadows rose and fell, sliding up the wall and falling away, long grey fingers clutching at the ceiling. The Madonna's pale cheek was flushed with firelight; the clock ticked steadily.

Presently, a door on the right opened, and the owner of the house stood in the doorway. She had a silver teapot in her right hand, but she stood, forgetful of it, gazing into the room. She smiled a little, and the caress embraced the little room tenderly. Her eyes travelled from the walls to the curtains, and from the curtains to the dresser; she marked the gleam on the lustre jug and the glow in the pottery; then down to the pale rugs and the rough old fireplace, and finally her eyes swung to the picture above the clock. There she paused and a little quivering sigh ran through her. She put down the teapot on the table and walked with her slow, graceful movement to the hearth.

She stood for a long time, hands by her sides, shoulders relaxed, head thrown back, gazing at the picture. The gold and blues were softened in the firelight, and the Madonna's lips curved in a tender smile above the child in her arms. For a long time, the woman gazed, as though she would absorb the beauty by concentration. Then she sighed.

"You are very lovely," she said softly, and the words seemed to break into several smaller melodies, blending with the quiet of the room. For a few moments, peace lay in the air, as the mist lay on the hills outside, then a bedroom door banged upstairs, and a little tremor ran through the stillness. The woman half-turned from her picture and frowned, one foot impatiently tapping the fireplace. She stood, listening; she and the stillness of the room were one, only her senses reached out to the outsiders, now descending her stairs.

She heard their muttered voices as they crosed the hall, the man's lazy and kindly, the girl's sharp and unsure. Then the voices stopped outside the door; there was silence, and she guessed that they were hesitating with a hand on the door knob. She waited, still and withdrawn. And then the handle of the door turned, and they came in.

They gazed round them, half unsure what to do or say next. The girl fidgeted with her belt, then looked anxiously at her nails, and finally put her hands behind her: she stood first on one foot then on the other, and looked anywhere but at her hostess. The man had looked curiously at the china, the rugs and the furniture, then had strode across to the mantelpiece, and now was standing, hands in pockets, feet apart, gazing at the Raphael Madonna. He whistled softly, irritatingly, under his breath. The woman had withdrawn into her-

self until she felt hard and contracted, striving to preserve inside herself the tranquillity which these people had shattered.

As she poured out the tea, she watched the man out of the corner of her eye, without appearing to do so. She wished he would move from the mantelpiece—wished he wouldn't gaze so insistently at the picture—wished he wouldn't whistle under his breath. The girl was sitting on a wicker stool, and looking at her finger nails again. The room was silent, with that sharp silence which makes for discomfort. Then the man turned away from the picture, and studied the toe of his shoe. He began to speak softly, trying to express some thanks for the hospitality they had received—for his hostess's kindness. She cut him short. "That's all right. You had better have something to eat."

They sat down to an uncomfortable meal. The food was good and beautifully cooked. Martin and Jane had not realized the extent of their hunger until they had seen the ham and the honey buns. Martin tried to break the silence which hovered over the table. He complimented his hostess upon her cooking, and she looked at him with wide brown eyes; a little smile hovered round her lips but she said nothing. He told her the story of their climb, how they had set out from Longmoor that morning, intending to walk to Pendrath Falls, and how the mist had fallen and they had become completely lost. The woman nodded, but said nothing. Jane felt that she knew all about them already. Jane watched her surreptitiously.

The face was quiet and aloof, and in repose had a dreamy quality which lent it surprising beauty. Once the woman looked up suddenly, and met Jane's gaze, her eyes expressionless and remote. Jane looked away, and then examined her finger nails nervously. Martin was asking about the house. Where were they exactly? How far from Longmoor? How near to Pendrath Falls? The woman looked at him strangely, and she paused in her clearing away. She gave no answer to his question.

"The mist will clear in three days," she said quietly, "then I will show you the way to Longmoor," and she went out of the room closing the door softly behind her.

Jane looked at Martin, consternation in her face. "I wish we could go," she said. "I don't like this place." She looked round her jerkily, unhappily. "I wish we could go."

He shook his head. "We must stay till the mist clears—three days, she said."

Jane shuddered. How did the woman know how long the mist would last? How did she know they were coming and would need dry clothes? Why was this house so still and she so silent?

Similar questions were flooding through Martin's mind. Why was a country cottage so well furnished? Why should a country woman possess such excellent taste? Why did she speak and look like a woman of culture? How did she live? And why here? The questions poured in a

torrent through his mind. He glanced at the Raphael Madonna.

"I believe she loves that picture," he said. "Did you see how she watched me when I looked at it?"

Jane glanced at the picture and away again, disinterestedly; she didn't like pictures much. She twisted her handkerchief in her fingers. "I wish we could go," she said.

* * *

The next two days passed slowly. The mist thickened and swirled increasingly outside the cottage, twisting and writhing in tenuous loops and spirals about the chimneys and eaves. Inside the cottage, Jane wandered disconsolately from room to room. Martin was sitting in the rose-covered armchair, reading a book, his feet propped on the mantelpiece, peacefully turning over pages at regular intervals; he occasionally knocked his pipe out against the rough bricks of the fireplace. Jane came in and closed the door behind her with a sharp movement. She went to the table and picked up a book, looked at the title and put it down again; she walked slowly round the room, touching this and fingering that; she turned the Toby jug with its face to the wall, because she couldn't stand its mocking grin. The clock's tick began to get on her nerves; she could hear it ticking, ticking, ticking, growing gradually louder till it filled the whole room with its noise, and her eardrums throbbed to bursting.

A shadow flickered in a dark corner of the room, and she looked at it sharply. It seemed to assume the shape of a woman, a tall woman with a black coronet of hair. She blinked hard and it became just a shadow, lying motionless against the wall. The quietness settled in again. There was no sound; even the clock now seemed muted. Silence. The stillness began to get on her nerves; if only something would happen to shatter it; if only there were a wireless or a piano—or somebody to talk to. She looked at Martin.

He bit into his pipe with his teeth, and turned over a page, absorbed in his reading.

"Martin ..." she said, and hesitated, for she had nothing to say. He looked up, and she felt impelled to plunge into conversation, any conversation rather than have the muffled stillness close over her again.

"Where has she gone, Martin?"

"She? Oh! I don't know—she went out after breakfast; she had a basket with her."

"Went out? In this? But the mist's thicker than ever—she'll never find her way back."

Martin tapped his pipe against the side of the fireplace, and began cleaning out the bowl with a penknife. For a little while he did not speak, refilling the pipe with careful fingers, then he looked up.

"She went out in the mist yesterday," he said quietly. (He fumbled for a match.) "And she came back quite safely before dusk." The match flame trembled a little in the draught.

Jane began to walk up and down, hands clasped tensely in front of her. "I wish she hadn't come back," she said; the words came in uneven jerks

as her pace increased. Martin looked up in surprise, and the match burned down to his fingers before he dropped it into the hearth.

"I wish she hadn't come back," Jane said, and her voice was brittle, not quite controlled. "I hate her. The way she looks at me ... and won't answer questions ..."

Martin shrugged. "There's no reason why she should answer questions," he said, "it's her house."

"Where does she go?" Jane's voice began to rise in the still room. "Wandering about in this fog. .. Why doesn't she get lost, as we did? There's something eerie about her —about this house—the way she talks to that picture." She stopped before the pale loveliness of the Raphael Madonna, and the serene countenance smiled away over her head into the slowly piling shadows in the far corners of the room. Jane shuddered. She felt as though someone had passed by her, causing a cold draught of air to fan her cheek.

Her voice had dropped to an almost incoherent mutter. "I hate this place—hate it." She picked up Martin's penknife from the table and began to twist it in her fingers. She looked at him. He had returned to his book, and was beginning to nod drowsily now over the pages. Now the stillness flowed in again and pressed on her eardrums. She listened, head on one side: not a sound; not even the drip of water from the outside eaves, not the snap of a twig; not even the crackling of the fire nor the tick of the clock, for the fire had died to a red glow and the clock had stopped at ten to twelve.

The place was full of shadows and stillness; nothing moved, nothing breathed. The room was filled with dead things—as dead as the woman who owned them. That's it; she was dead; she wasn't real at all—she was a ghost, or a great vampire who lived on the travellers she caught. Jane had a sudden dreadful vision of the vampire flapping in through the window, filling the room with its leathern black wings. She covered her eyes with her hands, still clutching the penknife, and tried to control the sick shuddering inside her. The room suddenly seemed to be full of a whirring sound; she felt dizzy, and the furniture began to spin round and round. How dark everything was; only the pallid face of the Madonna shone in the firelight—a vapid, empty, expressionless face, a cold, unseeing malevolent stare, like the eyes of its owner, its possessor.

That was it! The picture was its owner—there was no separating one from another. The eyes followed her hungrily round the room. So the creature knew how Jane hated her. She shuddered, and took a quick backward step; her breath was coming in full gasps, and her heart was beating in her throat until she felt she would vomit. The furniture swirled faster round her, and the floor seemed to be heaving beneath her feet—the pale Madonna hung in the centre of the whirling blackness and sneered and sneered; a mad whirl of darkness with a white hub; and darkness.

She gave a sudden, sharp, animal cry, and leapt forward, the penknife grasped in her hand, flinging herself at the picture. She thrust the knife in and ripped the parchment—slashed—from side to side, cruelly, viciously, lacerating the pale face until it hung in tatters. She muttered incoherently to herself between clenched teeth. She lifted her arm to strike again; then suddenly the strength drained away from her muscles, and the knife fell with a clatter into the grate. Her arm dropped to her side; she stood for a moment, without moving, then she began to weep softly, monotonously.

The clattering penknife had startled Martin from his sleep, and for a moment he could not comprehend his surroundings; then realization came, and he looked at the weeping Jane; his eyes swept to the ragged remains of the Madonna, and his mouth contracted. He sprang from his chair and caught her by the shoulders.

"You little vandal!" he said, and his voice was dangerously soft. "You wicked little vandal!" And he shook her until her teeth rattled in her head, and spasmodic sobs exploded in her throat. Suddenly he flung her from him, and she half fell against the dresser, clutching at it and sobbing hysterically. Martin bent and picked up the knife from the hearth. He stared at it in silence for a moment, then slipped it into his pocket. He looked at her distastefully as she huddled against the dresser.

"We've got to get out of here," he said, and walked to the door.

"But, Martin, the mist . . . we can't . . ." her voice died away into a wail.

"We've got to get out," he said, and then, turning at the door, "Unless you intend to stay and face her."

Jane looked round her wildly. She dared not look at the hanging rags on the wall; she turned helplessly to Martin and stumbled towards him.

"We shall be lost," she moaned, and her voice quavered in the air.

He turned on his heel, and marched to the front door. "The fog is lifting," he said. "We can be in Longmoor by six. I think I can find the way from here." She gave a little cry and ran after him, clutching at his arm. He shook her off impatiently. They closed the front door behind them, and walked down the path. The mist had lifted a little and they could see the outline of the moors faintly in the pearly light. "We turn to the right, and go past the gorse clump," he said. "The track to Longmoor is beyond." The gate clanged to behind them, and they walked away into the opalescent air.

* * *

On the high fells, the mist had been clear since morning. Glittering reminders of it still clung to the short grass and spangled the twisted heather with silver. The gorse bushes had shaken the vaporous scarves from their shoulders, and the flowers hung like golden butterflies from their horned stems. A lark was singing somewhere out of sight, tossing down his liquid notes condescendingly to the cold moor. A breeze blew across the hilltop, across the outcrop of rock on its crest, and the woman seated there pulled her shawl closer about her shoulders. She sat quite still, hands resting on her knees, a basket half filled with blueberries at her feet. Her head was thrown back a little, chin out-thrust, so that the pearly light lay across her forehead and cheeks. The black hair had escaped from its plaited crown, and fallen in an untidy, waving mass to her shoulders, but she made no attempt to restrain it, and as the wind grew stronger, little tendrils escaped and flew about her head. She smiled as the wind touched her cheek, and the smile embraced the whole, wide, quiet landscape.

From where she sat on her high rock, she could see the moor falling away beneath her, a straight drop of three hundred feet and then a gradual sloping away—heather, bracken and emerald turf—sloping away for miles, rolling endlessly towards the horizon. In the nearer distance, the ground was purple and brown, tufted and rugged; jagged outcrops of rock pushed through the curled bracken; fussy little springs gushed forth and tumbled headlong down the hillside, vanishing in a flurry of silver at the bottom, never to be seen again. But farther away, the moor's domination ceased, and the country was broken up into tiny fields, with miniature farms sending blue wisps of smoke into the air.

The watcher drew a deep breath, filling her lungs with cold clear air. She shook her head a little, and the long, heavy hair moved slowly on her shoulders; the soft dampness gemmed lashes and brows with tiny beads.

She stood up and stretched her arms luxuriously above her head; the sense of solitude filled her. She was the only human thing on the moor.

The breeze blew strongly against her body, and she relished its challenging power. There was strength here, and freedom: the familiar exhilaration began to rise in her, and she threw back her head, laughing with joy. The utter loneliness of this—empty sky, wide landscape. The breeze caressed her face and lifted her hair; a curlew called, and the cold liquid notes threaded the air with trembling music. She was filled with strength and knowledge and wild vitality.

With a quick, gay movement, she turned, caught up the basket of blueberries, and strode away from the rocks, swinging the basket in her hand and humming happily to herself. Strange, what a sense of power the moor gave you—a sense of wisdom—she felt as though she knew everything in the world—saw the reasons and the purpose; pettinesses faded and became insignificant in this immensity—"Only winds and rivers. Life and Death". Poetry and music; the poetry of words, the music of wind and curlews. She strode on across the moor, hair streaming behind her, green turf springing beneath her feet.

One belonged to oneself here—aloof and alone—needing no support—a revolving tower of strength in oneself, having and needing no human contact. This was outside humanity—the common interchange of people on a mediocre level; this was the highest point of the human spirit—and what might be beyond? —beyond this thrilling solitude which placed one so near to ... The thought broke off. So near. The body no longer held with its heavy ties; the screen grew very thin between one's spirit and the thing which throbbed through Nature. Some kinship there must be to create this response. (She leapt across a small stream which roamed across her path.) Some deep reality which linked animate and inanimate and pulsed through both. One touched it sometimes, rarely, unexpectedly—not everybody, of course; and it came only in solitude: people were distracting—their fleshiness too real, too near, to realize the spirit. But there was some kinship—a common birth perhaps.

She checked her free swinging stride to a walk. Soon she must return to the cottage. She sighed. A feeling of disturbance fretted her mind. They would still be there, the man and the woman—the man's persistent friendliness, the woman's brittle hostility—filling her house and suffocating the quiet peace with their sharp voices and sudden movements. She stopped, and putting down her basket, began to twist her hair into a thick rope, piling it round her head and pinning it into place.

Already she had donned the old fetters, convention, custom, civilization. She picked up her basket, and began to descend the hill, picking her way through the knee-high bracken. The mist was beginning to rise again, and the ground was already being smoothed into an uncertain uniformity. She quickened her pace. They would be sitting in her room, the man with his feet on

her mantelpiece, scattering tobacco ash over the hearth, the girl gazing at her finger nails, or fidgeting with the ornaments. She had seen them gazing at her picture—the Madonna—the man with interest, the girl with an indifference which bordered on dislike.

The girl's voice crackled through her mind again, as she had heard it yesterday, when she had paused, tea-tray in hand, outside the door of the room in which they sat. "Ugly thing!" the voice had said. "Stupid, ugly, expressionless thing!" And when she had entered, the girl had been standing at the fireplace, hands behind her, glaring malevolently at the picture. She had whirled round as the door opened, and stood in an attitude of defiance, chin in the air, shoulders tense. Nothing was said, the incident ignored. She shrugged away its rankling memory.

Tomorrow would be fine, and they would go; she would never see them again. The cottage would settle into peace and resume its quiet tranquil atmosphere. The furniture would glow in the firelight, and the jugs gleam on their hooks, and the Madonna smile with her benign secretive beauty into the shadows. All would be undisturbed and self-contained—a reflection of herself. She sighed, and her mind lingered on the Raphael print—such loveliness and wisdom—a world of knowledge and understanding in the steady eyes —"from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed."

She sighed, and pulled her thoughts back to reality. Presently, her garden gate loomed up at her out of the mist. She walked down the path and into the house. All was silent, no sound split the stillness. She paused with her hand on the sitting-room door, puzzled; the knob felt cold to her touch. She hesitated, then turned it, and flung the door back on its hinges. The room was empty. The fire was out, and had crumbled into a grey ash on the hearth. A smell of stale smoke hung in the air.

Where were they? Her eyes travelled round the room. One of the pink rugs was curled up, as though kicked by a hurried foot; a book lay, face downward on the floor; the Toby jug was turned with its face to the wall. Her gaze swung from the dresser to the mantelpiece, and then travelled upwards. Her eyes stopped. The frame was askew, and a few tattered rags dangled from the moulding, their gold and blue staining the pale wall. The rags stirred in the draught, flapping pathetically, twisting contortedly in the breeze.

The woman at the door let out a long, slow hissing breath between her teeth, then closed the door softly behind her.

* * *

For a little while after they had left the cottage, Martin and Jane walked on in silence, following a faint path through the bracken. Once or twice the girl looked through her lashes at Martin, but he gave no sign of even knowing she was there. Once she opened her mouth to speak, but all she could think of to say was, "I'm sorry," which seemed inadequate and futile, so she said nothing.

They tramped on in silence. Martin walked slightly ahead, glancing to right and left and trying to identify landmarks which would prove some guide and give some indication of their direction. The mist had lifted sufficiently to enable them to see fifty yards ahead, and presently they came to a thin stream, which chattered down from the higher slopes into the Longmoor valley. Martin broke the silence, throwing the words at her over his shoulder, without looking round.

"If we follow this we should reach Longmoor," he said.

Jane was glad of the opportunity of conversation, for the long silence had fretted her, and she began to talk rapidly, almost incoherently, hurrying to keep pace with him, as he stalked ahead of her.

"Martin," she began, "I didn't mean to do it. I don't know what happened. I couldn't help it—you know I couldn't. I'm sorry."

For a while there was no answer, and she had opened her mouth to begin again, when he spoke.

"It's rather late to be sorry."

There was silence for a little while, broken only by the sound of snapping stalks as they pushed their way through the bracken. Jane glanced at him anxiously.

"I couldn't help it," she repeated.

"You have always said that afterwards," he retorted.

"But this was different—I was frightened, I tell you, frightened."

He sneered. "Of a picture?"

Her voice rose a scale. "Not the picture ... I hated the woman—she and the picture. ..." The voice died away hoarsely.

He jerked his head round, looking at her for the first time. "And how do you think she'll feel when she finds it?" he asked.

Jane blinked. She didn't know. She didn't know. She could imagine a dreadful quietness, stillness, which would blanket everything: the woman with her hand on the door knob, gazing fixedly at the remains of the print. She shuddered, and pushed the thought away. She looked about her. The stream was not so easy to see as it had been; she could hear it still, babbling coldly over its stones, but it was not so easy to see. As long as they could hear it and walk beside it, they would be all right. They must hurry, put as much distance as possible between themselves and the cottage.

Unwillingly, her thoughts turned back to the scene: the little room, the fire crumbling in the hearth, the picture glinting mysteriously, and the still, awful figure of the black-haired woman, standing, watchful and malignant, in the doorway. Jane quickened her pace, and looked behind her fearfully, half expecting a dark figure to materialize out of the mist. She shook herself. That was ridiculous. The woman couldn't follow them—she wouldn't know which way they had gone. But supposing she did. What would she do? What would she say? Jane was shaken by a sick fit of trembling.

It was turning cold; the mist was rising around them in cold swathes, eddying slowly, deliberately, in the

air, as though spun from some gigantic, satanic machine. She looked jerkily, fearfully, about her. The stream had disappeared completely and was silent; the gorse bushes were sucked into the insatiable greyness; the landscape was being transformed again into shifting, enveloping unreality. She pulled at Martin's sleeve, as he stumbled forward ahead of her.

"I can't hear the stream, Martin," she said; her words reached him, mist-muffled and heavy. He came to a standstill, and they stood quite still and listened. But there was no sound of stream, or birds, or mountain sheep, only eerie grey silence. The mist swirled behind and in front of them; they were cut off by greyness and emptiness. They were lost.

Martin took her hand and squeezed it reassuringly.

"We must keep going this way," he said. "We must find the stream again."

They stumbled on, and the mist grew gradually denser, as they advanced. The stream had vanished, and although they blundered on for two hours, they never found it again. Each step became an ordeal; they never could be sure that the next advance might not take them over the edge of a hidden precipice, to die cold and forgotten on some remote rocky ledge.

The ground rose and fell, fell and rose again, with monotonous regularity; their feet caught in the tangled heather, stubbed against boulders, tore against brambles; their clothes clung cold and sodden to their bodies; and the fevered imagination of the girl was haunted continually by the calm, aloof face of the dark-haired woman.

They stumbled against one another, descending now, the ground gradually sloping before them. It seemed to Martin that they were descending into a great white basin, filled with mist from base to brim—nothing was solid, everything tenuous, grey and shifting—nothing constant. Jane was a vague, uncertain shadow beside him; a thick sound-proof, sight-proof curtain shut them off from the world, as though some creature had deliberately isolated them from their kind, hunting them down and cutting them off from reality, until they went mad or died. A heavy depression settled on his mind: then suddenly, Jane gave a shrill cry, jerking him out of his lethargy. He turned to her through the mist.

"What is it?" he said. "For God's sake, what is it?"

She was trembling violently. "There's something in front of me," she said, and her voice quivered "...something hard ..." For a long moment, he hesitated, then put out a hand to feel the obstruction. His fingers encountered a tapered piece of wood, with a bent staple in the side, fixed upright in the ground, and attached to it were other pieces of wood of similar size and height. His voice, when it came, was flat and metallic, and reached her from a great distance.

"It's a fence," he said. "A wooden fence." And his fingers slid along the wood, feeling for the familiar gate.

FRAMED!

DESMOND EDWARDS

IT WAS A Wednesday in July. I got back to the warehouse as usual, about 5.45 p.m. Harry was in the office.

"That Mrs. Prentice phoned again!" he said. He wasn't looking at me when he said it. I thought he was thinking of Alma, my girl.

"Look, Harry," I said seriously, "I've told you I haven't the faintest idea who she is."

"Seems to know you all right!" Harry said.

"What did she say?"

"Oh, nothing. Just asked for you —called you 'Dave'—wouldn't leave a message—said you'd understand. Fourth time she's rung you, to my knowledge!"

I felt mad for a moment. "You don't think I'm having an affair, do you?"

"I hope not," he said, "for Alma's sake. I like Alma."

"I love her, Harry," I said. "I'm not having an affair. You know I'm not that sort."

Harry didn't say anything. He got to his feet and went out. I felt just hopeless. It was damnable. I was beginning to feel guilty about it. Who was this woman who kept ringing me up when I wasn't there? Who the blazes was she? I hadn't told Alma yet. I didn't want to cloud her sky just then, just when we were about to be married.

Besides, there was something else —the letters. They were love letters. They kept coming. Quite a few of them seemed to be written as replies. The snag was that no address was given, but always just "Usual Address." They were signed "Rita." That linked up with the phone calls. They were post-marked "Railton," a fair-sized town thirty-two miles away.

All this was on my mind when I set off in my lorry the next Wednesday on my usual delivery round. It took me by a round-about route to Railton and back. My last call was at Chilton Camp. I backed on to the quartermaster's store, but there were a decent lot of Army lads there and I left the job to them. Fifteen minutes later I was on my way again. The rain was coming down steadily, but I'd secured the tarpaulin over the back of my lorry earlier. After some miles I came to a stretch of country road—the way I went every Wednesday—where there was only one house.

AND THEN IT HAPPENED. A woman was standing on the road. She was thumbing a lift.

"Are you going to Prenton?" she asked.

"O.K., lady!" I said.

She climbed in and sat next to me. "Have you a cigarette?" she asked me, after some silence. I indicated the cubby-hole in the dashboard and she fished out my case.

We came to the crossroads outside Prenton. The rain had eased off and

there was a woman standing at a bus-stop. "This'll do me fine!" she said.

I drew up. She looked at me for a moment and then suddenly put her arms around my neck and kissed me. I was surprised and pretty embarrassed. Then she got out. I drove off. On the road back, nearly an hour later, I saw someone waving a flashlight. There was a big black police car at the side of the road. The torch waved me to a standstill. A policeman came to my side of the lorry.

"May I see your licence, please?" he said. I noticed his companion was examining my number plates.

"You are David Gregson?" said the first, reading my name from the licence. "Of course!" I said.

"I must ask you to accompany me to the station!"

My mind chased back over the events of the day. I'd done nothing —no careless driving, no narrow shaves, nothing. The policeman came round and got into the cab beside me. "What's the complaint?" I asked.

"Get moving!" he said.

When we reached the police station the woman I'd given a lift to was there. "Dave, darling!" she cried. She ran to me and put her arms round my neck. "Forgive me, darling!" she sobbed, as she clung to me. Then: "Why did you do it?"

I disentangled myself from her. "I don't know what this woman's talking about!" I exclaimed. "I've never seen her before in my life—till I gave her a lift this afternoon!"

"All right, Mrs. Prentice!" It was the sergeant. He ushered her out. Mrs. Prentice! My God, I thought. I was up to my neck in something I didn't understand.

Then a man in ordinary clothes entered and told me that anything I said might be used in evidence. And then he charged me with the murder of Mr. Prentice on that Wednesday afternoon.

Next day, after the formal police court hearing, they let Alma see me.

"I didn't do it!" I told her.

"I know," she said, and I could see it in her blue eyes. Harry came to see me, too. He said he believed me, but he didn't seem able to lie to me very convincingly.

Mrs. Prentice was the star witness for the prosecution. Every word she said was a lie. She wore a becoming black costume and gave evidence in a low voice with apparent reluctance —naturally, because according to her we were lovers. She seemed to know all about me. How on earth, I wondered, did she know it all?

Her story was that on the fatal Wednesday I'd stopped, as usual, at the bungalow. I couldn't prove I hadn't, especially when the police found my cigarette case there. Then I'd quarrelled with her invalid husband and shot him. The police had found a gun in my lorry. There were no fingerprints on it, but I'd worn gloves.

After I'd shot her husband, I'd forced her into the lorry to make a run for it with me. At last she'd persuaded me to let her get out. The woman at the bus-stop said she'd seen us kissing, and the police found her glove in the lorry. Just to wrap

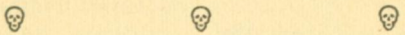
up the case, the prosecution got Harry and the switchboard girl at the warehouse to give evidence about the phone calls. . . .

When the judge put the bit of black cap on, I wasn't really listening. I was wondering again who really should have been in my place. They didn't hang me. They intended to, but at the last minute they were told the truth. The man who gave it to them is in prison now—not for murder, but for desertion from the Army. Thank God he did desert.

When I called at Chilton Camp that Wednesday afternoon, he concealed himself in the lorry under the tarpaulin. He was still there when I stopped to pick up Mrs. Prentice. He knew I'd never gone into that bungalow, and he came forward and said so. That put Mrs. Prentice in a different light, and to save her own neck she told the truth.

The truth was that she had helped someone plan the whole thing—Harry. I can imagine Harry now behind the bungalow curtains, seeing me stop to give his Rita a lift—and then turning back towards her invalid husband. . . .

They set me free. Alma came running towards me when I came out. She took my arm. Then I noticed that the sun was shining.



If you've got a nice *fresh* corpse, fetch him out!

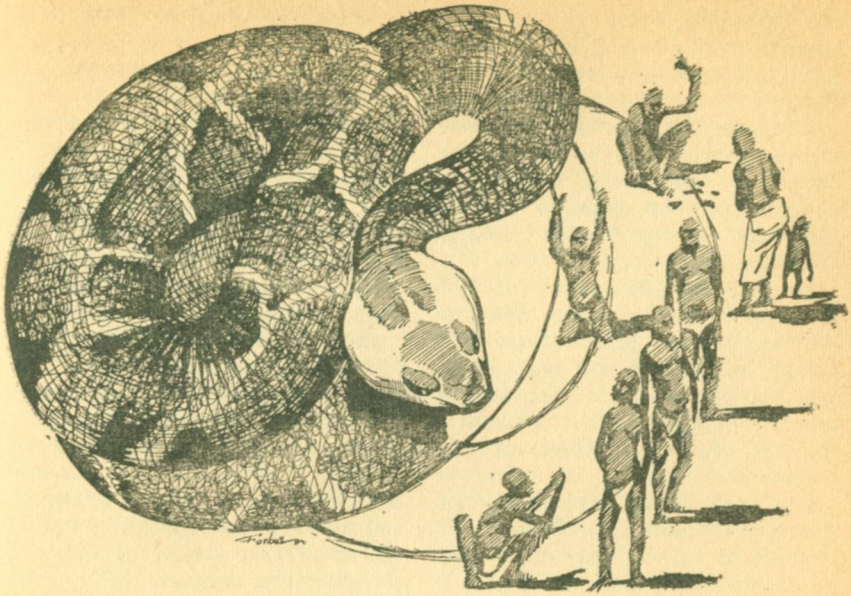
MARK TWAIN

For the world, I count it not an inn, but an hospital, and a place, not to live, but to die in.

SIR THOMAS BROWNE

I know death hath ten thousand several doors
For men to take their exits.

JOHN WEBSTER



SNAKE COUNTRY

P. M. RIGBY

Illustrated by D. C. Forbes

JOHN MARSTON LOOKED round sharply. He was really angry this time. The hot wind fanned his damp, rather grimy face and ruffled his unruly hair. It whipped up little swirls of dust and pulled at his khaki shorts, which would have appeared more than ridiculous in almost any other setting. His light blue eyes had a determined look as he strode along the rough, uneven path, his thick-soled shoes making heavy prints in the dry, sandy earth. Low, black clouds billowing from the east seemed to reflect his mood as he advanced on the group of Africans congregated at the foot of the kopje. The amber grass scratched at his legs as he made his way down, stumbling over loose rocks, swearing quietly and sweating profusely.

The Africans were still some way

off. Their voices were not intelligible to John at this height, but he knew pretty well what it was all about. Perhaps if he had someone to help him run the farm . . . after all, a few thousand acres and a whole community of labourers were quite enough for one man to handle, especially up-country in Central Africa. . . .

He reached the ground at last and approached the group. He was looking for a familiar face; Old Joseph, local practitioner in the black arts. This was not the first time Joseph had caused a hold-up in work and a shifting of the loyalties of his labourers.

Ah, yes! There he was, in the centre of the gathering. He was surrounded by various odds and ends—an assortment of chicken bones, a snake skin and several skin bags. The period of instruction over, thought John, he's selling his *muti*. They hadn't noticed him yet. He'd soon remedy that.

"What the hell's going on?" The angry exclamation seemed to stun the natives for a few seconds. Then they looked round at him, with sullen or frightened faces. They didn't say anything, just sat in the sand and stared. Old Joseph was the one exception. He handed two of the skin bags to one of the *umfazis* in the group. Then he stood up slowly. John realized for the first time how dignified he looked. His lean frame gave the impression of a stringy toughness, and his face, though hard, was handsome. The witch-doctor's eyes twinkled icily as John moved up to him.

"What the devil do you think you're doing?" said John, thoroughly aroused. "First it was a cure for 'love sickness', and now . . . ?"

"Now, *Baas*," replied Joseph, apparently unmoved, "it is chicken snakes." His face took on a determined attitude as he continued: "They have come to bring evil to this place, and I have come to warn your people."

Much as he would have liked to laugh uproariously at this, John felt it impossible to do so. The witch-doctor's implicit belief in his own ideas, however fantastic, seemed to give the whole thing an uncanny sense of reality. John had heard of the "chicken snake" legend. It told of a large black snake with a cock's-comb and matching crow; a deadly bite as well as strange magical powers. Of course, it was nonsense, but . . . He managed to sneer as he said: "So it's chicken snakes, is it?" He ended rather lamely: "There's no such thing."

Joseph make no attempt to defend himself just then. First he gathered his stick and his charms, and wrapped them in a grubby blanket. Then he confronted John. "Chicken snakes are evil doers and one day you may find it out. A man must protect himself from their powers." Before John could order him off the land, or even make a suitable rejoinder, he was gone, lithe as a duiker, among the granite rocks of the kopje. John's attention turned to the crowd.

For just a moment he experienced a strange feeling of loneliness and helplessness as they stood up, and looked at him with sullen, hostile eyes.

There was another thing—the few children to be seen had not made a single noise throughout the incident. It was frightening . . . like a dream. . . . He snapped out of it, pulled himself together. "Peter," he commanded, addressing the "boss boy", "get yourself and the rest back to work. And don't have anything more to do with that old scoundrel."

"Yah, *inkosi*," came the wary reply from Peter. Despite his height and massive build, he generally obeyed orders, even unpleasant ones. The labourers followed Peter, and trooped off to the maize fields. The women and children melted away into the bush. Hardly a word was spoken. John was left alone in an atmosphere heavy with concealed tension.

A "go-away" bird screeched its name at John. Angrily he picked up a stone and flung it into the thorn tree in which the bird was perched. He missed. It was very hot. The sun, a hard golden sixpence, glared down belligerently, scorching the landscape. He picked his way through the veldt scrub and made for the little mud hut that served for home.

That evening there was a definite if unseen tension on the farm. John felt glad he had his house a little apart from the compound. There was ploughing to do tomorrow—perhaps that would take their minds off this witchcraft nonsense. Still, it wasn't a very comfortable night. The Africans played their *kwela* pipes incessantly. Hyenas insisted on adding to the din. It was still very hot.

The next morning dawned bright and early and already warm. The air, still fresh and not yet dulled by the heat, stirred grass and thorn tree. Yesterday's troubles were compressed to a tenth of their former size as John enthusiastically splashed himself with water, in the corner of the room, with his home-made washstand proudly standing on roughly-hewn wooden legs.

A sharp hammering on the door of his home occurred so suddenly that the soapy water went into his eyes. With a muttered "Damn", and a quick wipe of the towel, he opened the door.

In front of him, like a shadow of yesterday, were a group of male labourers with set faces. Peter was at their head. John had never seen him like this before; chest thrown out and black eyes resolute.

"What is it, Peter?" blinked John. How the soap stung!

"Baas," began Peter, as though he wasn't used to making speeches, "today we must plough the land by the spruit." John nodded, wondering what was coming next. "But chicken snakes breed on that ground. We cannot plough it. They have evil powers, *Baas*, they will bring sickness to our kraals if we plough their land."

All at once the morning wasn't beautiful any more for John. It would soon be damnably hot, and here was he stuck out in the middle of nowhere with a crazy bunch of natives to deal with. Should he give way to them? God forbid!

"Peter, I pay you and your people well; I feed you well, and for this I expect work to be done."

"But, *Baas*. . . ."

"Do I pay you your wages, Peter?"

"Yes, *Baas*."

"Do I feed you?"

"Y-yes, *Baas*."

"Then please get to work and plough the ground between the kopjes next to the spruit and don't let's hear any more of this snake business." He felt better now, more in command of the situation. He wasn't ready for the next remark.

"No *Baas*, we cannot. Today we shall do other work to earn our money and our food." That was all. Nothing else. The whole group, silent and practically expressionless, turned their backs and left.

It was astounding! Peter had never been like this before. Nor had the others. What had possessed them? The fickle wind bore a tiny whirlwind which caught up the dust, and threw it into the doorway and into his face like a gauntlet. At the same time a dark brown child toddled towards him and called out derisively, as all children are prone to do.

That did it. He knew just what he was going to do now. So they weren't going to plough this bit of earth? He kicked the door-post savagely and walked out. Then he would. And the devil take the snakes.

John gave vent to his feelings driving the rather battered tractor; pulling the ploughshare towards the small stream. Going at full speed, he steered as erratically as possible down the rough dirt road. The ground between the two kopjes was one of the most fertile strips of land he owned. He wasn't, he told himself, going to forfeit it for a few non-existent snakes! It was good to feel the blades bite deep into the rich earth and hear the engine straining.

A cock crowed nearby. A cock? So far from the compound? Ah, well, chickens did wander off now and again. "Cock-a-doodle-doo!" There is was again. But so close! There was no cover for some hundreds of yards here. It couldn't be. . . . John stopped himself abruptly. No European, he told himself, had even seen a chicken snake. Wasn't that proof, he reasoned, that they existed only in the fertile imaginations of Africans? The thing crowed twice more as the day wore on. He tried to ignore it.

It was hard going, and by dusk there was still a lot of land left unploughed, but John felt satisfied with his day's work. Now, thank God, the whole business was cleared up. Or was it? He'd cleared most of the land.

It was getting late. The night was closing in rapidly, like a curtain falling in a theatre. Things that had been readily visible a few minutes ago suddeny took on an unreal, far-away appearance. He turned the tractor home, tired, hungry, and feeling strangely apprehensive.

As he approached the farmhouse, he heard the chanting. The rhythm of voices and Kaffir music rose and fell in eerie waves. In the background, throbbing like the great heart of Africa, he heard the drums. There was a huge blaze in the middle of the compound. He noticed indistinct dark figures dancing across the blaze.

For a second, it seemed as though a pair of fiery eyes were regarding him from somewhere in the bush. He

looked again. There was nothing but the grass and the trees, now indistinct and merging with the black sky. He urged the old tractor along the track towards the farmhouse and the shed which housed his battered Buick as well as the tractor. He wasn't scared, no, not that, just had to get home and see what these Kaffirs were up to now. Surely they weren't bewailing the loss of their sacred snake breeding-ground?

The tractor safely parked, he walked towards the farmhouse. A hyena laughed derisively as a fresh burst of throbbing broke out from the direction of the compound, the sound quivering and pulsating with fiery anticipation. Fear, in an unreasoning wave, swept over John Marston. This, he knew instinctively, was to be a show-down.

He strode up to the compound with measured steps. Old Joseph saw him this time, and so did the others. Almost, he thought, as if they'd been waiting for him. The music and the chanting gradually petered out.

Joseph took the initiative. He had a wild gleam in his eyes as he pointed an accusing finger at John. "Here comes the white-man! You, white-man, can count yourself lucky my medicine worked or a child would be dead because of your stupidity."

John wasn't ready for such an outburst. He hadn't the faintest idea what the witch-doctor was talking about.

"Today you ploughed the land between the two kopjes. For that deed a chicken snake exacted revenge on this child." He was foaming slightly at the mouth, as a small child was pushed unwillingly forward. He pulled it towards John, showed him its arm, and spat out: "Here are the fang marks of the snake!" Two small incisions were visible.

Joseph's anger was infectious. John went white. He cursed all the Kaffirs under the sun, especially lean witch-doctors. Then he told them in no uncertain terms that to prove that chicken snakes were non-existent, he would pitch a tent in the field between the two kopjes and sleep there during the night. He warned them that if he saw no snakes a policeman would be around the next day to pick up Joseph. The crowd stared at him sullenly as he walked to the house to collect his tent, rifle and spot-light. Then the party broke up silently.

The police car drew up to the station and gently came to a stop. Two African constables got out of the back and carefully carried a body inside. Two European policemen got out of the front of the car. The younger one said:

"Funny the Africans finding Marston so soon . . . did you know him?"

"Yes," replied his senior. "Strange chap, tried to run the farm all by himself . . . it never works."

"What a horrible way to die! Did you see his face? Those fang marks!"

"No need to be melodramatic," the other grunted. "Though it was unlucky his rifle had jammed."

"Seems dead uncanny to me."

"Nonsense. Just an accident. What do you think it was—witchcraft?"

THE SLAVE DETECTIVE

THE CASE OF THE PLEADER'S NOTES

WALLACE NICHOLS

Illustrated by Juliette Palmer

OLLIUS WAS LIMPING through the Forum and had paused to watch the men at work on the building of the Triumphal Arch which the Emperor was erecting in his own honour, when he was tapped on the shoulder.

"You are the Slave Detective," said a beautiful and well-modulated voice. "You gave evidence that saved my client in the Corbulo Case.* I remember you."

Turning, Sollius immediately recognized the speaker. He was the famous pleader and lawyer Tranquillus, a tall, handsome man in late middle-age.

"Yes, lord," he answered.

"I am glad to have met with you, for I think you can help me in a rather serious problem."

"You must ask my master, lord," said Sollius humbly.

"I know the noble Titius Sabinus well," went on Tranquillus, "and I will, of course, ask his permission to have your assistance."

So came it about that Sollius was introduced to a case which afterwards he called "The Case of the Pleader's Notes".

"It is like this," explained Tranquillus, when, the necessary arrangements having been made with the Slave Detective's master, he was seated in his library with Sollius. "As you have seen, I practice at my own home, the ground floor being a fruiterer's shop, the middle floor my offices, and the top floor my flat, where I live with my wife and daughter.

I have only two clerks, Monodius and Arcadius. They have been with me respectively for seven and five years; each is the son of a freedman, and is training under me to be a pleader. Until now I have trusted both of them as I should myself. Rome has many excellent barristers, and, the Romans being litigious, our profession flourishes, so I do not fear my rivals. We can live and let live—and fight only in the courts. But I cannot fight and succeed against treachery.

"There has come lately to the forensic arena," continued Tranquillus with a touch of pomposity, "a young advocate named Valerianus, a pupil till lately in the chambers of my old friend and rival Italicus, whom you will remember from the same former case. Valerianus is a rising man, oh, yes, and quite clever, but he would not be so successful against *me* —as recently too often he has been—if my line of defence, or prosecution,

* *See London Mystery, No. 42.*

had not seemingly been betrayed to him. Someone with access to my private papers has been supplying him with my lines of argument—or," he laughed sourly, "he is in communication with Thessalian witches! I have needlessly lost a number of cases, and can bear it no longer. The leak must surely be through one of my two clerks. I want the truth."

"Do you wish them to know of your suspicions?" Sollius asked. "I should have to interrogate them."

"Dig first secretly into their lives," ordered Tranquillus.

"As you wish, lord," replied Sollius, and took his leave with some misgiving. He would have much preferred to face the two men at once and to judge from their demeanour their reaction to the accusation.

For the next few days he was busy, with his usual assistant, Lucius, seeking all that gossip could tell of Monodius and Arcadius—and also of Valerianus. Monodius was a prim, dry man, and no scandals attached themselves to his legal placidity; Arcadius, more brilliant in all respects, had the reputation of a gambler. Valerianus, as brilliant as Arcadius, was seemingly entirely devoted to his profession, hard-working and ambitious. All three were unmarried. In all this there seemed no clue to follow, except that Valerianus's lodgings were within a stone's throw of the premises of Tranquillus.

Sollius returned to him.

"Lord," he asked, "are your wife and daughter privy to your problem?"

"I have no secrets from them," was Tranquillus's prompt answer.

"What slaves or servants have you?"

"Just an elderly household slave and a maid whom my wife and daughter share. We live very simply."

"I should like, lord, to interrogate them all."

Tranquillus shrugged his shoulders and led the way from his office to the flat above. No sooner had they entered than they knew they had broken in upon a considerable household disturbance.

"Husband," cried Tranquillus's wife as soon as she saw him, "you must order Cynthia a whipping."

The slave-girl—tears and distress spoiling her naturally pretty features—flung herself at the barrister's feet.

"It was only once," she sobbed, "only once."

"What is all this, Claudia?" Tranquillus demanded of his wife.

"Severus—that's our house-slave," she explained, turning for a moment to Sollius—"saw her slipping in again after having been out for most of the night—and she was wearing Helvia's blue cloak and hood."

"That is so, lord," sadly agreed Severus who had just reported the fact.

"It is my favourite cloak and hood!" snapped out Helvia. "She must be whipped, father. Oh, I'll never trust her again, the deceitful wretch!"

"Where did you go?" demanded Tranquillus, turning harshly on the girl at his feet. "Out with it! I know what I suspect."

"Only to see my flute-boy," answered the sobbing and trembling

girl. "I swear it, master. It was the first time. I'll not do it again. Mercy, master!"

"You certainly won't wear my cloak and hood again, I'll see to that!" cried the angry Helvia.

Tranquillus ordered the punishment at once without further consideration, and Severus led the girl away.

"There you have your leak!" burst out Claudia, her eyes suddenly eager and bright.

"Clearly so," echoed Helvia. "We need look no further. She should be more than whipped."

"We have solved the case without you, Slave Detective," said Claudia graciously.

"That is so," laughed Tranquillus. "Come down into my chambers. I will still give you a donative."

The little scene had etched itself very clearly upon Sollius's acute perceptiveness, and as he followed the barrister down to his legal office on the floor below he studied again in his mind the participants in it. The old slave Severus was obviously devoted to his master, and if honesty has a physiognomy of its own it was his. Tranquillus's wife was tall, handsome and very well preserved, and some years younger than her husband. Helvia, whom Lucius in his ferreting had discovered was an adopted daughter to the lawyer, the sole child of a dead great friend, was a dark and sulky beauty, very well aware of her effect upon men, even upon one so much her elder as Sollius, on whom she had condescended to flash a provocative smile. Though without direct evidence on the matter, he did not think there was much love lost between mother and adopted daughter.

"I am glad the affair has been so easily settled," said Tranquillus as soon as they returned to his office, and he opened an iron box which contained money.

"Wait, lord," said Sollius. "I am not satisfied."

"Not satisfied?" exclaimed the astonished Tranquillus.

"I should like to have that flute-boy's evidence—and under torture."

"You rebuke a legal carelessness in me," said Tranquillus wryly. "I see what you mean. That flute-boy shall be found!"

But even under a remorseless whipping Cynthia refused to betray her lad.

"We must set a trap," Sollius advised. "Tell me, lord, have you a case in hand in which you are shortly to be pitted against this Valerianus?"

Tranquillus nodded.

"Make, lord," Sollius suggested, "a set of false notes on the case, and leave them openly on your table. My assistant and I will watch for one going between here and Valerianus's lodgings—no great step—presumably at night."

"Cynthia? It seems so."

"It may be; it may not be."

"It will be bribery, no doubt," decided Tranquillus. "Valerianus has a rich father; he could bribe well. Your idea is good—and I will watch with you."

"Tell no one of that, lord," insisted Sollius, "no one, not even your wife."

"Be it so," agreed Tranquillus. "I

can pretend to work late in my chambers, and join *you* instead."

The place was well suited to lying in wait stealthily. A narrow alley went in beside the fruiterer's shop, and the way out from the office and flat above was by a staircase which led down to the street on the fruiterer's other side. The three men gathered nightly in the alley, with Lucius peering out on watch. They waited thus for four nights, and nothing occurred of any interest to them. They saw only a few night-wandering slaves and, once, a gaggle of Christians going furtively to their secret meeting-house. From where they were hiding, not only Tranquillus's door was visible, but that of Valerianus as well, just along the same narrow, cobbled street. No visitor to him would go unnoticed. The whole journey between the two dwellings was under observation. But not only did nobody leave by the flat door of Tranquillus during those four nights, but nobody of any kind at all visited Valerianus.

On the fifth night Tranquillus came to his two companions excitedly.

"It may be to-night," he whispered breathlessly. "The false notes have obviously been read, for I found them but now moved a little from where I had laid them carefully, though noticeably so only to myself. They had been read while I was conducting a criminal case in the Temple of Apollo this afternoon."

But in spite of his confident prediction again nothing occurred.

"Have you advised well?" he asked Sollius with some asperity when the grey cold of morning came.

"One more night, lord," begged the Slave Detective, "just one more. My bones tell me it will not be wasted."

"Well, it is your case," muttered Tranquillus, and agreed.

The fifth night had been cloudy, but the sixth was moonlit. They would have no difficulty, thought Sollius, as he and Lucius reached their post, in seeing any possible suspect. Joined by Tranquillus as before, they began their watch. That night again only a few drunken slaves passed by but, this time, no more secretly hurrying Christians.

"You made the same excuse, lord?" breathed Sollius.

"It is a good one," the barrister replied. "I often work so."

He kept on yawning.

"I am horribly sleepy," he complained. "I suppose I work too hard. But I have had a number of attacks of acute sleepiness lately. Gods!" he broke off as the implication of what he had said struck him.

"Did you take a drink before coming out to-night?" asked Sollius.

"Cynthia brought me a spiced cup! I always take such a drink when working late," he murmured, and sank unconscious at their feet.

"We must let him lie," said Sollius coolly, "or all will come to nothing. He may be clever in the law but he seems a fool in life. Keep your eyes on the flat door."

They continued to watch, and more than a full hour passed on through the night.

"Look!" breathed Lucius suddenly.

Like a shadow into the shadows moved a figure out of the door—a

feminine figure in a hood and cloak.

"So it is Cynthia," whispered Lucius.

"We must make sure that whoever it is visits Valerianus. Be sure to keep watching!"

The figure turned in at Valerianus's lodging.

"She will have to return," said Sollius, "and that will be our moment."

They stood motionless, peering out from the alley's mouth. Presently the drug administered to Tranquillus seemed to wear off, owing probably to the chill of the night and his exposure to it.

"Oh—h!" he breathed heavily, and yawned as he came to himself. He scrambled to his feet, ashamed and angered. "What happened to me, Slave Detective?"

"You were drugged—as you'll now have realized, lord—but the cold air has revived you."

"Has anyone . . . left the flat?" asked Tranquillus urgently.

"Cynthia," quickly answered Lucius, "and again in your daughter's hood and cloak—or so it seems."

"What!" exclaimed the lawyer. "After her whipping? Where is she now?"

"At Valerianus's lodgings," said Lucius.

"Then why are we waiting here?" demanded Tranquillus, taking a step forward.

But Sollius put out an arm to pre-

vent his movement. He had heard running steps approaching from the opposite direction .

"Wait!" he whispered. "Let these pass; we know that our quarry will have to return."

But it was one person only who came hurrying by, a girl, and moonlight for a moment showed up her face as she passed quickly by them and made a swift rush for the door of Tranquillus's flat.

"Cynthia!" gasped Lucius. "Then who was the other?"

"Cynthia?" echoed Tranquillus. "After her punishment?"

"Love in the young," said the Slave Detective sardonically, "can be wild with daring—at least when the lure is sufficient."

"She shall be even better whipped tomorrow,'" Tranquillus growled, "or is it today? I do not like this, Sollius. You tell me that someone left my flat and went into Valerianus's lodging?"

"That is so, lord."

"Oh, Helvia," burst out the barrister with a groan, "not you? You have been as dear to me as if you were my born daughter. Even against the jealousy of my wife I have indulged you—and now you've done this to me! Who can still believe in gratitude?"

There was a sob in his voice. Then, after his outburst, silence reigned among them as with varying emotions they maintained their watch. At last their straining eyes were rewarded. The same hooded and cloaked figure that they saw earlier emerged from the lodging of Valerianus.

"Helvia!" cried Tranquillus, rushing out from concealment before they could prevent him. "Helvia!"

"Let him go," said Sollius, "it is his problem now," and he and Lucius followed out more slowly, just in time to see him throw back the figure's hood.

As soon as the face was revealed he cried out, aghast, "Claudia!"

She stood still; her expression under the light of the moon was clearly contemptuous.

"Do you expect," she said, emphasizing every syllable, "to keep a wife's duty when all your hours are spent on work, and when an adopted daughter receives what tenderness runs in your stony veins? Valerianus at least can mix life with the law. I love him—and have helped his career. That at least," she laughed, "you cannot doubt. Well, divorce me," she added calmly to her silent husband, and walked past him homewards with a graceful disdain.

* * *

"I believe," muttered Lucius rather petulantly as he and Sollius returned to their master's house on the Esquiline, "that you knew the truth all the while."

Grateful after a long night for the crimson dawn, the Slave Detective smiled indulgently.

"She should not have been so eager to put it upon the slave-girl," he said, "and should have hidden her eyes when she saw what seemed such a heaven-sent opportunity to lay a false scent. I hope Tuphus the cook will give us a good breakfast!"

PAYMENT IN FULL

BARBARA WYSOCKI

Illustrated by Buster

THE BUS SLOWLY climbed up an ancient street, which would be just wide enough to let through a cart piled with hay. On one side only there was a pavement; on the other side, people pressed against the walls, their arms outstretched, while the big green-painted bulk passed by. It was the price paid for progress in this small town in Gloucestershire.

Carefully, the driver steered through a narrow outlet into a more spacious thoroughfare. There, on the sooty, Victorian façade of the railway station, the hands of a large clock pointed at half-past five.

Only then did Mary Bernard remember that she was travelling on what was locally called the London train bus. She also remembered something her son Charles had said earlier in the day. With a faint stirring of curiosity, she looked out. The street before the station was deserted, with the exception of a man waiting for the bus.

He was slender, of medium height, and wore a shabby, frayed raincoat. Before he jumped on to the bus platform, Mary had a glimpse of a round, nondescript face under the low brim of a hat; a face with a mean mouth and hostile eyes. No, it can't be that one, she thought.

The stranger entered quickly, as if he were in a great hurry. He took a seat behind the driver. He did not look at the other passengers, and they, after the first swift glance, did not look at him. Placidly interested, they waited for him to disclose his destination.

The stranger mumbled. The conductor, surprised, corrected him:

"You mean, the New Vicarage."

"I mean the Old Vicarage," the man replied. "That's where I'm going."

"But no one lives there."

"Well, what do you know!"

The conductor shrugged: "Eightpence. The Old Vicarage."

They were leaving the town; as the bus gathered speed, mean little houses on the outskirts streamed past.

Mary Bernard became conscious of her own fascinated gaze glued to the stranger's scrawny neck, and tore her eyes away. The war, she thought unhappily, it must be someone from the war. A war was like a hurricane; all sorts of odd, foreign objects came hurled from God-knows-where, to litter one's front garden. Sometimes it took a long time to tidy up.

A portly old man behind the stranger leaned over and touched his arm. The stranger bristled under the inoffensive tap. He turned sharply.

"The Old Vicarage is empty, y'know," the old man said. "Destroyed during the war; a stray bomb. Luckily no one was killed."

"That's fine," the stranger said.

"No use getting out there, y'know," the other continued, eager to save a fellow-man from inconvenience. "Nothing around, only a house in the woods where a writer lives, and an old quarry that hasn't been used for years, y'know."

"I know, I know," the stranger answered with some irritation.

"Why should you be getting out in the middle of the woods?"

"I'm going berrying."

"In October?" the old man asked with amazement. He got no reply and sat back, beaten.

It must be someone from the war, Mary Bernard reassured herself firmly, trying to smother the sense of anxious disbelief that a man of this sort, with his rude manner and unpleasant eyes, at some time, in some way, should have fitted into the life of her son.

Now the woods rose from the plain, and the bus entered them like a new country. Suddenly, it became very quiet. The wide, streaming air of the open countryside was caught and stifled under the tunnel of trees. A colonnade of tall trunks unrolled quickly, their feet deep in the rusty fire of the undergrowth. Mary watched the stranger. His head darted from left to right as he appraised the landscape. A small, resentful twitch of the shoulders intimated that he did not like it very much. A city man, Mary thought.

In a few more minutes, she would be getting out at her usual stop. The locals called it the Old Vicarage. The house had been abandoned long before the bomb dealt it a *coup de grâce*; yet to the country folk, it had remained a landmark.

Mary imagined herself alighting at the Old Vicarage, with the stranger at her heels. Should she address him? Should she—while people in the bus stared—introduce herself? She was reluctant to do so, not only because of social embarrassment. Deep in her thoughts there shivered a faint warning of trouble, like a memory of night thunder heard in one's sleep. When Charles had told her that a man was coming to see him on business, he had appeared quite composed. Or had he?

"What's his name?" she had asked.

"Freshman," Charles had replied, "Sydney Freshman."

"I don't believe I've ever heard his name from you."

"No," said Charles, "I don't believe you have."

Mary made a quick decision. She rang the bell and rose swiftly. On her way out, she had to pass by the stranger whose name was, probably, Sydney Freshman. She turned away, but it was unnecessary; the man was gazing through the window, squinting with disgust.

The driver applied the brakes. He looked up, and recognized Mary. "Not your stop yet," he remarked.

"There's a short cut," she replied. "Thank you."

"Thank you, ma'am," the driver sang out. Mary stepped down, to the

bite of sharp gravel under her thin soles.

There was nothing but the forest, smooth and undisturbed, along this stretch of the road. An only side lane was blocked off with a board. It led to an abandoned quarry, gaping like an ugly wound deep in the woods. Someone—Mary noted—probably pranksters, had tied a rag over the board. The rag looked like a remnant of a white-and-blue checkered apron. An unsuspecting person might wander into the lane, which was very dark, deceptively straight and smooth. The drop to the quarry came suddenly. Then the unsuspecting person might feel all firm support snatched away from under his feet, with scarcely enough time to cry out.

Mary's respect for civic duty was too thorough to permit her to hurry home straight away. She stopped by the quarry lane entrance. The rag was intricately knotted, and as she tried to untie it, she felt a tingling of annoyance, making her fingers clumsy and impatient. She tugged at the knots; the rag rent in two, and dropped on the grass. Black on the white board, the large letters sprang to view:

DANGER

DISUSED QUARRY

Mary sighed with some relief. She crossed the road, and quickly walked into the wall of trees on the other side. At the far-off turn, the big engine was heavily roaring away.

The old forest stood hushed in the mellow calm of late afternoon. From all sides, endless perspectives of dark tree trunks drew the eyes into the mournful, faraway depths. Then the house lay on the clearing before her: an old gamekeeper's cottage, overgrown with rambling roses. In the flowering season the place resembled a setting for a fairy-tale. Now only a few late roses were blooming in the garden, and splendid chrysanthemums raised their tousled heads above the grass.

Charles waited at the gate. He was still a young man, at the right side of forty, with a thin face and pleasant, clean-cut features which, at that moment, seemed rather strained. His eyes, beautiful, liquid-brown like his mother's, had a wary look.

"Hello, Charles," Mary said. "Everybody sends their love."

He nodded, unsmiling.

"Didn't you come by the London train bus?" he asked.

"Yes, I did. I got out by the old quarry sign."

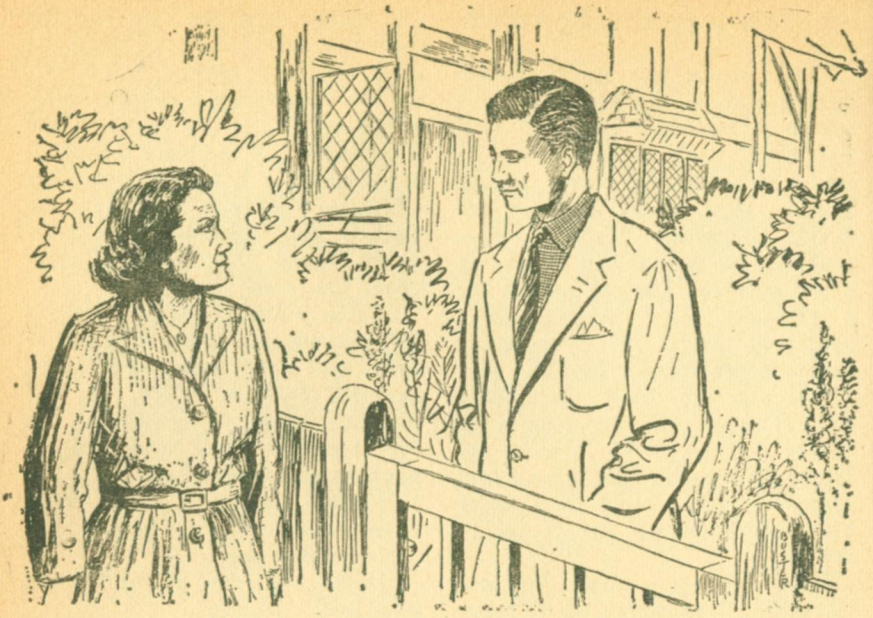
"Any strangers on the bus?" Charles inquired with apparent casualness.

"There were some. I wasn't paying much attention. What have you been doing with yourself?"

"Writing." He hesitated, his hands dug deep in his pockets, his eyes moody "I've still got some work to do," he said finally. "I don't know if that man's coming after all. I'll be in my study."

"I'm going to change."

In her bedroom, Mary changed from her town clothes into a pair of grey slacks, flat shoes and a thick yellow sweater, and sat before a mirror to comb her hair. She gazed at her



own reflection with veiled eyes, without consciously seeing herself. A man could see a friend in his mother, she thought ruefully. But how very little I really know about Charles.

After a while, Mary rose and went to the window. She saw the stranger from the bus walking down the winding lane, which led from the main road to the house. He came slowly, almost fearfully, careful of old tree roots which, like swollen veins, strove to burst apart the soft layer of dirt under his feet. His shoulders were hunched, witnessing to his deep dislike of the time and place. There was in his approach a sort of tight-lipped resolution, which made it appear ominous.

When he came closer to the house, Mary stood at the gate. Under her speculative look, the visitor set his shoulders straight, and made an effort to adopt an open, casual manner. He screwed his face into a semblance of a polite smile, and took off his hat.

"Good evening," he said. "I'm looking for Mr. Charles Bernard."

Mary nodded. With a grave, slightly puzzled expression, she discreetly inspected the seedy figure; the face with its pasty, unhealthy pallor, and the eyes which did not quite meet her own.

"He told me he was expecting a visitor," she answered. "You'll find him in his study. It's the last door in the row. You see, these were once three separate cottages."

"A nice place," he said. "Quiet."

" Yes, it's a very quiet place."

"You are Charles' mother, I suppose."

"That's right." Trying delicately to solve the puzzle, Mary added: "Did you meet him in the R.A.F.?"

"Earlier than that." His eyes flickered with cynical amusement.

"Well—" Mary said after a pause, and swung the gate open. "Come in. Charles is waiting for you."

"Thank you."

She clicked the gate shut after him, and followed him with her gaze. The man knocked, and opened Charles' door without waiting for a reply.

After he had disappeared inside, Mary stood brooding for a while. Then she walked quietly round the house, and opened a back door. She entered, and closed the door with great care, because the new partition walls were very thin. This part of the cottage served as a living-room. It had walls painted yellow, comfortable chairs and one small old painting over the fireplace. Usually, Mary found it very restful.

As she stood hesitating, a sound came from behind the partition which separated the room from Charles' small, low-ceilinged study. The sound was that of human fingers drumming on wood. It was so clear and suggestive, that Mary was able to imagine the two men: Sydney Freshman in a stiff horsehair chair, with his elbow, perhaps, on the arm support, betraying his nervousness by a rapid drumming of fingers; Charles, probably standing, with his hands in his trouser pockets, waiting for the other to speak out.

I know I should feel ashamed of myself, Mary thought, and yet I don't. It's too bad, but I have no time to worry about it now.

She heard Sydney Freshman clear his throat. Tentatively, he began:

"Im sure you're surprised to see me."

"You've warned me," Charles replied.

"I'm sure you've wondered what had happened to me all these years."

"Well, yes, I've sometimes wondered about you."

"Hoping that you'll never lay eyes on me again?" There was a suggestion of a sneer.

"What makes you say that?"

Sydney did not explain, but laughed cynically.

"You've found yourself a nice retreat."

"It was cheap," Charles replied.

"Not like the slums of Dover, eh? Those were the days, Charles."

"They were indeed," Charles agreed laconically.

Sydney waited for further comments, which would provide him with an opening; none came. After a pause, he asked with a cocky challenge: "No drink for an old pal?"

Mary heard Charles crossing the room. He had a corner cupboard of dark oak, in which he kept his liquor. Suddenly, Sydney asked:

"Which leg is artificial?"

"The left one," Charles replied. "Gin or whisky?"

"Good old whisky, every time. So you've become a hero."

His host came back to him. His

limp—usually very slight—had become more pronounced.

"A war hero," Sydney said tauntingly. "A damn bloody war hero. Little Charlie, a hero. It almost makes me cry. These the books you write for kids?"

The chair scraped on the floor, as he rose. Mary guessed he was looking at a hanging shelf filled with books in coloured covers, as he began to mutter: *"Johnny's First Flight*, by Squadron Leader Charles Bernard; *Rescue by Helicopter*, by Squadron Leader Charles Bernard; *Silver Wings for Andy*, by Squadron Leader—Glory be! You've sold yourself very nicely."

"I don't know what you mean," Charles answered. "I write books for boys, and they seem to like them."

"And you've made a pile. It's a nice gimmick, this 'Squadron Leader' stuff."

"I am a Squadron Leader."

"I know you are, old boy. I only mean that these books sell better for being written by a bloody war hero. I've heard that the little blighters simply eat them up."

"Evidently you've made inquiries."

"You bet I have. How else would I've found you in this hole? You've never looked for me. You've never wondered what had happened to your partner in crime." Charles did not reply. "I see you're not very curious," Sydney said, noisily gulping down the whisky. "Fill her up, old boy. Well—I don't think it was very nice of you."

"I would've helped you, if there had been anything I could do," Charles answered. "You know there wasn't. Later, there was the war. After the war, I was in the hospital. You could have found me easily, if you wanted to."

"Not so easily—not from the quod."

"But—" Charles began, surprised.

"I know what you mean. I got four years for our joint little venture. This accounts for my war record. When I left, I found myself at a loose end. I had to earn my living somehow, and I didn't fancy a factory job. Happily, there was the rationing: a boom period for people like me. And then, bad luck struck again. Three years. When I was my own man at last, you'd gone to earth. It's not very easy to discover the hideout of a publicity-shy author. But, here I am."

"Why did you come, Sydney?"

"To dispel any anxiety you may have felt on my account, dear boy. To show I'm still alive. To give you a chance of proving your gratitude."

"Gratitude?"

"Don't you think you owe me something?" Sydney asked. "Remember that night on the coast, when the guards caught me red-handed with the cargo, and you ran away? I could've split on you then, and there would've been two of us sewing mailbags in Wormwood Scrubs, while the Jerries were raising merry hell in the skies."

"It was pure chance that you were caught and I got away," Charles replied. "If I had been caught, I would't have split on you; it goes both ways."

"I could easily have turned King's

evidence, and got off free at your expense."

"Don't be absurd. You were the boss. And you shot at the guard. Let's not argue about it. I've asked why you came, but I can make a good guess. You want my help. I'll be glad to help, naturally."

"How very, very stiff and formal, Charlie. Sad to think that once upon a time you admired me."

"True," Charles answered wryly. "What an ass I was."

"Oh! So it's like that, is it?" Sydney exclaimed.

"Of course I was an ass. Barely seventeen, very poor, my father dead, my mother away, teaching at school, my life drab and dull like a dishcloth; no wonder that you, with your boat and smuggling tales, were a symbol of bravery and romance. But I've witnessed some bravery since then. As for romance, I threw it to the winds when I was running away from those coastguards, half-dead with fright. It's pointless to revive the past, Sydney. It holds nothing we could be proud of."

"A closed chapter, eh?" Sydney said. "With the difference that I had to pay, while you——"

"I think I've paid," Charles answered, with a slightly altered expression.

"Charlie, my boy, believe me: one never stops paying," Sydney said. "Look at me. Have I ever been given another chance?"

"I'm not in a position to preach to you."

"Right. You aren't. This little sermon will be delivered by me. You've got off lightly for a long time, Charlie; now you have to pay. And I don't mean your debt to society. As far as society is concerned, it'll have to manage without the co-operation of Sydney Freshman, Esquire. Let's spare society from the shock of learn-

ing that the celebrated war hero, the author of all those books, so trustfully pushed into the hands of innocent kids, is a man with a past. Although, mind you, if I whispered a little word, the police would have to do something. Perhaps they wouldn't put you in jail, not after so many years; but they could hardly ignore the matter altogether, could they? And the Press. Imagine what the Press would make of it. An exclusive story in one of those meaty Sunday papers: 'In the Smuggling Racket with Squadron Leader Bernard; Intimate Confessions by Sydney Freshman, Graduate of Wormwood Scrubs.' My dear chap, you wouldn't sell another line. By the way, I've met your mother in the garden. Does she know the secret of your past?"

"Leave my mother out of it," Charles said sharply.

"If I possibly can, dear boy. There's also a girl you're planning to marry. I've read about it in the social column of the *Sentinel*. A county family! Charlie, old chum, you've risen in the world since those sordid days at Dover."

"You've said enough," Charles answered. "I understand you perfectly. How much?"

"Now you're talking," Sydney said.

Mary Bernard heard him striking the desk with a flattened palm. She visualized him making this sharp gesture of triumph, his eyes lit up with cynical malice. At last, he seemed to be saying, everything had been dragged to the open.

The two men went on talking, in cold, factual tones of bargaining. Mary still listened, but her sense of hearing seemed to be working only in a wooden, mechanical way, overlaid by a frantic rush of thoughts. Finally she could not bear it any longer. She moved cautiously to the door, opened it, and crept out.

Mary Bernard saw Sydney Freshman leave the cottage some time later. The afternoon had already darkened into dusk. The clearing lay gloomy and deserted in the inky-black embrace of the forest. Only in the west, the sky still shone with a pale, pearly radiance.

Mary stood on watch at the far end of the clearing. In the sombre shade, she felt invisible and secure. For a short while, she saw the bright rectangle of the open door; then Charles withdrew into the house, and the door closed, leaving Sydney alone. Quickly, he walked away.

Mary turned and went through the forest. The situation was slowly crystallizing in her thoughts, emerging as if from a haze in the shape of a few clear, disconnected lines. Her orderly mind picked them up and joined them together. She fancied them arranged in a geometrical figure: a triangle. The apex, Charles alone in the cottage. Herself and Sydney moving along the two sides. The base, the main road. A typical setting out of the problem, she thought, for a mind trained in cramming geometry and algebra into resisting youthful brains.

Like a gallery of dull pictures, Mary's life had taken her from one schoolroom to another, while Charles was alone, in a cheap boarding-school, spinning his desperate bright

dreams. All that had happened might have been her fault. When her husband's death had left her with a son of twelve, she was sorely tempted to let herself go, to give way to self-pity. She could have kept the child at her side, and survived on the pittance offered by unpleasant relatives-in-law. She could have refused to honour the dead man's debts, and allowed the name of Charles' father to be smirched in human memory.

The boy always understood why he had been abandoned. He was proud of his mother. If ever he held his loneliness against her, the secret had been well preserved by, perhaps, the tear-stained pillow of his stark bed in the school dormitory. Now, after so many years, they were at last together.

Charles would try to solve his dilemma in his own way. This included reasonable compromise, but—contrary to Sydney's fantastic expectations—Charles' earnings were only moderate, and he would neither beg nor steal for a blackmailer.

The trees ahead were parting before the open road, grey like a layer of mist. Mary emerged from the forest in the same place where she had left the bus a few hours ago.

Shortly afterwards, walking up the road, she saw Sydney from afar, like a dark slim shadow, trotting a few steps from, and then back again, to the bus stop sign, as if he were tied to it by a length of chain. A bit farther, the sharp tip of the Old Vicarage roof stood up alone above the thick coat of ivy, which had been strangling the old house slowly to death, with the passage of time. No other human habitation was in sight; no living soul was abroad. The trees stood densely on both sides of the road, their wide-spread branches intertwining overhead. There was a complete, windless silence.

Mary saw Sydney stopping, casting his eyes around as if afraid something might spring at him from the bushes; turning longingly to the direction from which he hoped the bus would come. Presently he became aware of Mary's soft approach, and stiffened. Then he recognized her and visibly relaxed.

"You're leaving?" Mary said. "I'm sorry I didn't have a chance to say good-bye."

Sydney, reassured, looked at her with grim amusement. "I'm lucky to meet you now," he replied, "and I'm sure we'll see each other again."

She was silent for a moment, ignoring his remark.

"I'm afraid the last bus has gone," she said.

"Oh! Too bad!"

"Yes, it's a bad line." Mary added after a pause: "We have another line running through the village. There should be a bus in about half an hour. But you'll have to take a short cut to reach the village in time."

"Could you show me where to find it? I'd hate to spend the night in these woods."

"No, of course you can't think of doing that. Come, I'll show you."

He followed her some three-score paces along the edge of the forest. Finally, Mary stopped and said:

"Here."

There was an opening between the trees, leading into impenetrable darkness.

"It's a—path?" He tried to control the apprehension in his voice.

"Yes, it's a path. Not very often used, but it's wide, and cuts straight through the woods. You could almost walk along it with your eyes closed."

"It wouldn't make much difference at this time of the day, would it?" he joked.

"It's dark, but safe."

"Well, I have no other choice."

"I'm afraid so. In your place, I would hurry; otherwise you might miss the other bus, also."

"Then I'll be going. Thank you very much, Mrs. Bernard, and good-bye. It was a pleasure to meet you."

"Good-bye. I advise you to walk quickly. You have only half an hour, and it's a long way."

"I'll run," he answered, laughing, and raised his hat.

Mary remained where Sydney left her, long after the sound of his quick footsteps had been swallowed by the forest. Far away, in the west, the last faint radiance disappeared, sucked in by the sombre horizon. Still no breeze stirred. The minutes passed.

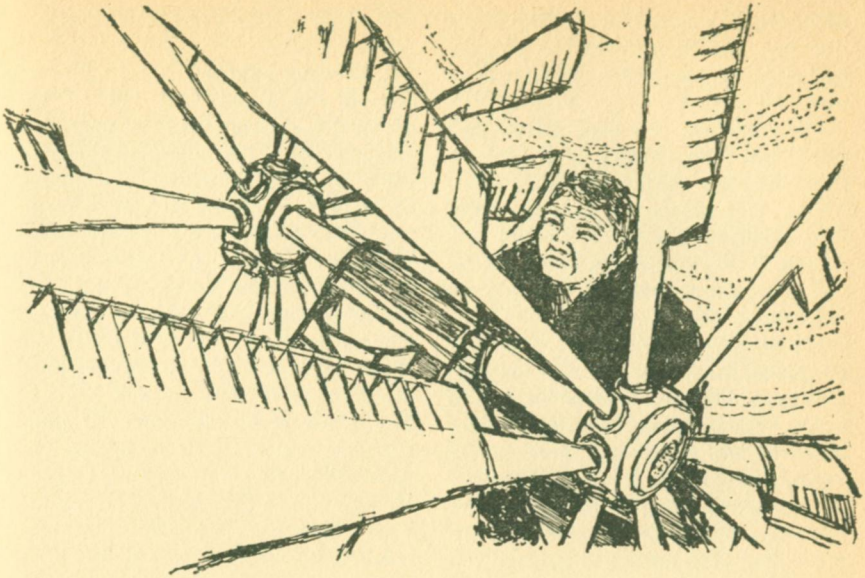
Suddenly, a long, lonely scream rang out from the woods; and, as suddenly, it stopped. Mary shuddered and sharply raised her face. It was as if she sensed something, someone, swishing overhead in violence and anger; then everything was still.

For some time yet, she remained in the same spot. Slowly, she came to realize that her body was shaking with cold shivers, and her cheeks were wet with tears. Around her, the night spread in desolate emptiness from which, apparently, even ghosts were absent. Mary felt that all she had ever possessed was forever lost, forfeited in a terrible reckoning of debts. All debts had now been fully paid, save her own, for which no one during her lifetime would ever exact a payment.

After a while, Mary descended from the road, and pulled out a long wooden board from beneath the bushes. Carefully, she placed it on two wooden props, across the entrance to the lane. Even in the dark, she could distinguish the large black letters of the word: DANGER.

Mary still hesitated for a moment. She looked questioningly into the black emptiness beyond.

She was about to start back home, when she heard a distant hum and a faint tinkling of a bell. She stepped back under the cover of trees as, brightly lit, the last bus came crawling through the night.



THE GATE

L. P. DAVIES

Illustrated by J. V. R. Davies

AT BREAKFAST TIME, a late breakfast because it was Saturday and so he didn't have to go to the office, Hetty said in a sour voice, "The cows have been in the vegetable garden again, Jeff. I had to chase them out and then go and complain to Mr. Butt. That's the second time this week. It would look better of you if you'd do something about the fence instead of playing with that windmill. If you must use the field as a short cut then for heaven's sake make a proper gate instead of having to take down a piece of the fence every time you go through."

He said, "I'll do it this morning." Then he looked out of the window and added, "If the rain holds off."

The gate itself could be made in the shed. But first he would have to dig the holes for the uprights and that would take the best part of a couple

of hours. It was no use starting a job like that and then having to give up half-way through if it came on to rain.

He stood on the back porch and filled his pipe. Micky was playing some private game by the shed. Micky, with his narrow face and pale, flaxen hair, took after his mother. Jeff sighed. It was surprising how little he had in common with his seven-year-old son.

He walked slowly down the path savouring the first tobacco of the day. He stopped to look at what Hetty had called the windmill. The vanes, mounted on a wooden derrick, revolved to lift an endless chain of miniature buckets that scooped water from one place and emptied it in another. It served no useful purpose but it worked and so he was satisfied. He had once seen a picture of such an apparatus and so he had made one just for the pleasure of the thing.

Hetty didn't understand the pleasure that a man could find in making such a patently useless construction. The feeling of achievement was what mattered. He was able to say to himself. "I saw this in a picture and I figured out just how it had been put together."

Even Micky had showed little interest. You'd think that any boy would be excited over something that worked, that did something.

He looked at the sky. The clouds were thickening. The most he would be able to do before the rain came would be to mark out the places where the holes were to be dug. Making a gate was a very ordinary sort of job without any interest at all. A boring job.

Collecting a spade from the shed he skirted the slope that led to the orchard and came into the vegetable garden. There the loamy soil carried the marks of the invaders. Three rows of Hetty's cabbages had been trampled into the ground, partly eaten heads lying about. The loose part of the fence was flat on the ground. He drove in the spade and rested his elbows on the handle. The blade had sliced into an ants' nest. He watched the panic scurrying of a myriad of tiny black creatures, some of them carrying oval white blobs. Eggs—? he wondered, or were they called larvae? He had done a little biology at school. There had been an ants' nest—the teacher, he recalled, had called it an ant city—contained in a glass tank that stood on one of the window ledges in the classroom. An oblong tank, and one took away the covering —there had been both a lid and some kind of covering, as he remembered—and there was the city of ants, a network of subterranean tunnels alive with tiny inhabitants. A cross-section through an almost miscroscopic world.

Leaning on the spade he tried to remember how that world in a box had been made. One put the soil in first, he supposed, and then introduced the ants, keeping the glass sides covered until they had completed the business of making their new home. Then the coverings could be taken away and there it was. . . .

He supposed that that was the way it had been made.

In the shed was a glass tank that had once stood on the sideboard holding goldfish until Micky had lost interest in them. Jeff knocked out his pipe on the spade handle and went back to the shed. He found the tank on a shelf over the door. He emptied out the accumulation of odds and ends and then washed it with the hose. A thin jet of water hissed suddenly from a new burst midway along the length of plastic pipe. When he had finished washing the tank he wrenched the hose impatiently away from the tap. He had already repaired four leaks. Now a new hosepipe was called for.

The tank under his arm he returned to the broken fence and the ants' nest. On his way he stopped his son.

"D'you know what I'm going to do with this, Micky?"

The boy eyed the tank. "No, Dad."

"I'm going to make a city in it."

"A city?"

"I'm going to put some soil in it and then I'm going to put some ants on top. Then they'll burrow through and make a nest and we'll be able to watch them through the glass sides."

"Oh—" Micky said; "ants—" and returned to his game.

Jeff chose soil that had a clay content and so should hold the shape of the tunnels clearly. He part-filled the tank, ramming it down tightly. He used an old envelope to scoop up the ants. He took the tank back to the shed and found a sheet of glass to use as a lid. Then he wrapped the sides with brown paper.

When he went outside again it was just starting to rain. In the cottage Hetty asked sharply, "Have you started on that gate yet?"

He nodded apologetically at the window. "It's just starting to rain, dear."

"You don't need to work out in the open to make a gate," she retorted acidly.

"I can't start the gate itself until I know the measurements. I've got to get the posts in first."

She sniffed. "And in the meantime I suppose Mr. Butt's cows will just be allowed to come and go as they please, trampling all over my few vegetables, those that they don't eat—? If it had been one of your stupid toys you'd been working on you'd manage all right then, rain or no rain. But if ever I ask you to do something, something sensible, then you've always some excuse——"

There was much more in the same vein.

He said weakly, "As soon as the rain clears——"

But it rained all day and on the following morning he went down to the village to knock up the owner of the hardware store so that even though it was Sunday he could buy another length of hose. He met Mr. Butt and they discussed the question of the marauding cows over a friendly drink.

Butt said almost jovially, "I had another visit from your missis—what day was it?—Friday. She chivvied my cows out of her vegetables and then came to tell me all about it. I mean, I can't keep the poor beasts fastened up and after all, old man, when you took over the cottage you

did agree to accept the responsibility of that particular length of fence." He grinned briefly. "A real taste of her tongue she gave me. . . ."

Back home again Jeff went to inspect his latest toy. Already the thing was taking shape, already there was a network of tunnels filled with scurrying creatures. He marvelled at their industry and ingenuity. Then he remembered that they would require food. Water would be easy enough; all he had to do was make sure that the soil was kept moist. But food. . . . What did ants eat? He went back to the classroom. Ants, he remembered, were omnivorous. That meant that they ate both vegetable and animal matter. So that was easy enough.

Covering the tank again he went out into the garden. Hetty came out while he was probing for grubs in the bark of one of the trees. She asked about the gate. Evading the question he said that he'd had to go down to the village and that he'd spoken to Butt about the cows. He said he'd start on the gate that afternoon.

It rained that afternoon. He went in the shed and made a pretence of preparing the wood for the gate. He took an old box to pieces. Some of the nails were bent. He remembered a puzzle made of intertwined bent nails that he had had when he was a boy. He tried to duplicate the puzzle and was made happy by success.

The rain stopped after tea. At the fence he spent some time in marking the places where the holes were to be dug. Then he went back to the shed for the spade. He looked at the ant city. The soil was there in the tank; the network of tunnels was still there. But there was no sign of any of the inhabitants.

He inspected it from all sides, frowning over the disappearance. The lid was still in place, held down by a piece of brick. The walls of the container were solid glass. And yet, so far as he could see, not a single ant remained.

Back in the cottage he asked Micky, "You haven't touched the ant city at all, have you, son?"

The boy shook his head. "No, Dad; I haven't even seen it yet. Is it ready?" There was no interest, only a kind of lackadaisical politeness in his voice.

And later, Hetty cried loudly and indignantly, "I knew you'd be playing with some toy or other instead of getting on with the gate! Some ants in an old tank? Why should I want to touch the horrid things?"

When he got back home from the office the following day his first job after tea was to replace the vanished population. Resting his elbows on the bench he watched the newcomers finding their way about the ready-constructed tunnels. They raced along aimlessly, exploring perhaps, scurrying back and to, meeting sometimes, stopping with antennae aquiver and then seeming to recognize an ally and hurrying off in some new direction.

Enthralled, he watched, trying to trace the route taken by one particular ant, seeing how it would scuttle along one passage to stop at the end as if fearful of what lay round the corner. And after a while he noticed that some semblance of order, or regularity, was taking the place of the

previous aimless wanderings. A one way traffic of minute black bodies had developed along one particular channel. They entered unerringly at one end, scurried along, and then——

And then they seemed to disappear.

But perhaps they were emerging along some other exit that was hidden from him. He turned the tank so that he had a three-dimensional view of one corner. Now he could see the exit of the one-way traffic tunnel. And certainly, nothing was emerging from it. Puzzled, he turned the tank back to its original position. Already the passageways were nearly deserted, only an occasional ant hurrying along as if realizing it was being left behind in some general exodus. An hour after Jeff had replaced the first population the tank was empty again. The ants had found their way to one particular tunnel, had surged along it, and then had vanished.

There had to be an answer. They had been there and now they had gone. They had found some way out of their prison. He poised an exploratory trowel over the soil and then he stopped.

This time he didn't return to his schooldays for help. Instead, he remembered something he had once seen in a book, a book filled with oddities that he had picked up one day at the library. In it there had been drawings of something called a Meobius Strip—was that the name? —and a strange container called a Klein Bottle. They had both been objects used to demonstrate something that was basically mathematically impossible. Strange shapes that hinted at, without proving, the existence of a fourth dimension.

He found a parallel in the maze of tunnels that surrounded that place from which the ants had vanished. He used the back of an old seed-packet to try and capture the intricacies of that particular part of the maze. But it refused to take shape in one-dimensional form. His eyes, searching the shed, fell upon the discarded hosepipe. He went back to the house for scissors and insulating tape. He managed to avoid Hetty who was working in the front garden.

Back in the shed he used a piece of string to work out the lengths of the ant excavations then multiplying them by five, cutting the pipe into appropriate lengths, joining them together with the insulating tape. When he had finished he found himself with an entwined mass of tubing with an entrance at one side and an exit at the other. And looking, he thought wryly, not unlike the model of part of the human interior which one might expect to find in a medical college.

He propped it on the bench while he tried to make sense of the shape. Some of the side tubes might be unnecessary. Perhaps only three or four, those in immediate contact with the vital central section, might be important to the mathematics of the thing. Mathematics, he felt sure, was the key to the whole thing. The key that would open the gateway to another dimension. He wondered if he had made that door now and it was open.

In a small earthenware bowl he found a handful of marbles. A glass one was too large for the diameter of

the piping. A small clay one fitted almost exactly. It rolled out of sight. He picked up the tube-mass and rocked it gently, distinctly hearing the rolling of the marble as it found its way through the maze. It rolled out at the other end.

Disappointed, and yet in some way oddly relieved, he tried again, this time making sure that it found its way along the central section. He listened to the hollow sound of its progress; he traced the sound the length of the tube. It stopped suddenly. The marble didn't emerge at the other end. It had vanished. He tried a second marble, this time guiding it slowly and carefully so that it crawled along the tubes. It disappeared as the first one had done.

Then, for the sake of his own satisfaction, he took the construction to pieces, inspecting each section as it came apart. Each was empty. He laid the pieces on the bench. Then, breathing a little heavily, he leaned against the wall and stared at them. Matter, he recalled, can neither be created nor destroyed. He wondered if that same law applied to a new dimension.

He took his triumph into the open air. He wanted to shout it aloud but there was nobody to hear. And if there had been, would they believe? Or would they regard it as some form of conjuring trick?

Hetty, he knew, wouldn't even bother to listen if he tried to tell her. And even if she did, she still wouldn't appreciate just what had happened. Micky was too young to even know what a fourth dimension was. Butt—? He would only laugh.

Gradually his internal elation waned. Once the initial excitement had died he started to think about it in more sensible terms. Making a model was one thing; finding out why it worked, a vastly different matter. He went back to the start of it all. He wondered whether the ants had happened upon that peculiar arrangement of tunnels purely by chance. The alternative suggested either instinct or a knowledge superior to that of man. He decided that they had achieved their escape route merely by chance. Then he wondered if the two marbles he had sent after them had come out in the same place as the ants. Or had size, the diameter of the tube, any bearing upon the destination?

Quite suddenly he realized that there was no limit to the size of the thing. So long as the linear measurements were in the correct proportion the tubes could be made wide enough to take a man.

Deep in thought he wandered back towards the cottage. Hetty was bringing a basket of weeds from the front garden. She asked sharply if he was working on the gate. He told her that he was going over to the farm to see if Butt had any wood he could spare.

"I thought there was any amount in the shed," she said suspiciously.

"Not the right kind."

"It wouldn't be," she said bitterly.

He escaped as soon as he could. It wasn't that he didn't mean to make the gate. It was just that right now there was something much more important to do. Something so important that words would be inadequate if he even tried to explain.

He found Mr. Butt in the dairy building.

"A tarp?" he said in reply to Jeff's query; "what in heaven's name do you want a tarpaulin for?"

"I remembered that you'd just bought yourself a new one," Jeff replied and improvized quickly, not having anticipated the question. "I mean, I can make a tent for Micky and some of it would come in handy for mending the roof of the shed. And"—he finished lamely—"oh, all kinds of things."

Butt winked a knowing eye. "One of your fancy notions? You can have the damned thing and welcome. It's all in pieces, anyway. It's only in my way. You'll find it in the barn."

"Wire—?" he wondered at the next query. "What kind of wire? Barbed?"

"No—just ordinary wire. Only fairly thick so that it'll retain its shape."

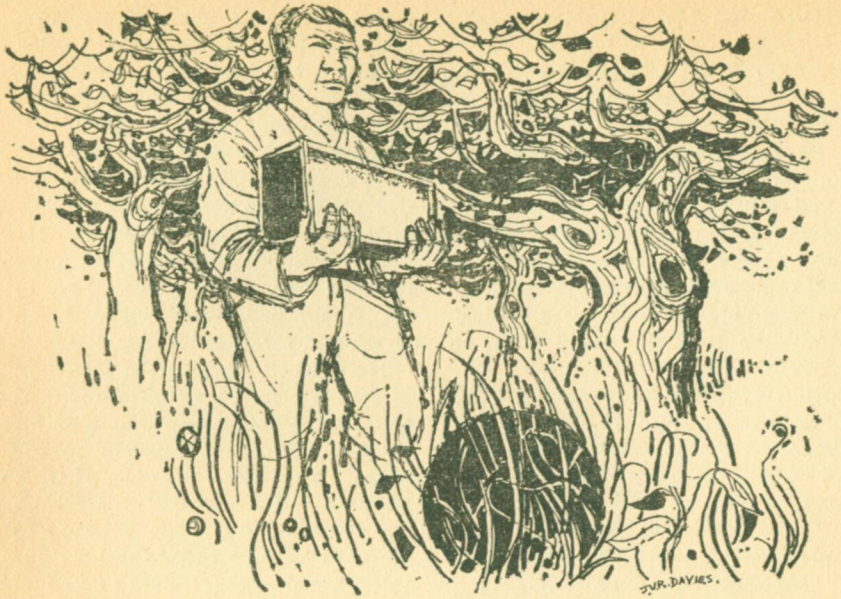
"You are up to something," Butt grinned. "Does the missis know? I bet she don't. You have a scout round the barn. I reckon you'll find two, three coils of wire left over from when I was running the fencing round the west field. And listen, old man; one good turn deserves another. Try to keep your missis from rampaging up here every time my damned cows get in her garden. She comes driving them back across the field like a bloody avenging fury."

Jeff lugged the first pieces of tarpaulin across the field to the orchard that same evening. He chose the orchard as the site for the large scale model because it was hidden from the house, Hetty wasn't likely to go there, and because a tubular construction made of tarpaulin mounted on coiled wire would, at least in part, have to be suspended from the ground by ropes slung over branches.

He stopped work when dusk fell. Over supper he told Hetty that he had started work on the gate. He found a certain humour in the remark. He said he would finish early at the office the next day so that he could try to get it finished. She looked taken aback and for once lost for words.

He finished carrying the tarpaulin pieces the following afternoon as soon as he had changed out of his office clothes. His last trip to the orchard was with four coils of wire. Then he was ready to start work on the assembly. But when he went to the shed he found that the hosepipe sections were gone. It didn't take him long to discover that Micky had taken them and that already some of them had been cut into smaller pieces. He carried the tank of soil carefully up the slope to the orchard, setting it on a stump while he set about the business of working out a new set of measurements based upon a tube diameter of two feet. By tea-time he had made four of the sections, one of them already slung from two branches, held in shape by the coiled wire and fastened with hooks made from thinner wire.

The thing was finished just after nine o'clock. Tired out, but filled with a great feeling of satisfaction and anticipation, he went in to supper. He had checked off all the measurements. He had carefully mended two tears in the fabric. If his reasoning and



calculations were correct he had made himself a gateway to the unknown.

After supper he returned to the orchard, climbing the slope slowly, his legs suddenly aching. In the twilight the thing looked like some monstrous, prehistoric creature, coiled over the orchard floor, between the tree trunks, up among the branches. It was like a serpent, he thought, a serpent from a nightmare or, incongruously enough, like some fairground contraption. It was ugly and clumsy, and to anyone happening upon it without knowing what it was, probably frightening.

And quite suddenly he was frightened.

Here, down at the front, raised a couple of feet from the ground, this wire and canvas cavern was the start of a gateway. All he had to do was climb into that opening, take the left-hand passage and so come to that central, vital part that was laid along the ground between the tall grass so that it could take the weight of a man. And when he came to the end of it, what then? Would he find himself still in the orchard? Or in another world, another dimension? Or would there just be nothing?

It might be the gateway to death.

He was going to travel those passages. He was sure about that. But not now. Not while he was dirty and tired. He needed time to think, to prepare himself. A man didn't undertake a venture of this kind without making some kind of preparation. It

wasn't a thing to be done on the spur of the moment. There was always tomorrow.

Deep in thought, the tank of soil under one arm, he started to walk back through the gathering darkness. As he reached the corner by the shed a sudden sound brought him to a stop, swinging round, a pulse throbbing at the back of his throat. The sound had come from the direction of the orchard and it had been as if something heavy had thudded to the ground and then rolled, crushing with sharp splintering the dried twigs in its path.

He sought a reason for the sounds. Perhaps—and he was relieved at the possible solution—perhaps one of the branches had broken under the strain and had fallen to the ground. He retraced his steps, his eyes narrowed to pierce the gloom. The second sound, a duplicate of the first, came as he reached the foot of the slope. He stopped again, dismayed at the thought of the construction collapsing. And when he came to move forward he tripped and fell headlong over some obstacle that had been hidden by the knee-high grass and the darkness, the tank falling from his grasp, spilling its contents on the ground.

Rubbing a grazed knee he picked himself up, puzzled when he discovered the round boulder that had been the cause of his mishap. He stooped over it, wondering why he had never noticed it before, running his hands over the slightly roughened surface. Certainly, the floor of the orchard was littered with stones, but none so large, so rounded as this. It wasn't granite. It was of some reddish-brown substance, porous in appearance, and with streaks of lighter red running across its surface.

Still rubbing his leg and limping a little he went on. He found the second of the strange boulders jammed against the trunks of two trees that grew close together. It was of the same size and shape as the first one but with a smoother surface and, so far as he could tell in the half-light, of an orange-brown colour. A trail of crushed grass led back from it up the slope. Frowning, Jeff followed the trail to the clearing. His wire and tarpaulin construction still hung unharmed from the branches. His feeling of relief was swamped by vague fears. He thrust them aside, telling himself that he was over-tired. But for all that he hurried back down the slope and was relieved when the cottage came into sight.

Hetty was sewing; Nicky had been put to bed. He spent a long time washing himself at the kitchen sink. This was the time of the day when he usually settled down with the evening paper. But tonight was different. He sat in his usual corner with the paper held in front of his face while he stared unseeingly at the print.

He was frightened. He had to admit that to himself. But the unknown was always frightening. Now he knew how those first voyagers must have felt when they sailed their frail wooden ships across uncharted seas.

But still they had gone, driven by the power of wanting to know what did lie at the other side. And they had

discovered a completely new world.

Hetty looked up from her work, acknowledging his presence for the first time. "Have you finished it?"

"Yes," he replied absently. "Yes."

"And about time too." She lowered her head to bite off a piece of thread. "Now perhaps we'll have a bit of peace and I won't have to waste all my time in chasing the cows back across the field."

"Yes," he said again and came to his feet, stretching. "I'm tired. I think I'll turn in."

He wanted to be alone for a time but Hetty put her mending away and said that she was feeling tired as well. In the bedroom she started to draw the curtains and then stopped, resting her elbows on the ledge of the open window, sniffing.

"Jeff, can you smell something?"

He stood at her side. The moon had risen, an orange-golden ball hanging low over the dark mass of the trees, making the shadowy sprawl of the orchard a place of mystery. A sickly-sweet smell came on the warm breeze. He had never smelled anything like it before. And sounds came out of the stillness of the night; distant sounds of movement, of creakings and rustlings. And over all a continuous rattling, like the sound that would be made if a handful of sea-shells or marbles was to be gently shaken.

Marbles. One had been round, with red streaks; the other smooth and orange-brown. They had been just the right size to fit the diameter of the hosepipe. And now that they were back they were the right size to fit the gateway through which they had returned. Perhaps there was a mathematical reason for that change in size. Perhaps something to do with another dimension.

Hetty cried, "I can see something moving in the vegetable garden! It's the cows again. At this time of night. I thought you'd fixed the gate?"

She hurried to the door without waiting for a reply. He heard the angry clatter of her feet on the stairs, the slam of the back door being flung open. He watched her hurrying down the moonlit path, brandishing a stick, her shadow dancing in mockery.

He thought about the ants, the myriad of tiny scurrying bodies too numerous to be counted. The smell was growing stronger. The night was filled with it and the sound of rattling. He tried to picture how they must look now, swollen, as the marbles had been, to the size of the gateway.

Then he found his voice and shouted frantically, "Hetty!—No! For God's sake come back!"

But if she heard him she took no notice. She was in the shadows and he heard her scream.

Marbles didn't roll on their own.

Ants, whose instinct had led them to find escape from a prison wouldn't voluntarily return to the same place.

Somebody had rolled the marbles back. Somebody was herding the ants back. Somebody who was perhaps as angry as Hetty had been at the cows that had broken into her garden. Jeff wondered who or what would be coming behind the multitude of giant ants, intent upon retribution.

Standing at the open window he watched and waited.

HELL HATH NO EXIT

FERGUSON PHILLIPS

Illustrated by Roy Jackson

IT WAS WITH a feeling of mounting frustration that Bede Downey eyed the oak tree stump and that broken gate leading into the field. Beyond the gate was a narrow, cinder path which wound through spreading fields, seemingly to nowhere. There was a lifelessness about the unrelieved flatness of the scene. Limpidly a spectral mist rose from the pastures; white tendrils curled towards him. He shuddered. A sense of loneliness suddenly engulfed him. He'd made three attempts to reach the main road, but each time he'd travelled in a complete circle and arrived back at this point.

It was Carruthers' fault, he decided irritably. If George Carruthers hadn't suggested this short cut back to town he'd have been half-way home now.

The Carruthers had bought a new house in the country, and he and his wife Marie had been invited to the housewarming. He'd had to leave to be at the office first thing tomorrow, but Marie had stayed on.

As he started up the car again he wished fervently that he'd been persuaded to stay on, too. Then he would have returned with Marie. Marie knew this part of the country well. She'd been born and bred in these parts—she would know the way.

Half an hour later another difficulty, a slowly rising mist confronted him. As the mist thickened he left the car and walked a few yards ahead. There was a signpost at the junction of the narrow roads. It seemed that after all he wasn't quite so far out as he'd imagined. Bartan Crook was only ten miles distant. Now if he could get on to the main road. . . .

Slowly he returned to the car. The fog was quite dense now. Odd how it crept up in these country places. He put out a hand towards the door of the car when to his amazement it opened obligingly for him.

"Do come inside," a man's voice entreated. "You're Bede Downey, aren't you?"

Downey took stock of the intruder as he slipped into the driver's seat. The face was lean, almost ascetic. He might have been around his own age—almost fifty. There was a quality about the man that was difficult to understand.

"How do you know," Downey began. Then he turned his head to where his suitcase was up-ended upon the back seat. The luggage label was plainly discernible. Yet the man didn't glance towards the case.

"I know you," he stated cryptically. "We've met, but you won't remember where." Downey fingered his smooth, plump chin nervously.

"You've got the advantage of me—your face isn't in the least familiar."

Suddenly he had a vague uneasiness about the stranger's presence there. "You're wanting a lift?"

The man nodded, "Yes, please—to Manstrie. I know the fog's pretty bad but it's not a difficult place to find."

Downey started the car. "I'm lost around here, I'm afraid, but if I can find the main road again I'll drop you off there, Mr. . . ."

"Lawrence—Professor Lawrence." His face tightened resolutely. "Manstrie isn't so far."

The car was moving on slowly. Downey was hunched forward peering through the fog. "I'm sorry, Professor, but I just don't want to take any more unknown routes today. I'm afraid I'm not too sure of this district, and the fog doesn't improve matters."

As the car crawled out of the rutted lane the Professor maintained an ominous silence. Downey took another look at him. Odd that he couldn't remember meeting him before. A professor—with that strange, yet unforgettable, air about him—very odd he couldn't remember.

"What's your particular field, Professor?"

"Research—the human field. Maybe I could explain later."

"And when did you say we met?"

"I didn't say when, Mr. Downey,

only that we have—but I'll explain that later, too."

Just when the main road seemed farther off than ever, and they appeared to be bound for the broken gate and the oak tree stump again, Lawrence said crisply, "Now—turn left, and just a mile down the road turn left again."

A doggedness affixed to Downey's jaw. Hadn't he made himself clear? Even if he knew where Manstrie lay it would be impossible to find his way back in these conditions. . . .

Lawrence glanced towards him. His calm was frightening. "I've told you, Downey—turn left. I want to go to Manstrie."

Despite his rising fear of the man, Downey remained inflexible.

"I'm sorry, Professor, you'll have to find your own way from here. Maybe there'll be another car——"

Instantly Lawrence's hand was in his pocket.

"No, Mr. Downey, I haven't got a gun, but I've got something equally effective—a razor. Believe me, I can use it, too. It's part of my 'field' as you might express it. Now—will you be persuaded to go to Manstrie?"

Suddenly Downey bridled. He wouldn't be scared by this man—he wouldn't. There was just a touch of theatre about the statement. . . .

Slowly Lawrence's hand came out of his pocket. The razor was there right enough. Cut-throat, murderous looking.

"Convinced, Downey? Now don't tempt me to use it."

Downey turned left. He was consumed with terrible rage.

"So you want to go to Manstrie, but why pick on my car? Isn't there a bus running?"

Lawrence replaced the razor, though his hand remained in his pocket.

"I don't think you quite understand, Mr. Downey. It's *you* I want. I'm taking you to Manstrie. There are people there who are interested in you—no, don't stop the car. Time's limited now."

Just the same Downey braked with a jerk. A terrible suspicion shook him.

"Look, Lawrence—before we go any farther I feel I'm entitled to an explanation. Suddenly, out of the blue, on an isolated country road, you meet my car. How the devil did you know I'd be there?"

Lawrence sighed impatiently. "I don't have to explain anything to you. I know a great deal about you, and your movements, but I can't tell you how."

"This place you're taking me—what is it?"

Lawrence glanced at him squarely. "We need you. Oh, not only you—there'll be others before we're through with our experiments. You're just privileged in being one of the first."

"Experiments!" Downey's eyes dilated. This devil! This nightmare! was it possible?

Lawrence's strong voice was continuing.

"In a sense you're a pioneer. Of course I can't promise you anything as a reward. Afterwards—in your condition—you won't be worrying

about rewards, though. Still, the satisfaction of the——"

Downey's hand slid out towards the door, but Lawrence had anticipated the move. He pinioned Downey's thick arms in an iron grasp.

"My friend!" his tone was solicitous. "My fat, under-exercised friend —you'll have to be quicker than that. You see I haven't spent months of thought and time on this little scheme to be thwarted at the last minute by you. Now—take care! I'm fitter and faster than you by far." He pulled out the razor. "Remember?"

Suddenly Downey's trembling ceased. He closed his eyes with a gesture of resignation. "Look, Lawrence, you haven't told me what scheme you and your colleagues have in mind for me, but I can guess it's pretty devilish. Do you honestly think you can get away with it?"

"We have up till now."

Downey was trembling again. "Why wait—get it over now."

"Just like that—in the car? My dear Downey, you don't understand. Our work may take weeks. Try to see it from a more adventurous viewpoint —first in the field—or one of the first—that's what you'll be."

Downey thought desperately. "The police—I'll be missed—and when they search—my car—that can be traced."

Lawrence gave him a pitying glance. "You must consider us perfect fools, my friend. There'll be nothing to trace. Your car will disappear as completely as you." He relaxed his hold.

"Now—drive on. Take the way I directed you to go. My colleagues will be waiting for us."

Downey didn't move. The terrible look of resignation was back upon his face again.

"Whether I go or not, I'll die—that's the way it is, isn't it? I think I'd rather face that razor now than whatever you and your henchmen have in mind for me."

Lawrence shrugged. "No doubt, my dear Downey—and we'd suspected that this situation might arise —so I've something to tell you." He moved into a more comfortable position. "You have a wife—we will have to consider her in your place if you decide to do anything foolish."

Downey's hands were resolutely upon the wheel again. He had to grip on something—he felt physically sick. Marie—there'd been no other woman in his life! She spoilt him, and he utterly adored her. No—they must never touch Marie! The thought of her—delicate, gentle, falling into their hands, blinded him with passions of fear and rage.

"Devils!" he cried brokenly. "I'll go!"

The car moved on. The mists were clearing but visibility was still poor. Despite this the car gathered speed. The fear and rage besotted Downey. He did not know what terror lay ahead, he realized only that there was no escape. He would die—of that he was certain—and he'd never see Marie again. Life was suddenly a nightmare which had to be endured until the awakening—awakening! A recklessness gripped Downey—no, of

course not, there'd be no awakening in this life! Faced with the thought of his terrifying end, life was suddenly sweeter than before. He wanted it to continue, just he and Marie—the best years must surely be ahead of them. . . .

As the agony of this last thought racked him, the car almost leapt over the surface of the road. Lawrence's hand came down upon his shoulder restrainingly.

"My friend—steady! Putting an end to both of us won't solve anything. Remember my colleagues will still be left, and your wife——"

Marie! Downey almost sobbed aloud in grief. Yes—he must consider Marie. Better that he. . . .

Lawrence's hand was swiftly upon his arm again, but his manner had quietened considerably.

"Stop—this is the end of the line, my friends are waiting."

As he slowed down, Downey became aware of the men, broad, grim-faced, standing quietly in the roadway. He opened the car door but the sight of their unflinching faces caused him to panic. No—he must escape—call the police! Then a strident voice cried out urgently, "Right, Carl—get him! Don't let him escape."

Downey turned to look at Lawrence in final, hopeless appeal. For answer Lawrence raised his hand and dealt him a crushing blow upon the back of his head.

Downey came to in a small, sunlit room. Now there was no sign of mists beyond the window. Little by little his experiences were returning to him. Then a man, white-coated, came into the room and stood by his bed. Now he remembered everything. Weakly he closed his eyes against the man's inquisitive stare. His head ached violently.

"Better now, Mr. Downey?" The man's tones were oddly subdued. "I'm Dr. Orton. You've had a nasty blow but you're over it now."

"What are you going to do with me?" Downey asked the question tiredly. Now he was here it was pointless to fight.

"Do?" There was a hint of amusement in the doctor's voice.

"Why—when your fit enough we're going to pack you off home."

"Home!" Downey was suddenly completely alert. "Where am I now?"

"You're in Grey House. It's a mental hospital. Don't you remember—you brought Lawrence back."

"Brought him! You mean he was a patient here?"

Dr. Orton nodded. "He escaped. He's not dangerous as a rule, but he suffers from hallucinations—and then he'd taken one of the staff's razors. Some of my staff were going out to join in the search for him when they saw your car driving up.

"Then—all he pretended to know about me—it was just guess work after all. . . ." His face began to twitch.

Another doctor entered the room just then. Anxiously he regarded Downey who rocked with hysterical laughter.

"That was a nasty blow he received," Dr. Orton said. "There's bound to be some sort of a reaction to it, I suppose."

THE LAST DEGREE

DOROTHY GARRARD

Illustrated by Vera Jarman

"DO HURRY UP," I said to Martin, scrabbling in the sideboard drawer for my lipstick. "We're always late."

"Well, don't wait for me then. I don't come on till scene two."

Through the mirror I saw him shake his pen in the general direction of the inkpot and drop a blot on to the tablecloth, which he hastily covered with his teacup.

"Oh, Martin, I wish you'd do your homework in your room after tea."

"First she tells me to get on with it because we're late," sighed my son, gazing at the ceiling, "and then she says——"

"But you shouldn't take these things on if you can't fit them in. You almost fought Alan for the part, and now—only three weeks from production—you still don't know the words. The only convincing bit is where you rescue Joan with that natty bit of sword play. . . ."

"Nag, nag, nag," Martin mumbled, and I saw he'd gone bright pink.

Several pieces of jigsaw fell into place and I grinned to myself. Who'd have thought it? Joan Scatton was the pretty fifteen-year-old who played the female lead, and I suddenly saw why the ruffles on Martin's cravat had to be just right, and why he'd made such a fuss when the breeches I'd made turned out not to fit quite right.

"Well, how much more homework have you got to do?"

"Only maths after this and I'll do that in a jiff. I'm brilliant at maths."

"When did your trumpeter die?" I jeered.

"Mr. Brandt says I am, anyway. I break all the rules but the answers still come out right. He gets mad because he can't follow my working out; he says it's unorthodox."

"Does your school cap still fit?"

"Ha-ha!" Martin said, his tone of voice consigning my humour to form 1c. "And if you don't stop nattering at me I'll never get done."

"Well, don't be too late. Mrs. Scatton is losing patience with you. She was muttering something about substituting Alan even at this late date."

"She'd better not," he said absently, turning out his satchel for his geometry set. But I could see he didn't take me seriously. At sixteen he had grown a protective skin around his ego and nothing could puncture it. He fancied himself in his old-fashioned costume, and even if we grown-ups looked desperately unimpressed at the sight of his flashing sword and dancing blue eyes above a ruffled cravat, Joan's moonstruck gaze still gave the game away.

It wasn't far to the village hall, and

in order to appease Mrs. Scatton by being on time, I took the short cut across the fields and through the wood. I was halfway across the second field when I found myself running. There was a slight decline, it's true, but nothing to account for the way I felt suddenly pitched forward, and the horrid feeling that as I put each foot to earth it kind of slid away behind me. The wood loomed nearer and I tried desperately to stop, the trees were quite thick and the mist-wet trunks coming at me from the dusk looked uninvitingly solid. But I couldn't even slow down, and blundered through the trees with my arms outstretched to ward off the impact I expected at any minute. On the other side of the wood was the road which was fortunately empty of traffic, for I crossed it like an inebriated chicken

and landed with an audible thud at the side of the hall.

Mrs. Scatton was alone inside when I tottered through the door. She was on the stage at the far end holding on to the table, and so far as I could see, she was grimly watching an orange roll from the table to the floor. I trotted the length of the hall at the same unsteady pace and fetched up against the wings, where I, too, watched the orange. It appeared to be quite round, but it didn't roll. It lolloped.

Still holding the table with one hand, she retrieved the orange—which had an important, though non-speaking, part in the play—and held it up.

"This orange," she said, "is round." She said it fiercely as if someone had disputed the statement.

"Yes," I said. Nobody argued with Mrs. Scatton.

"Watch!" she adjured me, pulling back her sleeve like a conjurer about to perform. When she let go of the table she almost fell flat across it, but recovering herself she put down the orange and let go. There was enough of a slope to start the fruit rolling but did it roll? Not it. It jigged this way and that as if it had a skinful of liquor instead of orange juice.

Then all of a sudden, things seemed different. I don't know how, but it was as if everything had suddenly come back into focus. I hadn't realized they'd been out of focus, but that's the only way I can describe it, like coming out of a very real daydream into reality. The orange gathered momentum and rolled off the table, and when I bent to pick it up my balance was quite normal.

Several of the others came in at that moment, laughing and breathless. Mrs. Scatton stopped gazing at the orange which I still held, and recollected herself.

"Where's Martin?" she asked sternly.

"He'll be here any minute," I assured her hastily.

"And does he know his words?"

"Well. . . ."

She seemed to be holding me personally responsible, and I felt annoyed with both her and Martin.

"If he doesn't know them tonight I'm putting Alan in his place."

My heart sank. Mrs. Scatton was a woman of her word and Alan was certainly a good understudy. But Martin was so right for the part and besides, Alan was much slighter and not so tall. The hours I had spent making the costume fit Martin would all be wasted. So upset was I that I turned on Martin when he clattered into the hall some fifteen minutes later.

"Your goose is cooked," I hissed. "She's going to put Alan in it if you don't know it, and you don't, do you?"

"I'll get by," Martin said airily, but for once he was mistaken.

He was removed from the stage at the end of Act 1, Scene 2 and his rival took the boards.

At the point where Joan was to receive a tender kiss on the cheek she shot a pitiful glance across the footlights to where Martin was fuming at the back of the hall. I saw his fists were clenched. Who knows how many tender kisses he had stolen

under the guise of practising, and now his excuse for dallying with the fair Joan was snatched from under his nose.

"Do that again!" Mrs. Scatton cried, "and Joan—try not to look as if you loathed him!"

"I wasn't, but I'd rather have . . . that is. . . ." faltered Joan, almost betrayed by her feelings into being unmaidenly.

"Again!" Mrs. Scatton repeated relentlessly.

After rehearsal we waited hopefully to see if Martin would get his last chance. I had forgotten all my complaining about fitting in homework, sewing costumes and hearing lines (immediately forgotten) and only felt smitten to the heart at the sight of love's young dream fainting at the footlights.

"We'll try you again on Friday, Alan," Mrs. Scatton told him graciously. "You have a different manner to Martin but at least you know the words. Joan, I'll coach you on that bit in Act 3 now, with Miss Hollis...."

We were dismissed. No lingering in the gloaming for Joan and Martin tonight. Martin followed me slowly out of the door, his backward gaze clinging to Joan's. We walked along the road in silence until he suddenly burst out:

"It's not fair!"

"But you were told plenty of times to learn the words," I pointed out.

"I'd have known them on the night, I always do."

"Yes, but that's not good enough for the producer, and not fair on the others either is it? They depend on you for their cues. . . ."

"Oh, I suppose so," he admitted, "but I never thought Mrs. Scatton would actually put Alan in my place. She was in a foul mood tonight wasn't she?"

"It was that orange," I said. "She hates to be baffled."

"What are you talking about?"

"The orange in the play, it wouldn't roll properly, it kind of . . . jigged about. And another thing, while I was coming here tonight. . . ."

I told him about my strange gallop through the trees and got quite carried away by my description. But when I finished, Martin was silent. I felt a bit silly all of a sudden and wished I hadn't told him. Martin and I had always been very close, but there were times when I remembered that he was a teenager with big plans for putting the world right, and I was an old-fashioned parent full of trivialities and strange notions. I changed the subject.

"Why were you so late? I didn't expect you to be more than five minutes after me, you and your mathematical genius."

"I lost a degree," Martin said, after a pause.

"You what?"

"In my first problem." There was a kind of wonder in his tone.

"I actually got a geometrical problem wrong for the first time in my life. I lost the last degree."

"Where did you find it?" I asked, my humour reaching a new low, but he didn't notice.

"A complete circle is 360°, but I

could only make it 359°. It took me a couple of minutes to find out my mistake. I mean, a circle can't be round if there's a degree missing, can it?"

I shot a sideways glance at him, to find he was shooting a sideways glance at me. The incredibly impossible answer to the lolloping orange and my merry capering had hit him, and he was wondering if I was bright enough to have had the same idea. We walked home in silence, overwhelmed by each other's perception.

On Friday we set out for the hall in good time, as Martin had all weekend to do his homework. He had been very thoughtful all the week, but now, walking down the road, he was whistling cheerfully in my ear like a cageful of canaries. I noticed that he had a couple of school books under each arm too—a strange thing for a Friday evening. I looked at him suspiciously.

"What are you planning?"

"Planning? Why, nothing!" he replied, his face brimming with astonished innocence.

Everyone else was already there and dressing for the parts. Mrs. Scatton liked to have several dress rehearsals. Alan was being pinned and tacked into the costume I had made to fit Martin and I looked at him coldly in spite of myself. I knew Martin was in the wrong, but Alan's superior manner irritated me.

Martin sat himself at the back of the hall and appeared to be taking an intelligent interest in the play. I watched him through a peephole in the wings when I wasn't on stage, and as the curtains opened for scene three, he suddenly became furiously busy with his books. He doesn't want to watch Alan kiss Joan, I thought to myself sadly, but I was wrong. After a minute he stopped work and watched Alan make his entrance.

At this point there were usually whispers of admiration from the watchers, but tonight there were giggles and smothered laughter. He looked . . . wrong, somehow. Granted, a tacked up costume can't look too elegant, but he hadn't looked too bad offstage. Now he looked ridiculous. His hat, which should have been worn with an air, sat flat upon his head, and his angular face looked like a caricature of itself. I saw Joan gulp desperately as he staggered, rather than swaggered, across the stage, and I knew it was all Martin's fault.

The stage floor didn't look flat; Joan wasn't affected because she was sitting down, but Alan seemed to have difficulty in directing his steps towards her. He bowed and held out his hand to help Joan to her feet, then almost overbalanced. Joan sat down heavily again and blushed at the gust of involuntary laughter which issued from the rest of us. Alan bent again and unceremoniously hauled her upright, then determined that the show must go on, bent to kiss her cheek.

What happened next is open to speculation. Either Joan turned her head the wrong way, or Alan misjudged the angle, for he kissed her full on the mouth.

The script went to pot. Joan, who should have dimpled demurely, went

scarlet, opened her pretty mouth and yelled—

"Oh, you beast!" She gave him a hearty shove which sent him sprawling, and furious at being made a fool he yelled back at her—

"Oh don't be so daft, anyone'd think you'd never been kissed before!"

"Alan!" boomed Mrs. Scatton, looming ominously above him. "Don't speak to Joan like that! And, Joan—what do you mean by getting temperamental? You never made all this fuss with Martin!"

"He doesn't kiss like a wet fish!" shrieked Joan, quite beside herself, "and he doesn't take liberties either! You're supposed to kiss me here!" she went on, stabbing at her dimpled cheek with a fierce finger.

I looked from the bewildered and cowed hero to Martin, standing at the back of the hall. It was rather dim back there but he had a grin from ear to ear, I could see that.

"We'll do that scene again," Mrs. Scatton said grimly.

"No we won't!" shouted Joan. "Not unless you give Martin his part back!"

We could see that Mrs. Scatton was sadly disappointed in Alan. Joan's was a large part and she did it beautifully. But the producer could not allow herself to be dictated to, so she compromised.

"We'll try Martin in that scene and see if he knows it. I can't understand you, Alan, you were so good on Monday, but tonight you turned it into complete farce!"

She turned to my son, who was scribbling industriously in one of his books.

"Martin!"

He was word perfect. We sighed with delight at his tender wooing of Joan, and Mrs. Scatton was soothed into reinstating him with many words of warning.

Joan had to stay behind for some minor costume alterations, and in view of his uneasy relationship with her mother, Martin wisely decided not to push his luck too far in one night. He walked home with me under the stars.

"Martin," I said, breaking the silence, "what was it you were doing for homework tonight?"

"Oh, just a little problem about angles," he said carelessly.

"Funny it wouldn't come right while Alan was on the stage." Then his tone changed.

"You know what happened, don't you? I don't know *how*, but it did . . . didn't it?"

I knew what he meant. "Yes," I said. "It was all your doing."

"It's a bit—frightening," he said, after a minute. "All that power . . . I feel sort of apart from everybody. It puts me on my own, if you see what I mean. Different."

The time was ripe. I had scarcely dared hope for this, but it was true. "Martin, I've got something to tell you."

"Yes?"

"You wouldn't remember this, it happened before you were born," I said carefully. "But when I was about fourteen, an island vanished in the Pacific Ocean. It was only a coral

island, no inhabitants or anything, so it didn't really matter. . . ."

"Yes?" said Martin again. I didn't blame him for sounding puzzled.

"Well, I happened to be drawing a map at the time, and I missed a bit out. It was the first mistake I ever made in geography—and the last."

"Fancy that!" said Martin inadequately after a moment. I felt his arm pushed through mine and we walked in companionable silence.

"I say, do you think we could have had a careless ancestor round about the time of Atlantis?"

IN AND OUT OF THIS WORLD

('*London Mystery*' *Selection No. 55*)

It's best to make it clear right from the start
This issue had some grisly tales to tell,
Grim yarns in which Non-humans played their part. . . .
We learnt of nameless horrors which befell
The sculptor who had essayed 'modern art'
On black and alien stone. We must not dwell
Too much upon those forces which can reach
The human mind—but 'brain-hook' did it well. . . .
And then that hut beside the haunted beach,
A seeming haven—well-lit, safe and warm;
Yet any man will hear, above the screech
Of high winds and loud rising storm
Sweet voices not of earth which promise death. . . .
A cat comes next, assuming flesh and form
As one's dead sweetheart, drawing life and breath
From God knows where . . . and we need nerves of steel
To contemplate these horrors—they're too real!

NORMAN D. PAVITT

THE SHADOW

ROSEMARY TIMPERLEY

E NEVER SAW it face to face. Only out of the corner of his eye. But when he looked round, it had gone.

At the start he thought he must be imagining it. He even had his eyes examined, but the oculist said they were all right. He became nervous and afraid.

He wasn't even sure what it was—a shadow—a vague figure, the size of a man—but not a man—not solid at all. Sometimes, working hard at his desk—he was an income-tax inspector for his area—he would forget all about it. And then it would come closer. He'd suddenly be aware of it right by his shoulder, almost touching him. He'd turn, stifling a cry. There was nothing there.

Others in the office began to talk: "Noticed old Forbes lately? He isn't half jumpy" . . . "Yes. Keeps looking over his shoulder. The other day I asked him what he was looking for. He said, 'Nothing,' but he was white in the face, almost green . . . going round the bend if you ask me."

He wondered that himself. Was he "going round the bend"? Madness often did begin with "seeing things"—persecution mania. But sufferers from that mania usually have some idea of what they're being persecuted about. He had no idea at all. His conscience was clear.

Sometimes, when he'd started his job as tax inspector, he'd felt a pang when he had to demand large sums in tax from people who could no longer afford it. Their own faults, of course: these freelance types who had to pay tax on their previous year's earnings and never remembered to keep enough by. Then they were in queer street. But it wasn't his fault that he had to hound them. He was only doing his job. And he'd very rarely had words with a tax-payer, or non-tax-payer. When they came to see him he was polite and helpful. He'd even been *thanked*—and that was more than could be said for most people in his position.

His conscience was clear. Yet he was haunted by this—what?

It was three weeks before Christmas that the haunting had begun. That was the period when he sent out demands, telling people how much tax they owed and asking them to pay it "on or before January 1st" of the coming year. Quite a few of them paid up before January 1st. This always gratified him. Why couldn't everyone be like that? But it was when those early cheques were arriving that he'd first noticed the shadow.

One day, in the week before Christmas, he went to a restaurant for lunch as usual and sat alone at a table. Not that he felt alone. He was aware of the shadow lurking there but schooled himself not to look round.

A woman came in, slender and

dressed in black. There were several free tables, but she moved slowly towards Forbes and sat opposite him. He was embarrassed, and thought she was trying to pick him up. He cleared his throat and concentrated on his steak and kidney pie. Not that he was hungry. He was never hungry now.

She sat there looking at him, then said "I'm sorry—but I had to sit here—I had to—I don't usually come to this place—I hadn't intended to—I don't know why——"

She sounded so distressed that he said kindly: "That's all right," and thought: Perhaps she's afraid to be alone for some reason, poor woman.

"Did you know my husband?" she asked abruptly.

"I don't think so. But if you'll tell me your name——"

"Mrs. Sharpley."

"No." He shook his head. Then he remembered something. Only two weeks ago he'd received a cheque in payment of tax from a man called Peter Sharpley, a freelance artist who scraped a meagre living.

"Unless it's Peter Sharpley, the artist," he said.

"You did know him!"

"Not by sight. I know *of* him."

"He's here." She was looking round in a panicky way. "I can't see him, but I felt it as soon as I came in—he's here——"

"But surely you'd recognize him if he were here," Forbes said humouring her.

"He died two weeks ago," said Mrs. Sharpley.

"I'm so sorry." Forbes wondered what he should do for the demented woman.

"He went out to the post. When he got home, he collapsed with a heart attack and died within the hour. And now—he's here—with you——"

"What was he posting?" Forbes had no idea why he asked this. It was as if some outside force compelled him.

"His income-tax cheque," she said.

"I got the cheque."

"*You* got it."

"Yes. I'm the tax man."

"Why do I have this queer feeling that my husband is around, wanting me to speak to you——"

"I don't know," said Forbes. "But I'm haunted, too."

They looked at each other.

"Tell me some more about your husband," said Forbes.

"He'd been unwell for some time. He wasn't a successful artist, but he wouldn't give up. He worked himself to a shadow."

Forbes started slightly at the word "shadow."

She went on: "The irony is that although he worried himself sick over paying that tax—he was very conscientious—he needn't really have paid it before January 1st. He needn't have paid it at all. But he didn't know he was going to die, poor darling."

"It was fourteen pounds, five shillings and ninepence," said Forbes, trembling slightly, terribly aware of the shadow just behind him.

"What a memory! Yes, it was something like that."

Forbes could never understand

what made him do what he did next. He knew only that he was compelled. He got his own cheque-book from his pocket and made out a cheque to Mrs. Forbes for fourteen pounds, five shillings and ninepence.

"You must take it," he insisted. "I'll make the necessary adjustments at the office. Please take it. It's yours."

"Why are you doing this?"

"I'm not sure—but please!"

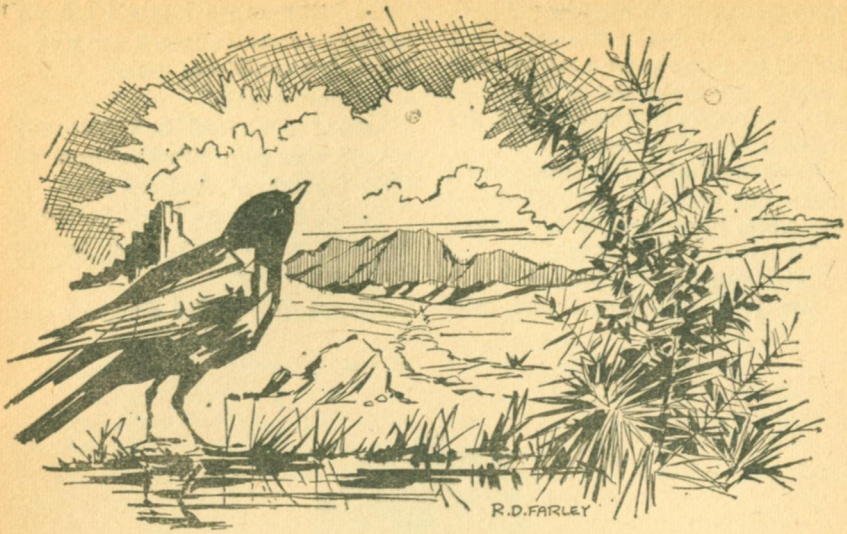
She took the cheque and said: "You know—when I said I felt my husband's presence here, it was true—this isn't a confidence trick."

"I know it isn't."

"But I don't feel he's here any more," she said. "You've been so kind. Good-bye." And she left.

Forbes finished his lunch. Suddenly he was very hungry. And he felt wonderfully free.

For the shadow had gone.



THE VALLEY

PATRICIA SZPIGANOWICZ

Illustrated by R. D. Farley

"YES, I THINK I know what happened to Everitt Fairchild," said Hanley slowly in answer to my question. "But I'm not sure, even now. When I look back at the whole thing, I find myself wondering whether I imagined most of it; whether I was influenced by Fairchild's personality into seeing more behind what was probably a perfectly normal landscape than actually existed at the time in question."

He paused for a moment, staring down into the heart of the cheerful, blazing log fire in front of us.

The comfortable lounge of the Club was empty but for the two of us, and the daytime roar of the city traffic had dulled to a low murmur outside. I waited expectantly for him to continue his tale.

"Ireland's a strange country, you know," he went on presently. "I think we English people really don't quite understand how very different it is from England. We imagine that, because it's part of the British Isles,

it must be just the same. Nothing, actually, could be further from the truth. Have you ever been there?" he asked me. I shook my head. "The further west you go, the more you come to realize the difference; the inexplicable feeling that you have stepped into a world where something rather weird, rather bewildering has happened to both time and the world as we know it. It is almost as though you had passed gradually into a completely different dimension; a queer, sometimes rather frightening sensation, which is difficult to define."

Seeing the look of astonishment on my face, he broke off and grinned ruefully.

"Yes, I know. Coming from me, a remark like that probably does sound pretty idiotic, which is why I said at the beginning that I only *think* I know what happened to Everitt Fairchild, but can't be sure. But, let me begin at the beginning."

This was the story he told me.

Last autumn, as you know, I came back from that disastrous climb in the Karakoram mountains. We lost three Sherpas in the avalanche on the Hispar glacier, and poor old Westbury went too, you remember? I was stuck on a ledge in a blizzard for two days and got badly frost-bitten; had to have my right foot off, which wasn't much of a joke, but there you are. When I came out of hospital, after my return home, I felt thoroughly sorry for myself, and completely browned off. Climbing was my life. I hadn't a single idea in my head of what to do next. It would have been different if I had qualified on the scientific side of things, as you and Fairchild did, but—oh, well, that's not the point. The thing is, that last February, Everitt wrote, very kindly asking me whether I'd care to join him in Ireland, for a month or so, to recuperate. He was doing some private survey work for an American he had met in Bolivia, when he was over there on that last expedition. This man, he told me, had bought some valley or other out in Ireland, on the west coast, hoping to make the place into a sort of self-contained tourists' paradise.

To tell the honest truth, I wasn't all that keen at first. A tourists' paradise sounded right out of my field of interests, but I had never been to Ireland and somehow, as I was at a loose end anyway, I decided to accept.

Donegal is quite unlike any other part of that country. To begin with, it hasn't really been discovered yet, by the general run of tourists. In places you can get right off the map, into completely unspoilt country, in less than an hour's drive into the hills. Everitt, I discovered, was staying in a tiny, thatched cottage which had no amenities whatsoever, and stood at the end of a rutted lane, about six miles from the nearest village. He rigged me up a hammock, which he strung from two great hooks in the rough-plastered walls, across one corner of the living-room. He himself dossed down on a camp bed. We lived pretty rough and I hadn't been there longer than a week, before I felt a new man.

It took me a week longer than that to realize that something odd had

happened to Everitt. He had always been a bit of an introvert as you'll remember yourself; never talked much, at the best of times. But now, he seemed to be even more secretive than ever. I occasionally caught a look of bewilderment on his face. No, perhaps that's not quite the right word. Frustration? Fear? It's difficult to say exactly, but I felt certain that something was bothering him; something which he couldn't combat. You know what he was like when faced with any tough problem? He'd worry away at it, like a terrier at a badger's set, until he'd got the better of it. But this time it was different, somehow.

For the first two weeks, I spent most of my time in and around the cottage, getting used to my wretched foot. Everitt went off early in his car, to supervise the work in the valley. He would come back in the evenings, when the light went, but sometimes he'd be later than that, and it was at such times that I noticed his unusual air of preoccupation.

He told me quite a bit about his work and it sounded interesting. About four miles from the cottage, to the north, a range of hills rose up abruptly from the moors to about a thousand feet. They were known locally as the Devil's Backbone, with reason, I felt later, and ended to the east in a massive, precipitous cliff which dropped straight into the sea. The western end sloped gradually downward in a series of lesser hills to the moors. About half-way along, two jutting spurs stretched out like a crab's claw, to the north-east, forming a deep, narrow gorge; a gigantic fault in the formation. This was the bit of land the American had bought. I suppose it was hardly a mile across at the widest point, and was almost completely closed at the open end by a huge, rounded boss of granite, which had been belched up from some great, internal earth upheaval, to rise about eight hundred feet above the floor of the valley.

When Everitt asked me, one Sunday, if I'd like to see what they had been doing over there, I agreed to go like a shot. I was getting a bit tired of my own company, day by day, at the cottage, and welcomed a change of scenery. Besides, I was intrigued. I thought I might get some clue to the mystery behind Everitt's behaviour.

It was one of those harsh, blustery days which you get in Donegal. The sun shines, there's hardly a cloud in the sky and the hills are nearly black, but the wind seems to blow with a malignant force, without rhyme or reason, and from every quarter. The odd thing is, that there is such a noise going on everywhere; a sort of panting roar, which seems somehow inexplicable in such a barren, open waste. You could understand it if there were trees about, but there isn't a tree to be seen between the cottage and the foothills; only the occasional, huge, erratic boulder, dwarf gorse, heather and tufts of half-dead grasses.

The track—you can't call it a road—winds over the moors for mile upon empty mile. Nothing to see but granite outcrops and bog-holes full of still, black water. An odd crow or two would flap away from the edge of

the track, or a gull soar inland from the sea. There were a few miserable-looking hill sheep grazing on the poor pasture, which bounded off when we came near them, but there wasn't a sign of human life anywhere. You see a lot of ruined houses and farmsteads in Ireland, but there wasn't a ghost of one there. I'd never seen anything so bleak and desolate.

We climbed up the steep side of the range in a series of poorly-laid hairpin bends, which Everitt faced with practised care. The lane was full of pot-holes and sometimes was half-blocked by stones which had fallen down from the sides of the banks above. As we reached the crest, the wind started blowing half a gale, rocking the car, and I was surprised when, after driving for several miles along the top of the hills, he drew the car into the right-hand verge and put on the brake.

"Look down there," he said, pointing out of his window. "The valley is just below us."

From that high vantage point, the view all round was stupendous. You could see for miles. The atmosphere was extraordinarily clear, and from where we were sitting, the whole of the rolling Donegal Highlands seemed to stretch out and surround us in a wealth of ink-blue masses, like some contorted scene of enormous, frozen waves. Here and there you caught sight of a lough, pewter-grey in the depths of a distant valley, and the sea lay spread out beyond, to the horizon, an angry deep blue, which echoed the cloud-shadows on the surrounding hills.

Following his pointing finger, I looked past Everitt and down over the expanse of rough-grazing land, which stretched out to end in a sudden dip in the ground. It was, I found out later, the lip of a precipice which plunged down to a jumbled, boulder-strewn scree on the floor of the valley itself. The gorge was narrow and ran for rather more than three miles between high-sloping, heather-covered cliffs to the far end. I couldn't see the stretch nearest to us, but the whole place looked utterly wild and savage. The last spot on earth which anyone would choose to make into a tourists' heaven, I thought. Some valleys have a warm, sheltering, welcoming look about them. This one not only looked godforsaken and forbidding, but almost hostile in its desolation. An odd light seemed to fill the air above it and I asked Everitt if there was a lake below the precipice, to account for it. He nodded.

"Yes, there is," he told me. "We were supposed to be bringing the road through the valley to the edge of it, where they planned to build a hotel or something."

"Funny sort of a place for a holiday camp," I mused.

Everitt laughed suddenly. "Impossible," he said shortly and, without explaining himself further, started the car and drove on.

The track left the hills in a series of twisting downhill bends, until we found ourselves driving over the moors again, on the other side of the eastern hills, which formed one wall of the valley. Half an hour later, we arrived at a cross-roads below a

steep spur and once more Everitt stopped the car. We were now facing the mouth of the gorge. Our track meandered away to the right, towards the coast, while the other lane curved downward, to the left of us, and disappeared out of sight in the valley, under an overhanging cliff. It was a brand-new track, the metalling neatly overlaid with cold tar and granite chips. In that uninhabited spot, it looked utterly incongruous. Almost exactly opposite us, two thousand or so yards away, that strange, enormous, bulging boss of naked granite reared up out of the dead heather, hiding the rest of the valley from view. The top of a monstrous, blind, black skull: that was what I thought, the first time I saw it. There wasn't a tuft of grass on it. It was smooth and rounded and, on that vast scale, looked somehow obscene against the heather and grass-covered shoulders of the other hills.

"He must have been mad!" Everitt exclaimed suddenly.

"Who?" I asked, startled out of my reverie.

"Petersen. He bought the place, site unseen. He must have been mad. A holiday camp!" Again he gave that short bark of laughter. Then he added, in a changed tone, "The work has come to a standstill."

"Why?" I asked.

There was a long silence before he spoke again. He was staring at that mass of black granite before us and when he did speak, the words seemed to have been dragged up reluctantly, from somewhere deep in his brain.

"There were too many of them."

"Too many of what?" I asked impatiently.

"Bones," he replied.

The sky seemed to have darkened and the sound of the wind, heightened by the steep, enclosing walls of the valley mouth, swept down over us with a deafening roar and then, as quickly, died away completely, leaving an eerie silence in its wake.

I turned quickly to face Everitt. "Bones?" I asked. "What sort of bones?"

"We found the first of them just inside the mouth of the valley," he began meditatively. "Sheep, mostly. We had to blast the rock to get the road through there, and when the men started using picks, they found them. Just a few at first. It didn't bother them then. That was right at the beginning. They weren't local men, either. No man from this district would take on the work. I had a hell of a time getting labour, and now—?" His voice trailed away into silence.

"And now?" I prompted, at last.

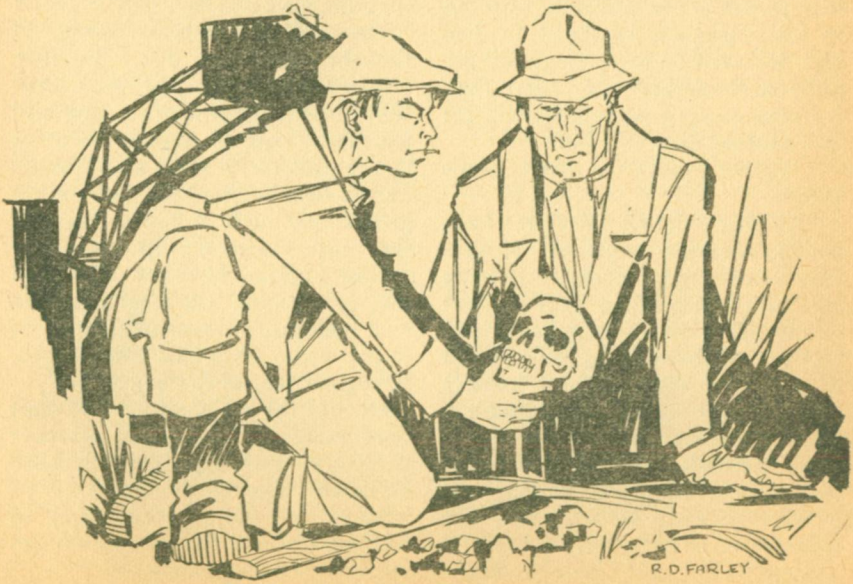
He seemed to pull himself together with an effort before continuing, jerkily at first, and then more steadily. "Yes, they were only sheep bones at first; old ones, mostly. But the job was devilish, right from the very start. We had to blast four times in the first half mile and twice we struck water. Two men were badly injured by falls of rock, and one of them died.

"Then, after a bit of good going, we struck a patch of bog. I've had that trouble on Dartmoor, but not here; not before now. It was the

wickedest mile of filth I've ever known. The stench alone was enough to kill you. The men started playing up and when the head ganger left, after a dispute, I had merry hell getting another man to replace him. And, all the time we kept finding bones. A skull, first. A man's skull. Of course, I called in the local police, but it was very old; half rotten. They got in touch with the department dealing with antiquities." Once more, Everitt chuckled mirthlessly and nodded his head.

"They sent down a learned professor from Dublin, and a team of enthusiastic young students; archaeologists. They ferreted about for a week. Not longer, though. Just one week. You see, there were too many bones. Not whole skeletons, mind you. They said that they would have understood that. These were just loose bones, lying higgledy-piggledy; masses of them, not in layers, but crammed into the earth. The students dug a pit twenty feet wide and a hundred feet long, and tried to make out how many bodies had been buried there, from the surface, right down to bed-rock. They couldn't come to an agreement on it and, anyway, by the time they'd half-finished that, the place and the smell seemed to be getting on their nerves.

"One young chap cracked up completely and I think that finally put them off; gave them the excuse they were looking for. Anyhow, they went soon after. The professor said that it



appeared to be part of a plague pit, probably dating back to mediæval times, or earlier. But he didn't seem to be very enthusiastic about it by that time, either, and was apparently glad to leave. No one has been here since.

"We went on with the road, while they were working there, but had to stop later. There is a high ridge of gravel, about a mile from the lake, which took an age to cut through, and just after we started work on it, last week, the bulldozer was involved in a nasty accident. Part of the road which we had just completed over the bog caved in, for no understandable reason, and the machine slid down the broken embankment on top of the driver. He was pinned by the leg underneath it and screamed like a maniac, while two pickmen, who ran to his assistance, struggled to free him. He went on screaming until the filthy mud choked him. After that, the men stopped work for good. He was another one, you see."

"Another what?" I asked, horrified.

"Another victim. They've been coming here for thousands of years. One by one; men, mostly. Can't you see them? Shepherds, who got lost in the thick mists which sometimes blot out the surrounding hills; a band of warriors, Vikings. Who knows? The coast is pretty near, after all. Roving gipsies, too, probably, and those pathetic, evicted families in the eighteen hundreds, starving and perhaps suffering from plague. The professor may have been right there. Tramps, too, and more recently, tourists, who wouldn't know the truth about the valley."

"And what is the truth about the valley?" I asked, turning to Everitt.

His face was livid under the tan and his eyes were staring blindly ahead of him. A cold finger of fear moved up my spine and I shivered.

"What wouldn't they have known?" I insisted.

"That it eats meat," he said thickly.

For a moment I looked at him in a stunned silence, then I laughed.

"Oh, come off it, Everitt," I expostulated. "That's a bit too much, old chap! You've been working too hard. What you need is a holiday. A good rest. You've let the whole thing get the better of your imagination. There's probably some very simple explanation to the whole business, if the truth were known."

He nodded his head slowly. "I thought you'd say that," he said. "Yet, have you noticed that, while we've been sitting here, not one bird has flown past us towards, over or out of the valley? There are no sheep on the surrounding hills. They won't graze there now. For some reason, they seem to avoid the place. Inherited instinct, perhaps? This road too, is deserted. No local man has ever built near here, or safely set foot in that valley since God knows when. I laughed too, at the beginning."

Outside the car, the wind had risen once more in fitful gusts, moaning dolorously among the lichened boulders, tugging at the tufts of heather. But the sky was empty of life and the land seemed overwhelmingly, unbearably lonely.

I felt a sudden unreasonable feeling of panic well up inside me, as though something out of sight, just round the bend in the new road, was watching, waiting for us to move nearer; near enough for it to—to do what? Everitt was watching my face and he smiled bleakly.

"Yes, that's it," he said softly. "And yet, why? It looks like any other valley really, wouldn't you say? Wilder than some, perhaps, particularly in this region. There are many forbidding gorges to be found in the Pyrenees, or in any other group of hills, or range of mountains."

"But," I began hesitantly.

Everitt nodded. "Exactly!" he agreed quietly. "I've come across two similar places in my wanderings. One was a small, terrifying pit, of volcanic origin, east of Ozumba, in Mexico. The other, a stretch of open moorland, not a mile from a busy main highway, on Exmoor. Both were completely fiendish in their hellish aim and purpose. Well," he went on, "I paid the men off yesterday and sent Petersen my resignation. I told him the truth: that his project appears impossible to bring to a successful conclusion. God knows what he will reply. Two men dead, in half that number of miles. I couldn't go on with it.

"But now, the valley is angry. Even you can feel it. You can feel it from here, a couple of hundred yards away. You see, it has had a taste of flesh again. Two men. It nearly had three. Fortunately, I put a stop to the flow, but it wants more, and it wants its revenge. It is waiting; waiting for me." He sighed softly and I felt him shiver. "I won't go back there, believe me, ever again, if I can help it, for love or money."

"Let's get out of here," I said suddenly, breaking the silence which followed his declaration. "I don't know what you have in your mind, but the quicker we leave this place, the happier I'll be."

He seemed to shake himself out of his strange mood then, and started the car without another word. An hour later we were back at the cottage, tucking into a meal of hot stew, washed down with good, strong tea well-laced with whisky. The following week I left Ireland and came back to London, leaving Everitt alone at the cottage, preparing to vacate the place after the loose ends of the business had been wound up. I noticed, before I left, that he seemed to have cheered up since our talk in the car, and was pretty much himself again.

"Last April I had a short note from him, telling me that Petersen was coming over to Ireland, to inspect the work which had been completed, and Everitt was looking forward to finishing with the whole thing. Somehow, I found myself remembering his last words to me before we left the mouth of the valley. 'I won't go back there, ever, if I can help it.' For some reason, they seemed to echo strangely in my mind. That was the last I heard of him. There have been so many other things which have occupied my mind since then, that I forgot about the whole matter until tonight. An item of news caught my

eye in this evening's paper. I wonder if you saw it?"

Hanley took a folded evening paper from his pocket and handed it to me in silence.

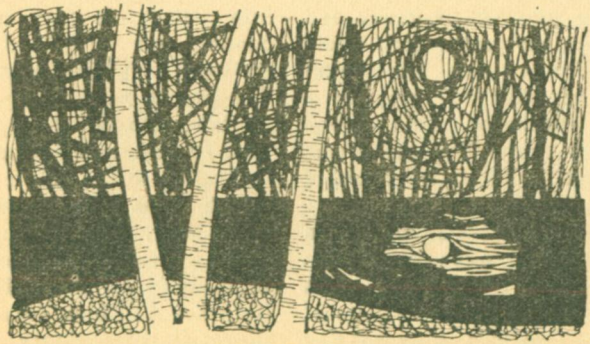
The clock on the mantelpiece struck twelve and I noticed with surprise that the fire had died down into a glowing heap of ashes. I took the paper and looked down the columns until I saw this headline:

"MISSING MILLIONAIRE FOUND DEAD IN DONEGAL"—I read. "The body of Mr. Eric Petersen, the American Real Estate magnate, was found yesterday lying not far from his abandoned car, beside the road leading from a remote valley, which he had recently bought in the Donegal Highlands. It is understood that he had intended to convert the valley into a high-class playground for visiting American tourists, and the work on the project had recently been started under the direction of Mr. Everitt Fairchild, the well-known geologist and surveyor. Mr. Petersen, who was seventy-six, is thought to have died as the result of a heart attack, which overcame him shortly after he left the valley. He appears to have been dead for several weeks. Foul play is not suspected.

Scotland Yard would be grateful for information leading to the present whereabouts of Mr. Fairchild, who was thought to have been with Mr. Petersen at the time, and who has been missing since the end of April."

I gave the newspaper back to Hanley without a word and he laid it down on the table beside him.

"Yes," he said quietly. "I think I know what happened to Everitt Fairchild, don't you?"



TIME IN HAND

LESLIE VARDRE

Illustrated by Norman Battershill

THE FIRE COLLAPSING in the grate brought me awake to the slow ticking of the clock and the drone of Kindray's voice. Kindray was still talking. In the two months he had been a member of the club I had never before known him to be so communicative and friendly.

I had dozed away from what seemed the beginnings of an argument, with Kindray expounding some vague theory and Barton, normally the most receptive of men, inclined to be sceptical. When I awoke, Kindray was staring into the fire, one elbow resting on the arm of his chair, his cheek cradled in his palm.

"They lived in a mausoleum," he

was saying; "the walls were lined with lead. I suppose that is why——" His pale eyes discovered that I was awake. "Insulation, you know," he added for my benefit.

"A what?" Barton asked in the incredulous voice of a man who has accepted so much but refuses to take more.

"A vault, if you like. Although vaults are usually below ground level. This was one of those pseudo Greek temple affairs that one finds in the grounds of the larger estates. You know the sort of thing I mean."

I joined Barton's disbelief. "You mean someone actually lived in one of them?"

"They did indeed," he assured me, and Barton growled something about it being damned uncomfortable and what had happened to the more usual occupants?

"The old lady made it very cosy," Kindray said, his face earnest. "Very cosy indeed; you wouldn't credit. And no, there weren't any coffins to be taken away first. The place had never been used for the purpose it was intended for. You see, the house itself was burned down less than a year after completion. It was never rebuilt and so never got round to furnishing the usual occupants of a burial place. The mausoleum stood empty for a few years before the old lady—she was a relative of one of the gardeners who had helped lay out the grounds—took possession. One might almost say she squatted there.

"She was a relic of a past age, ruling her pillared domain with an almost tyrannical fervour. Her life was regimented, each second of every day having its own special significance. The nephew had to become part of this regimentation. There was a time for play, a time for reading, a time for eating.

"Until he became old enough to assume the responsibility of shopping, her weekly visits to the village were painful, protracted affairs. She was over-large and cumbersome, and always had trouble with her feet. Her method of progression was a laboured shuffle. When the nephew left school the village saw her no more. She took to living in the one room, sleeping and eating there. The nephew took over the general household duties. The Aunt, her legs swollen now through disuse, was only able to hobble painfully from chair to table and from table to bed.

"But she had her comforts, her ways of passing the regimented hours. She read a lot and did embroidery; the television was a God-send. I can remember the incongruity of the place as seen from the road; the round Greek temple with its pillared portico; the almost windowless yellow walls; the domed roof with its upthrust of aerials. A strange blending of past and present.

"She covered the lead walls with a garish red wallpaper and hideously-framed family portraits; she detested cats and she kept all the clocks in the place five minutes fast."

"A lot of people do that," Kindray said. "I mean, keep their clocks a few minutes fast. But with her there was a difference. Most people who do that sort of thing always bear in

mind that they have those few extra minutes in hand. But not so the Aunt. She moved the minute hand of her clock five minutes forward and the new time became the correct one. So far as she was concerned if her clocks told her it was seven, then it was seven o'clock everywhere. You see what I mean?"

"Yes," Barton said.

"One might almost say that she was living five minutes ahead of everyone else."

"Oh, Lord!" Barton said with some disgust: "now I see what you are getting at. That's what you were trying to say before when you were talking about time in hand."

Asleep, I had clearly missed the point of the exercise.

"But," Barton pointed out, "her time was only relative." He frowned. "I think——"

Kindray nodded. "At the start, yes. She first took to keeping her clocks five minutes fast when the nephew left school and she became confined to her lead walls. And some six months later——

"It was one evening. She switched on the television to catch the six o'clock news. Which meant, of course, that there was still five minutes to wait. The time signal clock—you know the one I mean—came on the screen and confirmed that it was five minutes to the hour. And then suddenly it flickered and faded and there was the newscaster, just finishing his five minutes' bulletin. Somewhere along the line five minutes had gone astray.

"Neither the Aunt nor the nephew saw anything odd about this. Neither did it occur to them that the timings of the rest of the evening's entertainments were slightly awry. But the next evening when the set was switched on at six o'clock Aunt time——"

"Eh?"

Kindray smiled a little. "A joke."

"Oh. Yes, I see. Aunt time. Greenwich time."

"Well, when the picture came on the time signal showed the same time as the house clocks. So what did she do but get annoyed and accuse her nephew of putting them all back five minutes. The argument finished with her hobbling round the place pushing each minute hand on another five minutes." He stopped. "Do you follow?"

"Go on," Barton said shortly.

"There were certain manifestations —I think that is the word—right from the start. The Aunt, of course, being confined to the house, didn't experience any discomfort. But the nephew did. He would be—let me see—about sixteen at the time, and not overbright, and so he didn't give it much thought. The trouble was, you see, something in the nature of a hiatus, a slowing-down each time he left the house, and a compensating speeding-up each time he returned. It occurred each time he crossed the threshold between passage and garden-path. It only lasted a moment; a feeling as if he had stepped into nothingness; a sensation of vertigo each time he gained or lost that five minutes."

"But—" Barton started.

"Yes?" Kindray asked patiently.

"Go on," said Barton.

"It was another month before the house soaked up the next five minutes, making ten in all. The same thing happened again; a flicker on the television screen and the programme suddenly leaping five minutes ahead. And like the first time, the old lady worked herself into a temper at the apparent nephew-disorganization of her strict routine, and shuffled fiercely from clock to clock adjusting each to the new time.

"After his first experience of losing or gaining ten minutes of time each time he left or entered the house the nephew sought excuses for not going to the village. His first attempt, I recall, was a mythical sprained ankle which kept him confined to the place for a week. That gave him time to think up the more permanent excuse that when he did go to the village the folk there laughed at him because he lived in a mausoleum. This the Aunt was prepared to accept. There was more than a ring of truth to it.

"There was some trouble the first time the grocer's boy delivered a carton of goods. The Aunt opened the door and asked him to bring it inside and set it on the table. Which he did, subsequently having to be laid on the sofa until a vicious attack of palpitation had passed. When he left the house, apparently recovered, the exit losing of time brought on a spell of dizziness so that he had to sit on the grass verge of the lane until it had passed. After that he always deposited the groceries on the step, knocked at the door and then ran for his life.

"A fortnight later another five minutes was added to the time accumulation, bringing the total up to a quarter of an hour."

"Possibilities," Barton said pensively.

"Unlimited; if they had cared to exploit the situation. But of course they didn't know then what had happened. The Aunt never did get round to knowing. The nephew, in those early stages, did have a glimmering. What it boiled down to was this: they were living fifteen minutes ahead of the rest of the world. They were getting the news before anybody else, and where live programmes were concerned they were watching things happen fifteen minutes before they actually took place. A most unusual and interesting situation. There is no doubt that the lead lining of the walls along with the old lady's idiosyncrasy of keeping her clocks fast were responsible for the phenomenon. She made her own time, as it were, and the walls insulated against outside influences."

"Time travel," I suggested.

"Not in the accepted sense. This was more in the nature of an accumulation, a bottling of time. A storing away, as it were."

Barton made a great thing of cutting and lighting a cigar, no doubt to prove the even state of his mind.

"Like a—jar—of jam," he offered, blowing smoke.

"Precisely. Where was I? The fifteen-minute period. It was during that period that the Aunt had her attack. The sight of a marauding cat in her neglected garden stirred her to

such a fury that she opened the front door and for the first time in a year —since the time-storing had started, in fact—she hobbled over the threshold, avenging broom in hand. The nephew found her lying unconscious on the path and had a very difficult task in dragging her back to safety inside the house. Then he suffered the discomfort of the time-change in his turn when he went for the doctor.

"The doctor, fortunately, was a youngish man of excellent physique. He took the unusual sensation more or less in his stride, putting it down, one supposes, to symptoms caused by over-work, a hot day and a hurried walk up the lane. He ministered to the old lady, saw her well on the way to recovery, prescribed sleeping tablets at her request to offset the discomfort of her swollen lower limbs, and then went on his way, experiencing the slowing-down process on his way out. The nephew, watching anxiously from a window, saw him stagger down the path, one hand clasped to his forehead.

"For all the incident had clearly undermined her health the old lady managed to live another two years. One afternoon the nephew came through from the kitchen to find her dead in her chair, her head lolling on her shoulder like that of a sawdust doll, saliva looped from her open mouth.

"Seeing her like that made quite an impression on him. We must remember that he had been brought up in a rigid household where there was a place for everything and everything had to be in its place. The time for dying, he felt sure, was the night; the place, a bed, not a chair. He found something revolting in the appearance of his aunt's open mouth, staring eyes and limp arms. He promised himself that when his time came there would be dignity to his dying. Whoever had the unhappy chance of being the one to find him, would find him neat and tidy, composed, arms folded, mouth closed.

"But now he had the unpleasant task of contacting the doctor again and then arranging for the funeral. He had long learned that the easiest method of traversing the threshold of the two time periods was by taking a deep breath, closing his eyes and then making a run for it. All the same, it was very unpleasant. Instead of fifteen minutes to overcome he was now forced to cope with a difference in time of one month."

"A month?" said Barton.

"Four weeks, to be precise. Accumulated five minutes at a time. At that stage the nephew hadn't reached the point of experimenting. He was well aware what was happening but saw no reason to interfere with his aunt each time she added five minutes more to the reckoning.

"The doctor's visit over, the death certificate signed, he dealt with the undertaker. The undertaker was an elderly gentleman who took the time change very badly, accusing the nephew of faulty electric wiring, and refusing to enter the place for a second time. So the nephew found himself having to cope with a very unpleasant task. To avoid further

complications, on the day of the funeral he arranged to have the coffin slid through one of the windows on to the waiting shoulders of the six bearers.

"Because the church was only a stone's throw away there was no need for the formality of a hearse. The bearers, staggering a little until they found their step, set off down the winding lane. The nephew, the sole mourner, followed a few watchful paces behind.

"The little party was barely out of sight of the front door before the old lady came round and set up a hammering on the lid of the coffin. The bearers, hardy country men, lowered their burden hastily to the ground while the nephew, who, in anticipation of such an event had left the screws loose, ripped the lid away exposing the irate inmate of the casket. You see, he had worked out what was likely to happen. While his aunt might have been dead in the house, outside she still had four weeks less three days—the three days between the death and the funeral—to live."

"Just a minute," Barton said and sat for a while with his lips moving silently.

"Yes," he allowed. "Go on."

"The doctor offered the excuse of a coma. He said that such things weren't entirely unknown. He suggested, much to the nephew's relief, that the resuscitated aunt must be taken to hospital for observation. This solved what might have been a knotty problem. The nephew realized that if they had taken her back to the house she would have expired again immediately upon crossing the threshold." Kindray looked at me. "You see?"

"Dead inside; alive out," I said. "I'm with you so far."

"The nephew foresaw a sequence of deaths, funerals and revivals persisting until the rest of the month should have been used up, three days at a time. And of course there would have been questions. Most certainly the doctor would have wanted to know where he stood. And, no doubt, the vicar. It could have been very unpleasant for all concerned."

"Einstein," Barton said wisely for no particular reason.

"Yes," Kindray said politely. "You may be right. Anyway, the Aunt was taken to hospital, treated for shock, and to all intents and purposes made a complete recovery. She died, however, four weeks less three days later. And this time, having caught up with herself as it were, the thing was final and absolute. She was duly buried and the nephew left to carry on alone in the mausoleum.

"He started experimenting almost immediately. He tried adding ten minutes to the clock instead of five. He increased the dosage up to twenty minutes before having to give up. The speeding up of his heart and pulse, compensating for the gain in time, was too much for comfort beyond a certain point. He could take fifteen minutes at a time in his stride and no more."

Barton held up his hand. "Hold it." He brooded. "Yes, I see. Each time he increased the time difference

he had to live a longer time in a shorter one." He floundered. "I think——"

"You have the gist of it," Kindray consoled. "By now it took the house only three days to absorb each increase. By increasing fifteen minutes each time meant that he had to live each day five minutes faster than normal. And the human body is a very delicate piece of mechanism. Needless to say he very rarely crossed the threshold. After six months had been accumulated the result of leaving the house was usually a fainting fit. He experienced one bad moment when in a forgetful mood he leaned out of a window to clean it. . . .

"And then, one day, the inevitable happened. He suffered a sudden and blinding attack of toothache. When it showed no signs of easing he went to the bathroom, a small, windowless room. In the semi-darkness, bemused by pain, he fumbled for the aspirin bottle, emptying some half dozen tablets on his palm, swallowing them and washing them down with water. There was relief of a kind almost straight away. His vision cleared, he was able to focus his eyes again, and he discovered that instead of taking aspirin he had helped himself to the sleeping tablets prescribed for his aunt before her death. He remembered the doctor's stern warning at the time. Maximum dose, one; never more. Three could quite easily prove fatal. More than three and death was inevitable.

"In a panic the nephew did the only thing possible. Staggering to the front door he opened it and flung himself over the threshold. When he came round again some ten minutes later the toothache had gone. It only existed, of course, in his future. As did the tablets which, once time had caught up with him, would certainly prove fatal.

"Seated on the path, his back against a tree, he worked out just how long he had to live. One year, three weeks, two days, eight hours and six minutes. He took into account the time it would take for the tablets to have effect. Fortunately the doctor had been informative upon that point.

"So he was able to work out the time of his death to within a few seconds. Not a very pleasant thought, and neither was the knowledge that his mausoleum home was now closed to him for ever. But, being something of a philosophical soul as well as an orderly one—and we mustn't forget his promise to himself to expire neatly and tidily when his time came —he told himself that things might have been much worse. At least he knew just where he stood; it was up to him to make the most of what time he had left.

"In his pocket was his bank-book. Picking himself up he set off for the village post office without so much as a backward glance for the home that had given him shelter for most of his life.

"With enough money in his pocket to see him through the first stage of his journey he caught the next train to London. He allocated his time to the best advantage. Eleven months were to be spent solely in the pursuit

of pleasure, doing those things he had always wanted to do, going to places he had never thought to have the opportunity of visiting.

"The balance of his time, something under two months, he decided to spend in peace and quiet. As his span neared its close he would make sure that the scene was laid for his exit. A death that would be as he had once promised himself it would be; a thing of dignity, even of beauty. He would be found lying neatly on his bed, jaw discreetly bound with a clean linen handkerchief, eyes peacefully closed, arms folded across his breast. The final touch of a clasped flower he set regretfully aside as smacking of flamboyancy."

"It would certainly save a lot of trouble," Barton said with thoughtful approval. "A hotel—or a boarding house?"

"He decided that a dignified bedroom in a select men's club would be more in keeping with what he had in mind," Kindray told him and then took his face from his hand and looked at the clock.

"Toothache, of course," I said sympathetically, noting how his cheek was swollen.

"As I had expected it came on just before lunch. Knowing that I still had time in hand I was curious enough to see how the future would go about protecting itself. I went to a dentist. He told me that there was an abcess and he could do nothing for me until it had emptied."

And then Barton realized what was going on.

"But—" he started, looking at the clock.

"I have taken one of the best bedrooms here at the club," Kindray said, his eyes now never far from the minute hand. "The whole thing is timed to a second. Two minutes to get upstairs; two minutes to undress —I have new pyjamas waiting—and one minute in which to compose myself."

"But—" Barton said again.

"It has been very pleasant talking to you both," Kindray said politely and would have risen. But instead he sighed, gasped and lay back. His eyes stared, his jaw sagged and his arms drooped over the sides of his chair.

"Oh. Lord—" Barton said in dismay. He rubbed his chin.

I rang the bell.

"You'd have thought," Barton remarked while we were waiting, "that he had been a member long enough to know that the clock here in the lounge is always five minutes slow."

GREEN FINGERS

PHILIP JASON WEST

OTTO HAD BEEN the head gardener at the Grange for sixty years and what he didn't know about plants would cover a postage stamp. When the old Duke died, Otto went to live with his son in London, but was plainly unhappy there. So when Robin Scott, who was the doctor in Otto's village, decided that he needed a gardener, and mentioned this to Mrs. Baker, who had been the Duke's cook and housekeeper, that lady wrote immediately to Otto and suggested that he should apply for the job. Otto jumped at the chance.

The doctor's wife had recently died—indeed within a few days of the Duke of Yadon—and the garden which she had tended with loving care was now becoming choked with weeds. The lawn was cut rarely, the roses were turning to rough briars, the apples rotting in the orchard. Dr. Scott just hadn't the will to put things right. So Otto got the job, and went to lodge with Mrs. Baker whose house was not far from the surgery.

In a few weeks the doctor's garden was back to its previous glory—indeed it was even better than before, and all Mary Scott's good work had been exploited to the full by Otto's miraculous touch. It became a rite for Otto to join the doctor and his assistant, Jane Clifford, for a cup of tea on summer afternoons, and as the three sat discussing all the excellent progress that had been made Dr. Scott began to notice Otto's hands, and saw that they were, indeed, a delicate shade of green. It was as if a lifetime of gardening had changed them, so that his fingers were now physically akin to the plants which they knew so well.

But Jane hadn't noticed this strange phenomenon, and Otto behaved quite normally. Otto's hands became an obsession with Dr. Scott, and he took to watching the gardener at work and noticing how his touch brought from a dry hedge-cutting a flourishing green bush in a matter of days, or coaxed abundance from a plum or peach which had lain sterile for many a year. Were they really green fingers? The old saw haunted the doctor's mind.

Each time Otto came and sat with them for his cup of tea the doctor could not prevent himself from staring at Otto's hands, watching Jane to see if she noticed them too. But never by hint of word or glance did it appear that Jane Clifford saw what Dr. Scott saw, and as the weeks passed, and the garden grew and developed into a paradise of every kind of flower and shrub and excellent fruit, Otto seemed to work harder and harder—putting in far more hours than he was paid for, despite the doctor's gentle protests that he could not afford to buy any more of the old gardener's time. It

was as though he was hurrying towards a goal that could not be discerned—that the garden must be perfect before some event should prevent the completion of his task.

Then one day Otto did not report for work. Dr. Scott waited for an hour then hurried down to Mrs. Baker's house.

"Good morning, Mrs. Baker—I came to see if Otto was all right. He should have been at my place at nine. He's not ill, is he?" he inquired.

She did not speak for a moment. Then—"Come in," she said. She seemed puzzled, and yet distraught. She took the doctor into her tiny parlour from which a door led off. "He's in there," she said, waiting.

He looked at her wonderingly, but she said no more, so he opened the door and entered the bedroom. Otto lay in bed, but his blue eyes were open, and the look on his face was indescribably sad.

"Hello, Otto," said the doctor cheerily. "What's up? Touch of flu?"

Otto said nothing for a minute. Then—"Good morning, sir. No—it's not that. Shut the door, will you, sir."

Dr. Scott did so, then approached the bed. Otto certainly didn't look ill at all. "Well, what's the matter? If I can help you, Otto, you know I'll be only too glad——"

"I don't think you can help," said Otto. "Look!"

He drew his hand out of the covers and as the doctor stared at them his mouth dropped open in astonishment and disgust. Little green shoots were sprouting from the wrinkled fingertips. Ottor covered his hands again. Dr. Scott took a deep breath. "You still think you can help me, sir?" said Otto.

"It's incredible—incredible, Otto. It's—it's——"

"Horrible, doctor?" sighed Otto.

"No—no—not horrible. Just—unusual, Otto. We must get you to a hospital—a specialist—medicine is really wonderful these days, Otto—I'm sure your—trouble can be cured. Don't worry. I know a colleague who will be only too pleased to help you. If—er—special treatment is required there'll be no need for you to worry about the cost. I owe you that at least after all you have done for the garden. . . ."

Otto sighed. "I knew it would happen," he said. "It's been coming on gradually for years, you know. I've been trying to get your place finished before it made things impossible. Well, there's no harm in trying, sir. Perhaps your friend—is he one of them Harley Street fellows?—can slow it down. But he'll never stop it. I've been a gardener too long for that. You see, sir, plants is really part of me now. Do you understand, sir?" His eyes seemed to bore into Dr. Scott's brain.

"I'll make a phone call—try to fix an appointment for you. Then I'll drive you up to London. Jane can arrange for someone to relieve me for a few hours. You'd better stay in bed until we're ready to go. Don't worry. Everything will be all right." He moved to the door, turning again to look into the bright old eyes.

Otto grinned—just as he had done

when he came in for his first cup of tea on the loggia behind the surgery. "Thank you, Dr. Scott," he said. "But it'll win in the end—you'll see."

"Nonsense. I'll be back soon."

Mrs. Baker was still standing in the parlour as he went to the street door. "I'm going to take Otto up to London to see a specialist friend of mine—a skin specialist, you know. In the meantime he'd better stay in bed," the doctor said. He opened the door.

"Will it—go, Dr. Scott?"

"I'm sure it will, Mrs. Baker. I don't suppose it's anything really—certainly nothing to worry about. He'll soon be back at my place setting the shallots. Good-bye for now."

Two days later the doctor was waiting outside Bernard Vaughan's consulting room in Wimpole Street. Bernard and he had been good friends since university days. When the dermatologist came out Dr. Scott jumped to his feet. "Most unusual case, Robin," said Vaughan. "In all my time as a skin man I've never seen or heard of anything like it. I think we'd better keep this to ourselves. I believe the disease could be passed on—I'm not sure. Do you see the possibilities, Robin? It's too horrible to contemplate——"

"Good God!"

"He's still resting," said Vaughan. "At his age the journey has been pretty tiring——"

"But he still works all day in my garden!"

"There'll be no more gardening for Otto," Vaughan said. "I'll arrange for him to enter a nursing home—very private—at my expense, if you like. . . . His condition is the most amazing thing I've ever seen—and that's saying something! I want to study this as fully as I can. And if it's definitely contagious—well, see what I mean? Best thing for him too. Are you agreeable?"

"Whatever you say. It's staggering. I'll leave him in your very good care. Can I see—before I go—?"

"All right." He opened the door. "The change has become very rapid. Prepare yourself for a shock."

When the doctor went in he saw that Otto had replaced the gloves which he had worn continually since leaving Mrs. Baker's. Vaughan explained his suggestion about the nursing home, and Otto nodded with a wry smile on his face.

"I'm going back now," said Scott, "but I'll visit you as often as I can." He could hardly take his eyes from the heavy gloves the old gardener was wearing.

Otto noticed the doctor's stare. "Want a last look at old 'green fingers'?" he said.

"Well—if you——"

Otto laughed. "There are worse ways of dying," he said as he carefully removed the gloves.

Dr. Scott drew back in horror. He wanted to be violently sick. Otto slowly replaced the gloves. "Good-bye, sir," he said. "Thank you for all you have done for me."

Robin Scott mumbled his gratitude to Bernard Vaughan as the latter guided the trembling doctor to the door and helped him into his car.

In the weeks that followed Dr. Scott was so busy that the case of the incredible gardener was all but driven from his mind. But one evening he picked up the evening paper to see there a report of Otto's death. The writer had, it was plain, failed to break the veil of secrecy that Vaughan had drawn across the case. Even so, the doctor read that Otto had died "of a remarkable skin condition never before known in the history of medicine"—and a lot more in the same vein. He immediately telephoned his old colleague and was relieved to find him disengaged. "Tell me about Otto," he said. "I've just seen it in the paper. I hope they didn't find out too much."

"No, Robin—but I had to tell them something. There was a very astute and persistent reporter snooping around. How he got wind of it I can't imagine. But it's all over now."

"Poor Otto," said Dr. Scott. "I feel rather bad about not coming to see him. But how did it end?"

"He was quite happy," said the dermatologist. "Only you will believe it—and that's because you saw him when the thing was in its early stages. He literally turned into a vegetable—unbelievable, isn't it?"

"But how—how?"

"Well, as you know, it started with his hands. Then his feet. His limbs simply dried up into branches growing from his trunk—sprouting with small fleshy green shoots that towards the end threw out little violet buds. If it hadn't been so fascinating it would have been indescribably revolting and horrible. Finally his heart stopped beating. In view of the unusual nature of the case I was authorized to do a post-mortem myself. His inside was full of living pulp—like a mushroom, I suppose. I—I—can't say any more—the whole thing was impossible—yet it happened. Medical history, anthropology and botany are all outdated by this single case. And of course, nobody would believe it even if they were told. Can you arrange for him to be buried locally, Robin?"

"Yes—I'll see to it," Dr. Scott said.

Otto was buried in a deep grave in the village churchyard near the doctor's surgery—not far from the garden of perfection which Robin Scott now regarded as a living monument to Otto's work. Months later the vicar came to the doctor and complained that a tree which grew from Otto's grave was stretching its lush branches across the vicarage fence towards his house, robbing his poor flowers of their share of the sun.

"Do you think we could cut it down? It's a very ugly tree."

The doctor agreed—what did it matter? Nobody, except Jane Clifford and Mrs. Baker, remembered Otto in the village now. So one day they came to cut down the tree that grew from Otto's grave. And when the men had finished, and the old trunk and the long gnarled branches had been taken away and burnt, they looked down at the stump in the ground, and saw that it was oozing not the green of sap, but scarlet. It was oozing blood still on the following day—and the week after that. Maybe it always will.

THE SHADOW BEFORE

MORGAN EVANS

Illustrated by Juliette Palmer

AST WEEK I went back to Fernley. I walked along the lane to the crossroads, and Wolden House was bright and gay. There were children playing on the lawn and a woman with a sunny face leaning from a bedroom window watching them amuse themselves and laughing.

On my way back to the village I met Wally Drake. It was a moment before we recognized each other.

"So you had to take a look at the old place," he said when we had spoken together for a while. "It's all right now. It has been, ever since that night."

"Remember?" he asked.

I remember it as if it had only happened yesterday. We had been living in Fernley for three months, and the papers were full of the murder at Gorton, a smallish town some ten miles away.

Father was a detective sergeant. He said, "The dead man seems to have been an unpleasant type with any number of enemies. And he knew it. Left his estate in apple-pie order and a list of suspects. Just in case anything happened to him.

"Coming events," he added grimly, "casting a shadow before."

He was talking to Mother, and I happened to be listening outside the door. He never talked shop in my presence.

"I suppose," Mother replied resignedly, "this means you'll be working all hours of the day and night?"

"It won't take long," he told her. "We know who did it, Chap called Grant; Peter Grant. All we have to do is pick him up. He can't have got far."

I'd read about the murder but there'd been no mention in the papers of the police knowing who the murderer was. So I knew something that nobody else did. Just as I was, I ran out into the lane and raced down to the corner where I knew the gang would be.

This was in the days when there was a lot of talk about the Mafia. The children used to form themselves into gangs and instead of playing the usual games they had their private pastime of secret passwords and recognition signs. If you weren't a member of the gang then you were out in the cold and life in a small village was a very lonely thing.

There was only the one gang in Fernley and the members, farmers' sons for the greater part, used to meet during the long summer holiday at the corner by the little stone bridge. Hidden from the lane by a thick hedge they would sit on the bank and throw stones in the stream

while they went about the intrigue and mystery of their clannish community. My previous attempts to join them had met with stern rebuttals. They made it clear that because I was a newcomer from the city, speaking and dressing differently, I was very much an outsider.

They were all there that morning when I pushed through the gap in the hedge to set foot on the forbidden territory; Wally Drake, leader by virtue of his age, fourteen years to my eleven, tall and broad and very dark; Ben Waller, yellow-haired and lanky; little Dibby Toft with a bandage round his neck covering a crop of boils. And half a dozen others, all boys of the village.

Dibby saw me first and was very indignant.

"'Ere!—Davey Hunter. Out!" He jumped to his feet and took my arm in no gentle grip. Wally said sternly. "You bin livin' 'ere long enough to know better than come down 'ere."

"It's about the murder," I said breathlessly, struggling. "I know something that nobody else does. I know who did it."

"Sez you!" Ben sneered, spitting into the water.

"Out you go!" Dibby ordered and was for pushing me back up the bank, but Wally said, "'Old it, Dibby; let the kid be. Maybe 'is old man bein' a copper 'e does know." He winked knowingly. "I 'eard 'em talkin' about it last night. Old Gregson was offerin' to take bets, sayin' as 'ow 'e knew for sure who did it." He eyed me fiercely making me tremble. "Who did do it, kid?"

I nursed the arm that Dibby had bruised. "Only if you let me join the gang."

"Well, now," said he, "so you wants to join the gang. It ain't all that easy. You got to pass the test first. I tell you what I'll do. I'll tell you what the test is an' you can 'ave a shot at it, if you tells me who did the killin'."

"His name is Peter Grant," I said. "They're looking for him now."

"Never 'eard of 'im."

"He's the one all right." Father never made a mistake.

Wally rubbed his chin. "Where's 'e come from?"

"I don't know," I said. "What's the test?"

"You got to go to Wolden 'ouse an' spend an hour there. Alone, after dark, between 'alf-past ten an' 'alf-past eleven."

"I'm not afraid of the dark," I boasted. I usually went to bed a little before ten. It would be easy to slip downstairs again, and then it was only ten minutes' walk to Wolden House. There was nothing difficult about the test.

"It's 'aunted," Ben said with relish. "You ask anyone."

Dibby was eager to enlarge upon the matter. "An old tramp 'ung 'imself from the banisters. 'E comes back every night, just on 'alf-past eleven. My old man's seen 'im; 'orrible 'e said it was." He shuddered realistically for my benefit.

Wolden House was a desolate place of tall gables and twisted chimney-stacks. It stood by the crossroads in a half circle of lowering

trees. The grounds were a wilderness of overgrown bushes and briar. Most of the windows were broken and holes gaped in the slate roof. It was hard to believe that people had lived there at one time.

"I'll do it," I said in a small voice.

"Tonight," Wally said briskly. "An' if you've got the guts to go through with it then you're in the gang. Me an' Ben will come with you to make sure you does it right."

"I wouldn't go in there agen," said Dibby, fingering his bandage. "Not for anythin' I wouldn't."

Ben sneered. " 'E'll change 'is mind when 'e gets there."

They were all watching me.

"I'll do it," I said stoutly.

Wally issued his orders. "We'll meet you 'ere at ten. If you don't turn up we'll know you're yeller." Then he turned his back on me, and Dibby thrust me back up the bank and through the gap.

I heard Ben say, " 'Ee won't come, Wally; 'e's just a kid."

I leaned on the wall at the far side of the bridge and looked down at the water and tried to pretend I wasn't quaking inside. I was old enough to realize the problem confronting me. It had been bad enough before when I had been just a kid from the town with nobody to talk to. But now I had been given a chance and if I funked it I would be labelled a coward. Instead of being ignored I would be laughed at and taunted.

And after a while a thought came to me, bringing a gleam of hope. I wondered if the others had all had to pass the test in turn or if, along with the ghost, it had been invented for my benefit with the idea of keeping me from joining the gang. I walked slowly down the lane. Constable Nettley, wheeling his bicycle, came out of one of the side-lanes. He nodded to me, passed some remark about the length of the school holidays, and went on his way. I remembered Father once saying that Mr. Nettley had been born in the village and lived all his life there. I called after him. He took the trouble of coming back to me.

"And what do you want to know about Wolden House, Davey?"

"Is it really haunted, please, Mr. Nettley?"

"You want to keep away from there," he told me. "It's dangerous, falling apart. Loose floorboards and broken slates and guttering."

"But is it really haunted?"

"You don't want to take any notice of stories like that," he told me in the way adults have when they don't want to answer a question. "Now you cut along home."

It was as if he had confirmed the story outright. Wally and the others hadn't invented the ghost for my benefit. It actually existed. Every night on half-past eleven, perhaps just as the clock was striking, the ghost of a tramp would appear, and —Dibby's description had been very graphic. For all it was a warm, sunny morning I shivered with apprehension as if it were the depths of winter.

At dinner time Father said, "Oh, Davey; Mr. Nettley tells me that he had a chat with you about the old

house at the crossroads. Why the sudden interest?"

I had never lied to Father. I told him that some of the village boys had spoken to me about a ghost but I didn't say anything about the test.

"I see——" He looked across the table at Mother. Then, "Davey, what do you know about ghosts?"

"They're dead people come back."

"That's what they say. Well, son; I'll tell you something. Because I'm a policeman, when we first came to live here I made it my business to learn as much about the place as I could. So far as I know, nobody has ever died in Wolden House; least of all a tramp. So you see there's no earthly reason why the house should be haunted."

"No, Father," I said. The matter, so far as Father was concerned, was closed. I didn't intend to listen at the door afterwards. I was taking my school blazer from the hallstand and the door happened to be open.

"—sooner or later he'd hear the story," Father was saying. "I didn't want to scare the boy any more than was necessary. Nettley tells me he has already warned him off." I couldn't catch Mother's reply.

"There has to be something," Father said. "Too many people say they've seen it and they all tell the same tale. A tramp hanging from the banister rail. I mean, one has to keep an open mind about such things."

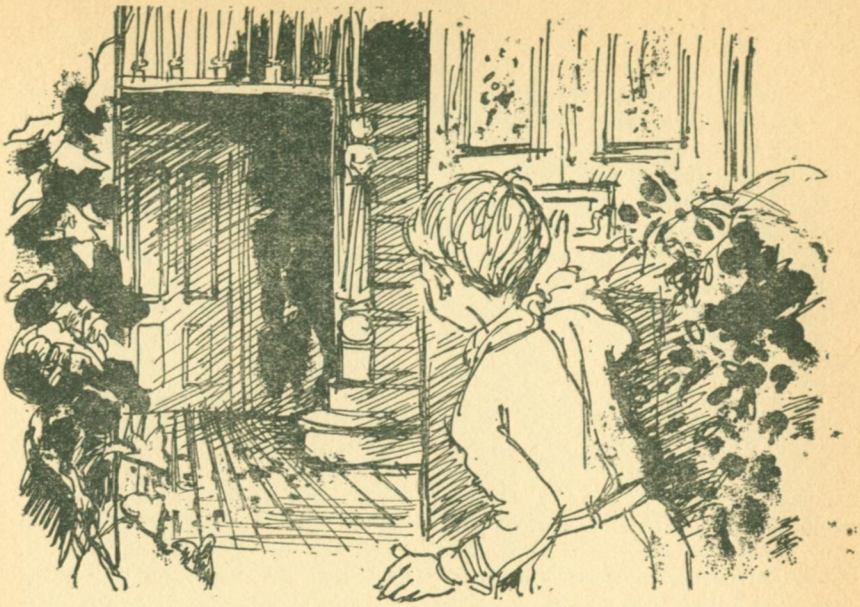
I didn't wait to hear any more. I went into the garden and played a game of throwing a ball against the garage wall, counting the times I caught it so that I wouldn't have time to think about a lonely, derelict house and a tramp that hung himself each night at the same time.

Later that afternoon when I was out shopping with Mother, Dibby and Ben came slouching past. They said "Good afternoon" politely enough to Mother, even touching their caps. But at me they smirked and nodded knowingly. Mother was surprised and, I think, pleased. She said it was nice that the village boys were making friends with me at last.

That night I went up to my bedroom at half-past nine. I leaned on the window ledge and thought. It was dusk and the orange-yellow globe of the moon was low over the trees.

I would have to go through with the test. That was for sure. Wally and Ben were coming with me to make sure I went in the house and stayed there for the prescribed length of time. But there was certain to be a way out at the back. I would go straight through the house and then hide in the trees at the back until the chiming of the church clock told me the hour was up. Coming back again would be the worst part. That was a hurdle to be crossed when I came to it.

I tip-toed downstairs. Mother and Father were watching television in the lounge. Taking my blazer from the hallstand I went out into the lane. Wally and Ben were waiting by the gap in the hedge. Their surprise at my appearance gave me some courage. We walked along the lane to the crossroads. It was dark now and the moon sent our shadows leap-



ing ahead. The breeze soughed through the branches of the trees. We walked close together and found nothing to say to each other.

We stopped when we came to the drunken and rusted wrought-iron gate. Wally said, " 'Ere we are, young 'un." He held his watch to the moon. "Dead on 'alf-past ten."

"Sooner you than me," Ben said, and Wally turned on him and told him to belt up. Then he patted my shoulder in a comforting rather than a patronizing way. "You sure you want to go through with it?"

I went up the overgrown drive. Wally called after me, "The door's open. . . ."

Without giving myself time to think I set my hands against the warped and blistered wood. The door gave with a gentle creaking. Plaster cascaded from the top of the porch.

I was in a hall that stretched the width of the building. Moonlight came through tall windows. Fragments of glass and mortar crunched under my feet. The paper had peeled from the walls to hang in dismal shreds. In front was a staircase leading up to a gallery. And there were the banisters, broken in parts, looped with grey festoons of cobweb.

There was a doorway beneath the gallery and I went towards it, my heart thudding, more with a sense of urgency than of fear. The door opened on a long passage. I was part way along it when I heard a sound.

Somewhere in the house somebody had coughed.

And now the fear was there; overwhelming, paralysing fear that fixed my feet to the one spot so that I was unable to do anything but stare at the door at the far end of the passage. For it was from behind there that the sound had come.

As the door opened it grated on rubble.

There was some light in the passage for moonlight filtered through the skeletons of two small windows. At first there was only a shapeless shadow moving towards me; then he was in the light from one of the windows—a small man with a thin, unshaven face, wearing a shabby raincoat that hung loosely from narrow shoulders revealing the red scarf about his neck, the shapeless tweed jacket and the brown corduroy waistcoat.

And then my fear suddenly melted. For he was taking a huge bite from the chunk of bread he carried in one hand; behind him light danced and flames crackled with an oddly comforting sound. And there was a rich smell of cooking food.

When he saw me he stopped, the bread poised for another bite. He spoke through a mouthful of food, "What the—?" and came a few steps nearer, peering, his head with its shock of black hair held sideways.

"And what are you doing here?" he wanted to know after his scouting.

"Nothing," I told him.

He scratched the side of his head in obvious indecision and I enlarged, "I live here; in the village."

He took an absent-minded bite of bread. Then he remembered why he had opened the door.

"Fire in the kitchen," he invited. "Tea brewing and beans all nice and hot. Company always acceptable. You go in there and then we'll have a chat. I was just on my way for some more wood."

An ingenious contrivance of wire spanned the fire. Water seethed in one can and beans steamed in another. On the floor was a collection made up of a metal plate, a bent spoon, an enamel mug and a filthy haversack. The fire-glow lent an air of homeliness to the otherwise drab surroundings.

He came back with an armful of broken wood. When he had replenished the dying flames he lowered himself to the dusty floor and busied himself spooning beans to the plate. He glanced up, smiling, "Hungry, kiddo?"

I told him that I was. He handed me the plate and spoon. He used a sliver of wood to eat from the tin. When the water boiled he had a paper screw of tea and sugar all ready, and a pencil to stir with. We took it in turns to drink from the mug.

The church clock struck while I was drinking. "Eleven," I said after counting the strokes.

"That late?" said my companion. "Hadn't you better tell me what you're doing here? Won't your folks be worried?"

Because I knew that I still had half an hour more to kill, and because I felt that as soon as he had heard my

story he would send me off home, maybe even coming with me as far as the gate, which would spoil everything, I made it last as long as possible, telling him the whole story, right from the beginning when I had stood outside the lounge and heard Father telling Mother all about the murder.

He heard me out without interruption, listening with gratifying intentness. When it was finished he leaned forward to poke the dying embers with the piece of wood saved specially for that purpose.

"That's quite a story," he said, his face red in the glow. "A ghost—" He turned with a grimace. "And I was all set for a kip for the night. I reckon you've changed my mind." He tossed the poker into the fire and sat back on his heels.

"It's not a good thing to do, listen at doors," he told me reproachfully.

"I didn't really mean to," I explained hastily.

"No——" He stared into the glowing heart of the wood ash. He seemed to have forgotten my presence. In the silence I could hear the wind drifting through the empty windows. I wondered what the time was now; how long before the half hour and the end of my vigil.

He roused himself at last, coming to his feet and looking down at me. "You'd better be on your way—— I never asked your name?"

"Davey."

'Well, Davey; off you go. And don't ever do anything like this again."

He came with me as far as the front door and there, thankfully, left me to go on alone.

The half hour struck when I was a little way down the drive and I hung on for a few minutes, crouching behind a bush so that when I did join Wally and Ben they would have no reason to accuse me of having left before my time was up. I spent the time thinking. I couldn't tell them about my new friend and the meal we had enjoyed together because that would spoil everything. I could either make some story up about having seen the ghost, or else I could just say that nothing had happened. I would have to think some more about it before deciding. I went to the gate. They came from the bushes at the other side of the lane where they had been waiting. They were eager for my news.

"Did 'e come?" Ben breathed with awe. "Did you see it?"

"I'd rather not talk about it," I said smugly, enjoying his curiosity.

Wally put his arm about my shoulders.

"You got guts," he said; "I'll say that much. You got guts all right. You c'n tell me what 'appened."

"Maybe tomorrow," I said. We walked back to the village.

"See you tomorrow," Wally said at parting. "You knows the place."

When I reached home all the doors were locked. I tried climbing the drainpipe under my window. Rubbing a scraped knee I had to knock at the front door.

Father's surprise turned to anger. He stood over me while I blurted out

the whole story. I told him everything.

And then he seemed to forget his anger.

"This—this friend of yours," he asked sharply. "What did he look like? How was he dressed? What colour was his hair, his eyes?"

I think that even before he left me to ring the police station and then race upstairs to dress himself that I knew who my new friend really was.

It was all over the village the next day. The police had found the murderer. But he was dead. He had scrawled a few pencilled lines on a scrap of paper and then tied his scarf to the banisters and hung himself. Just as it was striking half-past eleven, they said.

And in the note he left, Peter Grant said that he was taking the easy way out because he had discovered that the police were after him and that it would only be a matter of time before they found him.

For six months I enjoyed the friendship and confidence of the boys of the village. In their eyes I was something of a hero. But for all that I was glad when Father was promoted and we moved from Fernley back to the city.

One thing has stuck in my mind Something that Father said when he was talking about the murder, right at the start.

"Coming events," he told Mother while I listened outside the door, "casting a shadow before."

That's the way it must have been with Wolden House. For like Wally told me when we met last week: "It's all right now. It has been, ever since that night. Nobody ever saw the ghost again after that night."

72, PROSPECT STREET

GUY STAFFORD

BEN CROMPTON TURNED the corner into Prospect Street, as he did every morning at around 7.30. It was just getting light, and the wind, blowing strongly from the north, caused little whirlpools of leaves and waste paper to dance crazily along the pavements.

It was quite chilly, and as he pulled his coat collar closer about his neck, Ben thought of warmer days in Bermuda. That was during the war. Funny, but thinking back, it wasn't such a bad time, or was it? At least one did get a bit of variety in life; none of this being cooped up in a factory all day, then when you got home at night, a wash, a meal and it was time for bed. There just didn't seem any point in it, a mere existence that's all.

Never mind, there was always the chance of getting a win on the football pools; he smiled at the thought. Every week, with thousands of others, he would gamble a few shillings on his coupon and dream of a big win; that was until he checked the results, then it was the depths of despair until the next week. It was sort of "living in a pools paradise" as it were. Ben laughed to himself at that, not bad, a "pools paradise", must remember that one.

Another chilly blast of wind brought him back to reality, there would be no big wins for Ben Crompton, of that he was sure. He would be walking down this street this time next year, and the one after that probably.

The mean little houses, in terraces on either side of the street, were for the most part empty, in fact condemned. The exception appeared to be the last house on the right, No. 72, which, although empty, had fixed in a downstairs window, a notice stating that the house was for sale.

As he tried to imagine what type of person would want to buy a house like that, Ben ran a speculative eye over the building. It was then that he noticed that the front door was not properly closed.

What prompted him to push open the front garden gate and go on through the door he never knew, but soon he found himself in a dingy passage with a door leading off. Might as well have a look around now I'm in, he thought, and went into the front room.

There was very little to see, filth on the floor, paper peeling off the walls and a cracked ceiling. He went on into the back room and found it much the same, except that it looked out to a small walled garden overgrown with weeds, that is, except for a small patch of freshly dug earth.

Somewhat intrigued by this, Ben passed through the back door, which he noted was also unlocked, and walked out into the garden. Picking up an old piece of pipe that he found

leaning against the wall he started to probe the soft earth until he struck something solid. With mounting excitement Ben looked around and found a piece of board with which he started to dig.

He soon unearthed a rectangular package wrapped in canvas and tied up with string. Quickly, he fished out his pocket knife, cut the string and ripped off the canvas to reveal a cheap fibre attaché-case. With trembling fingers he fumbled with the catch. It was not locked and the hasp flew up with a sharp click. Strangely afraid, Ben slowly lifted the lid and looked inside.

"Strewth!" he gasped as he looked down on a case full of bank notes, all in neat rows, and still in bundles just as they were at the bank.

The bank! The truth struck Ben at once, that was it, there was a bank robbery in Millhead last week. This then must be the loot! Weak at the knees, Ben sat on an old upturned bucket to consider the situation. The correct thing would be to take the money to the police—and yet—Ben thought on.

Nobody knows that I've got the money he reasoned, and there is nothing to connect me with the robbery. Here in this case is my passport to a life I've always wanted. Across the sea to far away places, not as an ordinary seaman this time, but as a first-class passenger. He could see it all, yes he would keep the money, after all finding's keeping, he consoled himself.

Before leaving he threw the canvas and string into the hole and pushed back the earth so that it looked exactly as before. Then carrying the case he went quickly out of the house.

Ben decided to carry on at work as usual as it would be unwise to make any sudden changes; it might cause talk, and that would be dangerous. Perhaps after a week or so he would quietly leave his job and the district; he would find a suitable excuse. Yes, it was all very simple.

With the case locked in the drawer of his bench, Ben started work in a bit of a daze. It was difficult to concentrate under the circumstances. His state of mind did not go unnoticed.

"What's up, Ben?" asked Jim Ferris. "You don't seem to be with us today."

"Oh, one or two things on my mind, Jim," answered Ben. "I'm all right."

"I saw you lock that case in your drawer," Jim went on. "What's in it, the family fortune?"

Somewhat shaken at this remark, Ben hoped he sounded convincing enough when he replied, "Wish it was, Jim. No, its just a couple of things the wife asked me to drop round to a friend. Don't want to lose them, see?"

The wife! Ben hadn't thought of her, that was awkward, how was he going to explain his sudden wealth to her? Mary had been very good through all their troubles, a simple woman, but much too honest to have anything to do with this business. He would have to think up something during the day.

However, as the day wore on Ben

became even less happy about the situation. The more he thought, the more problems seemed to arise. In the end he decided that perhaps he couldn't keep the money after all, he would hand it over to the police. Yes, that was it, there might even be a reward, he could do with the money, yes honesty is the best policy!

Just as he was congratulating himself on solving the problem. Ben thought of a snag. How was he going to explain his presence in the house? True, he had never been in any trouble with the police, it was just that he never felt at ease with them. He felt quite sure that they would treat him with the utmost suspicion. Although he didn't know a great deal about the law, even *he* had heard of being an accessory or something. Why, he might even end up in jail at that rate! He shuddered at the thought. No, his mind was made up, he wanted no part of it, the money was going back where it came from, and the sooner the better.

The day dragged wearily on, until, at long last it was "knock off time". No overtime for Ben tonight, he had other things to do! Grasping the case firmly he made his way out of the factory and in the direction of Prospect Street. He was very conscious of the contents of the case, so much so that on seeing a policeman on a corner, he went right out of his way to avoid him. Then to his horror, there, standing on the corner of Prospest Street itself, was another policeman!

Ben almost turned and ran in panic, then, pulling himself together, he forced himself to walk on until he drew level.

"Good evening," Ben croaked as he passed the officer.

The man turned slightly and looked down at Ben. "'Evening," he answered gruffly.

As he walked on down the road Ben could feel the officer's eyes boring into his back, or so it seemed. At the first road junction he stopped and while pretending to look into a shop window, took a careful look back—the policeman had gone.

Ben hurried back to No. 72, through the garden gate and up to the front door. He pushed, but it didn't open; it's stuck he thought, and pushed harder, but still no movement. Panic welled up inside him as he realized that the door was locked. Desperately he tried the window, but there was no access that way. For a moment he stood there trying to think, then he had the answer. He must go round to the back and over the wall.

He almost ran out of the front garden and made his way to the back of the house. It was dusk now, and no one was about. He threw the case over the wall and quickly scrambled after it. Feverishly he dug the hole, wrapped up the case in the canvas and string, and quickly reburied it. In a matter of minutes he was scrambling back over the wall.

Ben was almost home before the fit of trembling left him. Never again he vowed, in future he would leave crime to those who had the stomach for it, the straight and narrow from now on for Ben Crompton!

May looked into the little hall as he entered the house.

"Hello, dear," she said in a surprised voice. "I thought you were working on for a while this evening. I'm afraid your meal isn't ready."

"That's all right, love," he replied. "Felt a bit tired so I thought I'd come home early for a change."

May and Ben spent a quiet evening watching television, although Ben did feel a twinge of conscience when a news item referred to the recent spate of robberies, particularly from banks.

The following day Ben had recovered some of his self-assurance, even to the extent of toying with the idea of going after the money again. It did seem to him to be a crying shame to leave it buried, particularly when he could make such good use of it. However he managed to resist the temptation when he passed No. 72.

On the third day he was himself again, and having walked a little faster than usual on his way to work, there was enough time for him to have a glance at the local newspaper.

It was from one of the inner pages that Ben received his big shock, it was a headline which read as follows

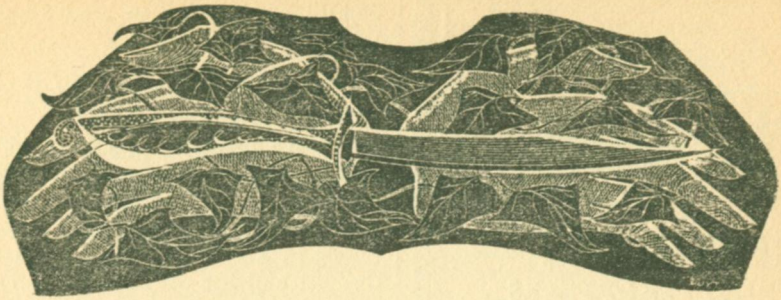
BANK ROBBERY MONEY RECOVERED

With a thumping heart Ben read on.

It was learned from the local police H.Q., early this morning that the £10,000 stolen from the Millhead Bank has been recovered from the garden of an empty house in Prospect Street. Police, led by Inspector Bowen, acted on information received from a Mr. Denton, an old age pensioner, who lives in a house overlooking the garden of No. 72, where the money was found.

Mr. Denton told our reporter that he saw a man climb the wall and bury a package in the garden. He said that he had given a description of this man to the police.

Officials from the Millhead Bank stated today that Mr. Denton will receive a substantial reward for his part in the recovery of the money. A police spokesman said that from the description given of the wanted man, they were confident that there would be an early arrest.



CROOKS IN BOOKS

A review of some recent crime, mystery and detective books

STEVE AUSTEN

"A DRAGON FOR CHRISTMAS", by Gavin Black (*Collins*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

It's my impression that thrillers now, by and large, are better written than whodunits. Time was when only such notables as Graham Greene and Eric Ambler lifted the thriller out of its rut of over-coloured and strident, yet banal, clichés; not that some of the melodramas were not enjoyable to read but the style was usually bad, what you might call literate penny-dreadful. Today the standard is much higher, while the detective writers' prose has, in many cases, deteriorated: at times, it takes a fair degree of concentration to ignore all those badly hung petticoats which were not intended to show. Despite the title which, to be fair, is apt in its context, Gavin Black's latest Far Eastern thriller is an example of good, readable competence. Occasionally over-written, perhaps, and with a plot that appears at times to be diving into the thick, rich soup of Fu Manchu melodrama, although it never in fact does more than skim the surface, this is a skilful, fast-moving story of an anti-Communist British (but youngish Old China Hand) businessman flogging engines to the Chinese Peoples' Republic and pursuing his own personal and semi-ideological mission at the same time.

A very credible picture of the New China emerges and the majority of the characters and the scenes are both interesting and revealing. The action is fast, exciting and well-contrived and the element of fear is made thoroughly realistic and understandable.

Mr. Black's narrating hero is something of an over-performer but even though you might get exhausted

by living with him, you are likely to find him enlivening to read about. Recommended.

"CHOICE OF VIOLENCE", by Hugh Pentecost (*Boardman*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

This is a highly exciting and wholly persuasive story about a backwoodsman lawyer and his small nephew who become involved in the brutal killing of a rich, hunch-back philanthropist and her zany husband. The pace is rapid but not breathless; the plot takes just enough twists and turns; the writing is unobtrusively good; and the final scene—an attempt to bargain and negotiate with personified evil—has just enough quality to lift the book out of the rut. For those who have not yet met Mr. Pentecost, here is another reason for doing so. Thoroughly recommended.

"THE DEADLY NOOSE", by Rae Foley (*Hammond, Hammond*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

In which, as the chapter-headings used to say, the wealthy young dilettante investigator, Mr. Hiram Potter, is persuaded out of his elegant New York bachelordom and unmasks a devilish blackmailer. A few murders happen and some nice folks are put to a lot of trouble but, rest assured, Mr. Potter saves the day. In fact, this is a complex and sophisticated plot with some good characterization along the way. I liked the book and enjoyed its moments of tension and excitement, but I am by no means sure about Mr. Potter. I find him difficult to believe in, and when I do, I don't think I like him much: he's

too colourless. However, as a book, *The Deadly Noose* rates a comfortable beta plus.

"THE GOGGLE-BOX AFFAIR", by Val Gielgud (*Crime Club*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

This is a nice, comfortable *English* mystery—if you know what I mean—to take with your muffins and Broken Orange Pekoe and enjoy in front of a proper, dancing coal-fire (as long as you don't live in a smokeless zone, that is). It's up-to-date, complete with Commercial TV network and references to homosexuality, but it's trad and cosy—and none the worse for that, either. The background of Gargantua Television (progressive, serious in its approach to "the Medium" but profit-making) is good, informative and interesting; in fact, just what you would expect from Mr. Gielgud, an old and distinguished B.B.C. hand. Scotland Yard, Gargantua head office, the controlled bedlam of TV studios, the *haute monde*, Soviet Zone Berlin, Wartime Military Intelligence, Inspector Pellew and the (Dowager) Lady Hannington, all contribute to an agreeably complex plot which is entertainingly put together. An enjoyable book for the family, aunts and all, except, no doubt, for the confirmed tough-Private-Eye addict.

"SANCTUARY ISLE", by Bill Knox (*John Lang*, 12s. 6d.).

The island is a bird sanctuary off the coast of Argyllshire, a lonely spot separated from the mainland by a treacherous stretch of sea and inhabited by a solitary, and ex-seafar-

ing, warden. He is found dead, poisoned, and two Glasgow Police officers, Thane and Moss, are sent north to investigate. This is an outside book; the sea, the island and a very nasty group of rocks, the Fangs, playing more than a scenic role in the plot. If at times there are elements of a boys' adventure tale about *Sanctuary Isle*, none-the-less there is an accuracy and realism in the background descriptions which lend solidity to the book. By and large, the characters are well-drawn, although not particularly original in conception or revealing in development. Competent, but without any spark of brilliance, it will be enjoyed by those who like the documentary approach and the low-toned colours of authenticity. Beta.

"Fatal Error", by John Boland (*Boardman*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

A disappointing offer from Mr. Boland (*The League of Gentlemen*, *The Golden Fleece*, etc.) although it has some redeeming features. But basically this is a straight, rather dull, affair of murder for insurance gain, brightened up by a tyro female insurance investigator who provides some excitement by stumbling on the murderer. As the school reports continue to say, Mr. Boland can do better; much better.

"R.I.S.C.", by Robert Caine Frazer (*Collins*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

An Anglo-American thriller with a hero, Mark Kilby, who works for the highly improbable Regal Investment Security Corporation and operates

without and beyond the law. Kilby outflanks James Bond and is, to me, equally unsympathetic. R.I.S.C. is a risk-capital venture financed by a consortium of millionaires and Kilby is there to see that the risks pay off. On the whole, he and they are on the side of good, right, etc., but the means are not altogether praiseworthy—nor are they for the squeamish. Having said all this, "R.I.S.C." is at times compulsively readable; the plot is clever, the characters variable but often interesting and sometimes good, the pace is fast and the violence is no worse, and no more gratuitous, than in many another book. Mark Kilby even has moments of sentiment. If you like action, violence and shock-treated plots, slickly if implausibly put together, then try Mr. Kilby whose ego is no more inflated than a barrage balloon.

"THE PEASENHALL MYSTERY", by John Rowland (*John Long*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

Like the Wallace Case, the Peasenhall Mystery was a tantalizing, unsolved crime and, as in the Wallace Case, there was only one obvious murderer. The setting, however, was rural, not urban: indeed, the whole story of Rose Harsent and her lover might have come out of a novel by Thomas Hardy or Eden Philpotts. Rose was a young servant girl in the little village of Peasenhall in Suffolk; she was honest, hard-working and sang in the choir of the Primitive Methodist Chapel. On a June morning in 1902 she was found in the kitchen of her employer's house with her throat cut and her hair and cloth-

ing burned. She was found to be pregnant. Suspicion immediately fell upon William Gardiner who had long been rumoured to be her lover. He was a married man with six children, a foreman carpenter and ardent chapel-goer. He was tried twice; at each trial the jury disagreed and he was finally set free.

Both Austin Freeman and Miss Elizabeth Villiers in her *Riddles of Crime* have examined the Peasenhall Mystery and come to the conclusion that Rose died by accident—she fell down the narrow cottage stairs when she was carrying a lamp, a lighted candle, a bottle of camphorated oil and a newspaper. The candle ignited the paraffin from the lamp; the wounds in her throat came from the glass of the broken bottle. John Rowland thinks this an over-imaginative theory; he sets out to prove William Gardiner guilty and does, I think, do so. The book is slightly too long, perhaps, but fascinating.

"A Grave Undertaking", by Lionel White (*Boardman*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

This is a brightly written, well-constructed and supported crime book. It is centred around a bank robbery executed from a mortician's premises (undertaker's in English). It's one of those plots made up of different strands which eventually, cleverly, excitingly and satisfyingly, all get tangled together. I suspect that the main warp and woof is less improbable than it seems: nothing, after all, is more improbable than serious organized crime, and yet it exists, particularly in the States. The

characters are well-sketched, the plans well-organized and even the *dénouement* gets by, on skill rather than credibility. In all, an amusing, entertaining and excitingly readable job, well worth putting on your list.

"THE CRIME MASTER", by W. Murdoch Duncan (*John Long*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

The title, like the conception of the book itself, is reminiscent of another world, another generation, another fashion of style: *The Crime Master* reads like a latter-day Edgar Wallace. It is competently done and not without well-contrived sub-plots and nicely conceived characterization. However, in terms of detection, it has to be either A or B and from fairly early on most of you will pick the winner. Somehow the plot lacks sustained suspense and Mr. Duncan therefore seems to misfire, despite his skill and experience. Suspects, police, journalists, village lasses and lads, all have their engaging quirks and combine to make a comfortable and cosy bedtime read.

"MALICE DOMESTIC" and "THE TASTE OF FEARS", by Sara Woods (*Crime Club*, 12*s.* 6*d. each*).

Miss Woods is a new find who sprang fully-fledged into the crime fiction list with five novels. These are now being fairly speedily released. Her investigating protagonist, who continues from book to book, is a youngish barrister called Antony Maitland. He is accompanied, or more accurately backed, by an uncomplaining and charming but childless wife, Jenny, and an eminent

uncle, Sir Nicholas Harding, a Q.C. of presence, mind and manner, worth his salt and his silk. Frankly, I was unimpressed by the first Sara Woods release (*Bloody Instructions*): it was neither bad nor good, and while welcoming a new detective writer—I found I was not very interested in the outcome. But with the second two Maitland adventures I am much more taken. *Malice Domestic* is the unravelling of an upper middle-class family drama, which emerges as the head of the family business—they are vintners—is murdered and his great-nephew arrested. The handling of the plot, the creation of characters and the development of Maitland, Harding and Jenny, are all to be praised. The legal scenes are good, court *and* chambers, and the story is intricate and surprising enough to retain interest. If not a really polished gem, this book is certainly sufficiently urbane and competent to demand the attention of readers.

The Taste of Fears is, for my money, a more compelling book, all of which suggests that the author is improving with each completed novel. The plot here is superficially more melodramatic with wartime hangovers, Nazi regeneration and S.O.E. and M.I.5 all playing their, in varying degrees, grisly parts. There are, at least a brace of murders and Maitland has a testing and thoroughly exciting time, which the readers should relish more than he does. In sum, this is a good, readable and gripping piece of semi-legitimate detection. I now await with considerable interest the next two. I should be still more enthusiastic if Miss Woods' prose style was a little less undistinguished. Meantime, put her on your reading list.

"THE FATAL FIFTH", by Margaret Penrose (*John Long*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

A lightly told detective story set in South Africa—though it might be anywhere—with an engaging heroine who runs a firm called Service Unlimited. The firm does not undertake criminal work; it is merely accident that involves Clare in the life of a rich and decadent family, on murder bent. The guy at a November the Fifth prep school party turns out to be a dead body. The tale rattles on pleasantly enough with some extremely lively and amusing characters. A good, cosy read; unviolent, unsexy. It makes a change.

"KILL WITH KINDNESS", by Robert Bloomfield (*Boardman*, 12*s.* 6*d.*).

Norval, the small-town worm, the unsuccessful, nice, little fellow whose jobs collapse on him, whose crockery falls apart in his hands and whose trousers fall down at parties, turns—and, apparently, murder turns with him. It begins with his wife who laughed at him and deceived him, and it goes on to erase others in his way. Mr. Bloomfield writes wittily and effectively and his gallery of provincial American rogues and gulls is illuminating and rewarding.

The progress of Norval is excellently done, and if the crimes lack the gravity of suspense, this is more than compensated by the sharpness of wit and the quality of the entertainment.

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