

LONDON MYSTERY



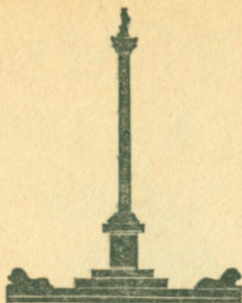
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QUARTERLY



Original - Thrilling



**THE LONDON
MYSTERY SELECTION**



THE LONDON MYSTERY SELECTION

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CROOKS IN BOOKS

A quarterly review of some of the finest mystery and detective books recently published appears on PAGE 119

THE LONDON MYSTERY SELECTION



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THE LONDON MYSTERY SELECTION

We bring you eighteen new and original stories in this issue and you will notice that all the old favourite authors are there—with one or two young newcomers.

Each year sees a slight change in our type of detection and suspense writing and on the whole the trend is towards extremely clever plotting plus far better technique and know-how of crime! In fact, I sometimes wonder how very close to “true” stories we are running when I first read a submitted manuscript.

Spring is about to burst on us and so we emerge a trifle in this issue from some of the macabre horrors that made us huddle round the fires in our December Mystery. Indeed, if you are toughly modern you will perhaps find a laugh of relief at the endings of one or two stories in this issue.

But there is also the latest murder story, the nasty experimentalists with the sciences and a number of quite unpleasant children!

We do not often get quality stories from overseas but “Uncommon in that part of the Country” is a most excellent short story on heroic lines that just had to be made space for.

For sheer imagination and invention though, Miss Dinah Castle’s “Too Strange to Tell” with its unexpected ending is perhaps the most unusual story of all.

The Editor.

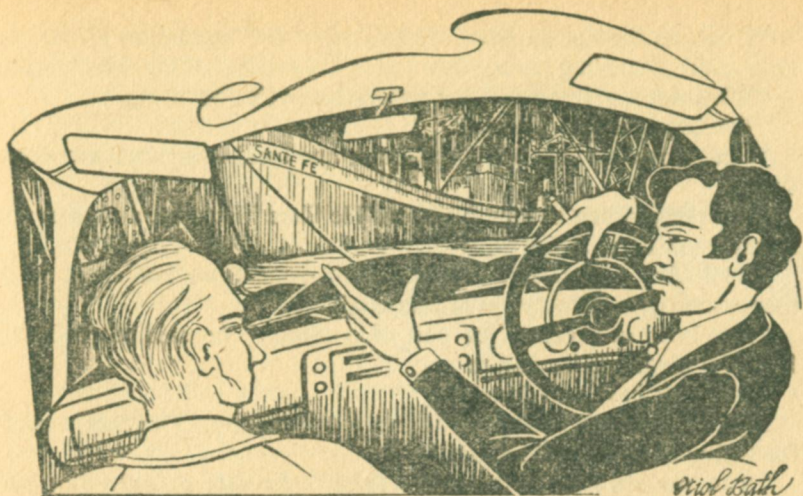
“I’ve always wanted to be a dress designer. I used to do all my own clothes before the accident. Sometimes now I look at the fashions and I know I could do just as well. If I had my hands.”

(Sheila, 18)

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THE BRITISH COUNCIL FOR REHABILITATION OF THE DISABLED



CROOKED COP

PETER BRIXHAM

LOGAN swayed slightly as he turned in under the neon-lit sign of the Honey Pot Club. The burly doorman with the broken nose stared suspiciously at him, hesitated, and then nodded. Logan lurched past him into the plush foyer, turned right, and went down the softly illuminated passage to the door at the end. The plaque on the fumed-oak door bore the single word "Manager" in Gothic capitals.

He knocked gently and, taking a deep breath, stepped inside. The girl seated at the desk hadn't heard him come in; her dark, curly head was bent over her clattering typewriter, and there was a faint frown of concentration on her lovely face.

The sick feeling in the pit of his stomach swelled as he stood gazing at her. The sooner it was over and done with the better, he thought miserably, and licked his dry lips.

"Sue!" he called, and she looked up with a start. Her dark-blue, almost violet-coloured eyes widened, and her slim hands froze over the keyboard.

"Ben," she said huskily. "Where were you last night? I waited——"

"I was on the mat in front of the Assistant Commissioner," he cut in brutally, bunching his big fists inside the pockets of his old raincoat.

"Whatever for?" she said, her pencil-thin eyebrows lifting.

"I've been sacked!" he said.

"But—but what for, Ben?" she said, one hand flying to her creamy throat.

Cold perspiration beaded his brow. He tilted his trilby, and then ran a hand over his stubbled chin.

"Ben! Are you sick?" she said, half-rising from her chair. And then accusingly: "You've been drinking!"

"I've been celebrating the end of a career," he said, the whisky fumes now stale in his mouth.

"But what have you done?"

He bared his strong white teeth in a mirthless grin. "I've been sacked for taking bribes, Sue," he said.

"You wouldn't do a thing like that!" she said quickly, but her expressive eyes were mirroring consternation.

"I'm afraid I did just that, Sue."

"But—but why, Ben?" she said bewilderedly. "You—you'd just been promoted Inspector, and—and——"

"An Inspector doesn't get paid much," he said. "And I needed quite a packet to buy the furniture for our flat, and pay off what was outstanding on the car. I——"

"You expect me to condone what you've done," she cut in incredulously, and now she was pale with anger.

"No," he said slowly. "I've come to tell you the truth. You deserve——"

"The truth!" she cried, visibly trembling. "To tell me that you're dishonest! That you've ruined our future!"

"I'm sorry, Sue," he muttered miserably. "I——"

"Here—take it back," she said, and, pulling off her engagement ring, she tossed it on the desk.

He stared blindly at the diamond ring glinting on the desk, and then he heard the door open behind him. He turned around to see Sue's boss, Edward Crowther, standing in the doorway with a quizzical look on his darkly handsome face. Crowther was a tall, broad-shouldered man in his mid-fifties with iron-grey hair. He was immaculately dressed in a dark-grey suit, and had the polished manners of a well-groomed ex-public school man.

"Good evening, Ben," said Crowther, smiling pleasantly. "Sorry if I'm interrupting a lovers' tiff."

"He was just leaving, Mister Crowther," said Sue in a small voice, her eyes misting with tears.

Crowther glanced at the ring lying on the desk, and then looked at Logan. "Real trouble, Ben?" he said.

"I've lost my job and my girl in the same day," mumbled Logan.

The doorman's broken nose wrinkled as Logan came out into the cold night. Logan glared at him, walked down the crowded street, and turned into the first pub he came to.

* * *

He woke to find himself lying under a single coarse blanket on a hard mattress. He groaned aloud. His head ached abominably, and his tongue seemed to be covered in a thick paste. He couldn't open his right eye, and his upper lip was cut and swollen.

The cell door clanged open, and a burly Sergeant stared down at him with unconcealed hostility in his hard eyes.

"And how's our ex-Inspector this fine morning?" said the Sergeant coldly. "Ready to speak your piece in front of the Beak of Bow Street?"

"What's the charge?" said Logan, licking his swollen lip.

"Drunk and disorderly," said the Sergeant. "That'll cost you a few quid . . ."

Logan sat up shakily. "Can I have a cup of tea?" he said and the act of sitting up increased the throbbing in his head.

The Sergeant's mouth tightened. "The book says you can," he said. "But if it was left to me you'd get a glass of hemlock, you crooked, grafting bastard!"

"You're a disgrace to the Metropolitan Police Force," barked the magistrate, his dewlaps quivering. "It's as well for you that you were suspended from duty before you were brought before me. . . . Quite disgraceful! . . . Fined ten pounds. Next case, please."

A week later he was thrown out of his digs.

"It's common knowledge why you were sacked from the police," said his scrawny landlady, her small mouth puckered with disdain. "And for the past week you've come home drunk every night. And look at you! All unshaven and dirty!" Her reedy voice jumped an octave. "You'll have to clear out at once. This is a respectable house!"

He drained his pint of beer, and stared blearily at the reflection in the mirror behind the bar. It was familiar in a vague sort of way—but still that of a stranger. The red-rimmed blue eyes were sunk deep in their sockets, and the square-cut chin was covered in black stubble. The face swam in the blue haze of smoke, and he blinked in an attempt to focus his eyes.

“Another pint, Harry,” he muttered to the bald-headed barman.

“You’ve downed three quids’ worth already,” said Harry sourly.

“Don’t worry. I’ll pay,” he said, his words slurred.

“And when’s that going to be?” said Harry, filling the pint glass from the barrel.

“I’ll pay all right.”

“What did you say?” said Harry, raising his voice above the din of the packed bar.

“I said I’ll pay all right,” he repeated.

“Course Logan’ll pay,” said a voice from beside him. The voice had a Cockney whine he recognized.

He turned slowly to meet the nervous gaze of a thin-faced little man.

“Eddy Weems!” he breathed, and banged down the pint glass so viciously that half the beer slopped on to the counter. “I’ve been hoping to meet up with the dicky-bird who sang about me!”

“Now look, Logan,” said Weems apprehensively. “You ain’t——”

Logan put his big hands around the little man’s throat and began to squeeze. Weems shrieked, and then, as his breath was cut off, he struggled wildly and his eyes began to bulge. Logan was dimly aware of the uproar in the bar, and then a shattering blow exploded on his jaw.

* * *

He swam back to consciousness to find himself lying on a camp bed in one of the small back rooms. The two naked electric-light bulbs suspended from the ceiling merged into one, and then he became aware of the man sitting on a chair nearby. The man stopped filing his nails, and grinned at Logan with very white even teeth.

“How are you feeling, Logan?” he said softly.

Logan grunted and forced himself to sit up. Tenderly, he felt his swollen jaw, and decided it wasn’t fractured.

“I could do with a drink,” he said hoarsely.

The stranger pointed to a half-pint bottle of whisky standing beside a

tumbler on the table.

"Help yourself," he said, the grin twisting with contempt.

Logan rose shakily to his feet and stumbled over to the table. The neck of the bottle chattered against the rim of the tumbler as he poured the amber fluid. He gulped down the whisky and then turned to look at the stranger. The man was sharply dressed in a dark-purple suit, white silk shirt, and a hand-painted tie. He had the olive good looks of a Latin; the hair black, oiled, and curly, and a pencil-line of moustache above the very white teeth.

"Let me introduce myself," said the stranger. I am Micky Morales. . . I've come here to make a proposition."

"What sort of proposition?"

Morales stroked his thin moustache with a manicured finger and regarded Logan with hooded brown eyes.

"You are in possession of certain information that my Syndicate wants to buy," he said, and took out a wad of bank-notes from the inside pocket of his jacket. He riffled the notes and then placed them on the table.

Logan stared at the notes and then looked up at Morales. "What's all this in aid of?"

"Just as I said—we're in the market for information, Logan. There's two hundred quid on the table. Tell me what we want to know, and it's all yours."

"What d'you want to know?"

"We know you were in the Narcotics Squad," said Morales. "And we want you to give us the breakdown on how the Squad operates . . . staff names, names of informers, methods . . . everything."

Logan's eyes crept back to the wad of notes. "It's not enough. . ."

"Don't be too greedy," warned Morales softly. "Two hundred will buy you a lot of hooch."

"And when it's finished? What then?" said Logan, and poured himself another drink.

"How much?"

Logan swirled the whisky around in the tumbler and stared thoughtfully at Morales. "I want five hundred in cash . . . and a job."

"A job? What sort of a job?" said Morales, frowning.

Logan smiled mirthlessly. "Something suited to my talents."

"You seriously think we'd give a job to an ex-cop—and a drunk at that?"

"I could knock off the liquor at any time," said Logan. "And with my knowledge of the game I'd be more than useful. But I'd expect more than the price of a bun and a cup of tea."

Morales lit a thin cheroot and gazed at Logan through the blue haze of its smoke.

"We'd need a sample of your goods," said Morales. "In the first instance—give me what you consider to be two hundred quids' worth of information, and I'll pass it on for checking. If it's valid, I'll contact you again."

"Fair enough. Where d'you want to start?"

"Who's the boss-man of the Squad?"

"Jimmy Bannister—a Superintendent. He's directly responsible to the Assistant Commissioner," said Logan.

Question and answer volleyed to and fro for the next twenty-five minutes. And then Logan reached for the notes. "You've had your money's worth, Morales," he said. "You'll get the rest when you fork over the next instalment. Three hundred quid—and a job."

Morales stood up; a strangely feline movement. "I hope for your sake, Logan, that you've been feeding me the right stuff. We've our own not-too-subtle methods of dealing with smart lads."

"It's one hundred per cent square."

"Whichever way it goes, I'll be contacting you," said Morales, and went out of the room.

Logan watched the door shut, sighed, and put the money in his pocket.

* * *

Logan stepped out from under the shower and briskly towelled his lean frame. He went over to the basin and shaved. When he'd finished, he examined his face in the mirror. There were still faint shadows under his eyes, but the blue eyes were now clear. He brushed his short-cropped blond hair and climbed into his clothes.

It was exactly seven o'clock that night when he went into the lounge bar of the Golden Heron. Morales was sitting in the corner, and Logan joined him.

Morales looked him over critically and said: "I can see you've managed to stay off the liquor for a whole week, but you'll have to stay permanently on the waggon if you join the Syndicate."

"That won't be difficult—providing the money's right."

Morales put a thick manila envelope on the table.

"We checked your information. It was solid," said Morales "Here's the other three hundred quid you demanded."

"You want the rest of the information now?"

"Later. After you've done a little job for us."

"What's that?" said Logan.

"Under the table is a brief-case," said Morales. "You'll take it with you when you leave. The brief-case contains three packets and an envelope. In the envelope you'll find three names and addresses. The names of our only sub-distributors. You'll deliver one packet to each of them. To each of them you'll merely say it's a delivery from the Syndicate."

"What do these packets contain?" said Logan.

"Snow," said Morales, his heavy lids drooping over the brown eyes. The first address turned out to be a small tobacconist in grimy Pimlico.

"A delivery from the Syndicate," said Logan, and the bald-headed man behind the counter whisked the packet out of sight.

The second on the list was a pawn-shop in Hoxton which was run by an old man with a hook nose and a pair of rheumy eyes.

"A delivery from the Syndicate," said Logan, and the old man hesitated only fractionally before grabbing the packet.

Outside the pawnshop, Logan hailed a passing taxi and told the driver to take him to La Buta Club at the end of Wardour Street.

Logan strode into the plush, over-heated club, and a hard-faced individual in a dinner-jacket glided swiftly towards him. It was early and there were few people in the club.

"I want to see Mister Trevelyan," said Logan, and thought that the long-haired combo playing on the band-stand were amateurs.

"This way, please," said the hard-faced individual, and led him across the tiny dance-floor to an alcove. A closed door was in the back shadows of the alcove.

"Go on in. You're expected," said Logan's guide.

Logan went into the office. A man, standing with his back to Logan, was staring out of the window. He was wearing a black overcoat and a black fedora hat pulled down over his eyes.

"Mister Trevelyan?" said Logan, and the man turned around.

"You're dead on schedule," said Morales, grinning.

"I don't get it," said Logan. "You're Trevelyan? I——"

"Open up your last packet," said Morales with a chuckle.

Logan ripped off the wrapper to reveal a small cardboard box. He lifted the lid. The packet contained a white powder.

"Taste it," said Morales.

Logan put a tiny pinch of the powder on his tongue.

"It has a sweetish taste to it," said Logan.

"It should do—it's icing-sugar!" said Morales, laughing.

"Why've you had me running around London delivering icing-sugar?" said Logan, now baffled.

"You were doing a dummy run. A sort of final test," said Morales.

"We had to be sure you were playing things straight. If you hadn't been on the level, you'd have nailed the three people I'd told you were the Syndicate's sole sub-distributors. . . ."

"You've been wasting your time—and mine," said Logan angrily.

"Kid not," said Morales, his grin fading. "We can't afford to take chances in this racket. We've had you watched and tailed for the past week, and this was your passing-out parade."

"I see," said Logan.

Morales lit one of his thin cheroots and sat down at the desk. "Take the weight off your feet," he said, gesturing to a chair. "Now I want that three hundred quids' worth of information from you."

"Fire away," said Logan sitting down.

"Tell me about the statistics of increased dope addiction known to the Narcotics Squad," said Morales, blowing a thin stream of blue smoke out of one nostril.

"Eleven thousand new cases were registered in the past year," said Logan. "And the Squad estimate there must be at least five thousand others unregistered. Total, say, in the region of sixteen thousand. . . ."

"Their estimate is three thousand short of the actual figure," sneered Morales, and then: "Do the Squad think the increase is because of the activities of a number of operators? Or the work of a big outfit?"

"Superintendent Bannister reckons it's the work of one well-organized outfit operating in London," said Logan.

"How do they think the stuff is getting into the country?"

"They think it's being brought into the country in bulk—mostly probably by ship. The Squad can cover the airports much too easily."

Morales stared thoughtfully at him and then picked up the telephone and dialled a number.

"Our information bureau is based on solid fact," said Morales into

the mouthpiece, his eyes still on Logan. "I recommend admission for the new member."

Morales listened and then said: "I'll attend to his initiation to-night." He replaced the telephone on its cradle and said to Logan: "You've just cut yourself into a nice slice of spending money."

"Where do we go from here?"

"To a quiet spot in the Thames Basin," said Morales, chuckling.

* * *

A brittle moon shone down on the murky waters of the Thames as the Jaguar saloon car picked its way along the cluttered wharf between the shadows cast by the long-necked cranes and the warehouses. Morales drove with consummate skill, and soon they pulled up in the huge shadow cast by a rusting tramp steamer tied up alongside.

"This is it," said Morales, and they climbed out of the warm comfort of the Jaguar into the cold night. Logan glanced up at the bows to the flaking white letters spelling the ship's name: "The *Sante Fé*."

"She's in for a re-fit," said Morales, leading the way between coils of rope to the gangway.

A dim yellow light glowed on deck, and Logan followed Morales along to an open companion-way. Their footsteps echoed hollowly as they descended two flights of worn, uncarpeted stairs. Morales led him along the passage to an opening that belched a stink of diesel oil.

"This old tub flies the flag of Panama," said Morales, pausing. "She's just arrived from Marrakesh via Gibraltar."

"I still don't understand what——"

"Be careful how you step from here on," said Morales, ignoring his query. "These iron ladders are damn slippery."

They clambered down the vertical iron ladder into the bowels of the ship. They were in the engine-room, and the place was ablaze with naked lights. Up at the narrow bow end stood three men shielding their faces with blue-glass masks. One of them was operating an oxy-acetylene torch that spluttered blue and yellow sparks as it cut into the steel hull.

"Now do you understand?" said Morales.

"I think so," said Logan slowly. "You place the heroin or cocaine packets in position, and then weld a false plate over it."

"Simple, isn't it?" said Morales. "The ship then books into this yard

for a refit, and the Syndicate takes delivery.”

“I suppose the Syndicate owns the yard?”

“Under the cover of a front man. And now let’s go up to the Captain’s quarters for a celebration drink.”

“I could do with one,” said Logan gratefully.

“One is all you’re getting, my friend.”

The Captain’s cabin was surprisingly spacious and was comfortably furnished. Morales opened a cabinet and pointed to the racked bottles.

“What’ll you have?”

“Whisky, please,” said Logan, and Morales poured generous measures into two tumblers.

“To your new job,” said Morales, and swallowed the neat spirit.

“Quite an occasion,” said Logan. “What I’d——”

Just then the cabin door crashed open, and a smartly dressed man with iron-grey hair stepped inside.

“Good evening, Ben,” said Edward Crowther, smiling faintly.

“You didn’t say you were coming when I phoned you,” said Morales curiously.

“I didn’t know I was coming—then,” said Crowther, gazing at Logan. “After you phoned, I went to the Honey Pot to collect a document. My secretary was most surprised to see me. Surprised is hardly the word. She was scared to death.”

“Why?” said Morales.

“She’s a young lady with remarkable talents,” said Crowther in his public-school accents. “She’d broken into my private office, and then picked the lock of the wall safe. She was going through our private files when I arrived. . . .”

Logan’s neck hairs bristled, and he broke out in a cold sweat.

“Where’s the little bitch now?” rasped Morales.

“She’s waiting outside under escort,” said Crowther, still gazing at Logan. “I’ve also brought a certain Mister Eddy Weems.”

“Why bring that coppers’ nark?” said Morales.

“As my trusted lieutenant, you’re most adequate,” said Crowther. “But you must allow me to do the deeper thinking. After I’d caught the girl at the files, my logical mind began to function. Now I propose to put a tenuous theory to the test.” He turned towards the door and shouted: “Bring them in, Doc!”

Sue was pushed into the cabin by a tall, thin man who had cadaverous features and black eyes deep-sunken in their sockets. Sue’s lovely

face was pale and drawn, and Logan's heart missed a beat.

They were followed by Eddy Weems, who was dragged in by two hulking men with battered features. Weems' close-set eyes betrayed his terror, and his thin face was twitching.

"Now we'll set about getting the true facts of the situation," said Crowther blandly. "We'll start with Weems. He's the weakest character, I think. . . ."

A switch-knife gleamed in Morales' hand. "Tell me what you want to know, and I'll carve it out of him."

"We need nothing so crude as that," said Crowther, and turned to the two men holding Weems. "Remove his jacket and stretch him out on the table."

The little man screeched and struggled.

"Take over, Doc," said Crowther, and the tall thin man stepped forward. He took out a black leather case from his overcoat pocket. From the case he extracted a hypodermic syringe and a large plastic capsule. He depressed the plunger of the hypodermic, and then inserted the needle into the capsule.

"Please explain what you are doing, Doc," said Crowther.

"This is sodium pentothal," said Doc as he carefully drew out the drug from the capsule. "It's used extensively in America by psychiatrists and some police departments as a truth drug. This contains .5 of a gramme in 20 c.c.s of solution. I shall inject it very slowly into his vein—so that he hovers between consciousness and unconsciousness."

Weems moaned and his eyes bulged with terror as Doc first bared his thin arm and then injected a small amount of the drug into his vein.

Ten minutes later, Weems relaxed visibly on the table and now his eyes were glazed and unfocusing. It was cold in the cabin, but Logan was perspiring freely.

Doc looked up at Crowther and nodded. Crowther stepped forward and bent over Weems' inert form.

"Tell me, Eddy," said Crowther gently. "Did you really inform on Logan? Or was it just a police rig?"

"It was rigged," whispered Weems. "Superintendent Bannister organized it all. I was paid a hundred nicker. . . ."

"And the girl, Eddy? Who is she?"

"She's a police-woman. . . . The scene in your office between her and Logan was an act. They knew you'd be listening on the microphone."

Morales swung around on Logan, his brown eyes now hot and

glowing, and his face was a frozen mask of hate. He lunged with his switch-knife at Logan's stomach. Logan swayed aside and chopped down the hard edge of his right hand against Morales' neck. Morales went down as if he'd been pole-axed and Logan spun around to meet the onrush of the two hulking guards. But he was a fraction too late. A black-jack smashed down and his head exploded in red and white. . . .

He swam back to consciousness, his head ringing and throbbing with pain. He'd been stripped to the waist, and his hands were lashed behind him to a ring set in the deck. Crowther was examining the small plastic case that had been strapped to Logan's chest.

"It's a miniature radio transmitter," croaked Logan. "It has a range of forty miles. I've been in constant touch with the Yard, and I——"

"Let me finish the creep!" snarled Morales, rubbing his neck. "I'll——"

"Not yet," said Crowther. "Let him talk."

"We've known for some time that you're the boss-man of the Syndicate," said Logan, trying not to look at Sue. "But we didn't know how you were getting the consignments of cocaine and heroin into the country. Now——"

Just then a lone police whistle shrilled in the still night outside, and then a blaze of white, dazzling light played on the dark port-holes of the cabin.

Logan's captors stiffened, and then Morales stepped cat-like towards Logan, his knife gleaming wickedly in his upraised hand.

"Don't!" screamed Sue, and darted between them.

"Don't be a fool, Morales! Make a break for it while you can!" yelled Crowther, and bolted out with the two guards at his heels.

Morales hesitated. Then he shrugged, tossed his knife on the deck, and ran out of the cabin.

Sue picked up the knife and sliced through the cords binding Logan's wrists to the deck. She helped him to his feet, and he took her trembling body into his arms.

"Our marriage has been delayed long enough, Sue," he whispered. "I'm not going to expose you to any more capers like this. You're going to keep house, while I earn our bread and butter. . . ."

Outside, more whistles shrilled and the cordon of police closed in to spring the trap. . . .

THE CONSPIRATORS

C. C. UNDERWOOD

"Shut up and stop tapping," Ella hissed, "or we shall think that you're the nervous one." There was a sudden sound down below. They all froze . . .

THE THREE children looked furtively around, then, satisfied that no one was watching them they slipped through the unfinished doorway of a half-completed house. The evening sun cast its light in a dusty beam through glassless windows and projected huge macabre shadows of the children as they plodded upstairs into the largest of the three bedrooms.

Ella faced the two boys in the bare room, like a teacher facing a class. She was eleven years old, only a few months older than the boys, yet she was much taller and far more mature.

She spoke in an exaggerated way, and by over-playing everything she gave a weird, mystical atmosphere to everything in which she participated. In this way she fascinated the two boys, who looked to her to provide them with unusual out of school diversions, and as they were all near neighbours they had known each other for as long as they could remember.

"Peter, have you got the rope?" she asked.

He nodded, grinning craftily as he pulled a coiled clothes line from under a bulging jacket, the lapels of which were covered with badges. "No trouble at all," he added proudly.

The girl turned to Eric. "Have you got the stuff?"

The boy's buck-toothed grin and fair hair gave him a comic appearance, contrasting vividly with the dark portentousness of his companions.

"Yes, yes, what else," he replied, holding up a small package wrapped in brown paper.

"Good," said the girl. "All is ready then."

Peter put the rope down carefully in a corner and began looking round for a piece of wood. He soon found a heavy length that had been discarded by a carpenter. He picked it up, weighed it carefully in his hand and turned to Ella.

"I think this will do very well." He then began to scrape around idly on the sand and cement encrusted floor boards. He spoke again in his strange husky voice.

"Do you think he will come? You know how nervous he is. Perhaps he will tell his parents where we are to meet and his father will come lumbering up here and spoil everything."

Ella tucked the books she had been carrying firmly under her arm and quickly reassured them.

"He will come all right. He has always been keen to play with us, and that will be enough to bring him here. Don't worry about him telling his parents. He's too scared to tell anyone. We will start the moment he gets here. We can't waste any more time."

"His nervousness makes me sick," said Peter, tapping on the floor impatiently with the piece of wood he was holding.

"Shut up, and stop tapping," Ella hissed, "or we shall think that you're the nervous one." There was a sudden sound down below. The girl put a finger to her lips. They all froze. She went to the top of the stairs and peered down. A boy stood at the bottom, looking hesitantly around him. He was very neat and tidy, and very apprehensive.

The girl called to him as loudly as she dared.

"Come up, David. It's about time you turned up."

The boy smiled and quickly ran up the stairs and entered the room with an air of innocence and pride at being accepted, by even so bizarre a trio as these.

"I'm sorry about being late," he stammered.

"Never mind about that," said Ella, as she moved into a corner. "Welcome to our circle," her voice rose. She crouched down with the books on the floor beside her, one book open in her hand, she tapped her teeth with a pencil.

David stood awkwardly in the centre of the room. He smoothed his brown hair down and pulled his socks up. He was still in short trousers, and only now did he feel odd about it as he looked at the two boys in their jeans.

"When do we start?" he stammered.

"Now," yelled Ella.

The two boys rushed towards David. Peter raised his arm and brought the heavy piece of wood crashing down on the side of the boy's head. Eric closed in, clutching the package and began to prod, slap, and punch the unfortunate boy, who fell back under the onslaught.

Peter swung the piece of wood again and again. So erratic was his attack that Eric had to abandon his share of the violence, for fear of being hit by Peter's wild swings.

After a while Ella yelled "enough".

"Stop now, tie him up and start the torture."

The boys stepped back from the now half-conscious heap on the floor, he was in a ghastly mess. There was blood all over his face and hair. His lips and cheeks were swollen, the boys took him by the armpits and propped him against the wall, a handkerchief was quickly tied over his mouth. Peter grabbed the rope from the corner and they began to truss him up.

Ella sat in the corner all the time saying nothing, showing no emotion, just tapping her teeth with her pencil.

Eric delved into his pockets and pulled out a packet of cigarettes and some matches. He put a cigarette in his mouth, and with an exaggerated flourish he went into a clumsy ritual of lighting it. He advanced toward the terrified boy.

He touched the red, glowing end on the boy's face and neck, and each time he did so a muffled scream came from the bloodstained gag.

"Good, good, that's the idea," yelled Ella from her position in the corner. Suddenly David's head lolled forward and the groaning stopped. The boys stepped back in surprise and stared at the horrible sight before them.

"You've killed him," whispered Peter. "You and your bloody cigarette torture."

"I've killed him! I like that. What about that club you were bashing him with."

"I didn't hit him all that hard. He bleeds too easily."

"Shut up," Ella hissed. She leapt to her feet. "We must all keep our heads. First, we must think of how to get rid of the body; but let me make sure that he is really dead."

She went over to him and, grabbing him roughly by the hair she pulled his head back to where she could feel the pulse in his neck. She prodded around under the jaw bone and after a moment she pronounced him dead.

Before they could decide what to do, there was a sudden movement downstairs and a voice shouted, "David, are you up there?"

"It's David's father," said Eric. "Now we're in it, right in it." The two boys rushed over to David and began furiously to untie him and

remove the gag. Footsteps on the stairs and the large portly figure of David's father stared stupidly in the room. What a sight he faced as he gaped in the doorway.

"Good God, look at you, all covered in blood. What on earth's been going on? David, just look at the state you're in."

"It's all right, dad," said David, rushing forward and pulling frothy sponge strips from his mouth and making a futile attempt to wipe away the blood from his face and hair with his handkerchief. "Don't look so alarmed dad, it's only artificial blood." He was talking non-stop in an effort to reassure his father as quickly as he could.

"The blood is in that tin over there covered with brown paper. Eric got it from his brother, didn't you Eric; and we used sweet cigarettes for the torture bit. It was Ella's idea, she's full of ideas, you see it's a game, but it's different and exciting."

The look of horror was still on his father's face.

"It's the last time you play these horrid games up here my lad, and you children should be ashamed of yourselves, just look at the state you're all in."

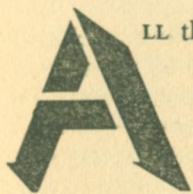
"Amen," murmured Ella, as they trooped mournfully down the stairs and out into the warm evening sunshine.



KEYHOLE ON TOMORROW

JEFFRY SCOTT

"PREMONITIONS and second-sight. Any person having direct and documental experience, please contact Box A.Z. 23"



ALL the office routine came as a bit of a shock. Somehow, from the advertisement, I'd expected a far different setting for *Box A.Z. 23*. In fact, I had a clear mental picture, days before: a white-haired boffin type, puffing his pipe in a study littered with books.

Instead, I was asked to call at a modern office block. Oddly enough, it was only just around the corner from where I worked, so there was no problem about slipping away from my own desk to get there.

A pretty girl took my name and address, typing the details on a filing card. Quite frankly, I was so busy staring at her knees that she had to ask several questions a second time; she must have thought me a bit stupid.

Then she handed over to another girl, in an even shorter skirt, who interviewed me and jotted down a précis of the two cases mentioned in my letter.

Speaking slowly, while she scribbled, made me realize again how outlandish and fantastic my claims sounded in daylight. "You must think I'm a crank," I muttered.

She shook her head briskly. Scent floated out from her swirling blonde hair. "Oh no," she replied briskly. "I've written dozens of these reports since the advertisement appeared."

That cut me down to size.

I left feeling a little piqued by the casual sense of anti-climax. The next day, I got a letter, asking me to return as soon as convenient, and enclosing a five-guinea cheque "as an advance on expenses".

That bucked me up, although I didn't need the money. But it meant that they took me seriously.

This time, the mini-skirted brigade ushered me straight in to Professor Smith's office. He was a thin, sceptical-looking person, with rimless glasses. A file lay open beside him, holding the filing card and précis

of what I had said the previous day, plus a cutting of the advertisement.

"PREMONITIONS and second-sight. Any person having direct and documented experience in this field, please contact Box A.Z. 23."

It might be upside down, and a long way away, but I knew that screech by heart.

Now, as the rimless lenses flashed, I was nervous. So I babbled out the rather feeble anecdote about my image of Box A.Z., and the reality. "Really knocks the old premonition, eh?"

"Quite so, quite so." He waved the joke aside without cracking a grin, making me feel more silly than ever. "The point is, young man, that you are the only person among nearly one hundred replying to our advertisement who had taken the trouble to collect proof of his claims."

I nodded tensely. Professor Smith leaned forward. "You *do* have proof?"

Without answering, I pushed a packet across the desk. It contained a note from my bank manager, confirming that I had deposited the enclosed sealed envelopes with him, one six months before, and another the previous month.

The seals were unbroken. Professor Smith, breathing heavily through his nose, opened the two envelopes with a crackling of sealing-wax and rip of paper.

Five minutes later—"But this is . . . fantastic!" He blushed at such unscientific language. "I cannot believe it."

It was my turn to blush. "I'm not a liar, or a cheat. I *saw* a fire and a murder, 48 hours before they happened."

He frowned, drumming well-scrubbed fingers on the envelopes. "Why did you go to so much trouble to provide documentary evidence?"

"There's nothing sinister about that. Two—no, it's nearer three years ago—I went to Liverpool on business. Sitting in the train, I got a sudden mental flash of an old tramp lying near a huge warehouse, bleeding from the nose and mouth.

"It was so grotesque and unexpected that the scene stuck in my brain. I got a terrible shock, later. I'd never been to Liverpool before, but killing time by the waterfront, I spotted exactly the warehouse I'd been shown in my mind."

The Professor tried to break in, so I cut the story short. "Anyway, I came back to London, a few days later. Somebody had left the Liverpool paper in my compartment. Splashed all over the front page was a

report about a tramp being battered to death, just where . . . well, where I'd been warned it would happen."

He stared at me for a moment, playing with my file card. "There is a simple explanation for some of that, you know. You're a man of, let's see, nearly 35.

Are you trying to tell me that you can remember *every* photograph and film you've seen of Liverpool, since childhood?"

He was surprised by my reply. "That's exactly what I told myself. Maybe some detail of local scenery had sunk into the back of my mind. As for the tramp, his murder could have been a coincidence. I didn't want to believe anything . . . uncanny."

Professor Smith grunted approval and offered me a cigarette. I took it, inhaling gratefully. "During the next few months, the incident faded. Deep down, I hated the idea of being given some sort of keyhole view of the future. Imagine seeing one's own death!" And I shuddered.

"A year later, walking in the park, I saw a terrible mental picture: a woman in a vivid red raincoat, being pushed under a train at the station I use every day of my life. I was so upset that I took a day off from work, to get over it. When I caught my usual train the following morning, everybody was full of the accident. They kept saying that so young and pretty a girl had no reason for killing herself."

Smith gulped, removed his glasses, and polished them feverishly.

"Again, there is a rational explanation," he argued, feebly. "No doubt the station is crowded in the rush hour, when you travel to work. You noticed the woman's bright clothing and, without realizing it, told yourself that somebody might get pushed in the path of a train. The fact that she was the victim of such a tragedy is"—he gulped again—"a strange coincidence."

He wasn't convincing himself, far less me. I gave him a pitying smile. "I work with computers, Professor. Just for fun, I ran all the factors of that accident through one of our boxes of tricks. The chances against it being mere chance are more than a million to one."

"I know," he whispered, thinking aloud, "I know."

I ground the cigarette into a glass ashtray on the desk between us. "When I got the next preview, six months ago, I was ready for it. Everything was crystal clear. I was in the cinema, waiting for the big film, when I saw a house with a yellow front door and yellow curtains, blazing from basement to roof. There were chrome numbers on the door—52A."

Jabbing a finger at the first envelope, I went on: "I didn't wait for the film any longer. I went straight home, wrote every detail of that daydream on a sheet of paper, and sealed it in a dated envelope. The date is repeated on the report inside, too. As soon as the bank opened the following day, I gave the envelope to the manager."

Professor Smith nodded dazedly. "Exactly. And I remember that fire—a complete family wiped out."

"Two days after I wrote the report," I confirmed. "And I followed the same routine last month. This time, I got the message while swimming—a girl, very pretty, in a white linen dress with a large yellow daisy embroidered over the left breast . . . being strangled to death, on her way home from a dance. It happened."

My hair was damp with sweat, and my heart thudded crazily. "It's not so much a question of me helping you with data, Prof. I'm the one who needs help. This thing's driving me mad!"

* * *

Professor Smith was subdued, to say the least, as he showed me out. His staff seemed to have caught the air of bewilderment. The mini-skirted blonde—Sally Regent, according to the discreet little sign on her reception desk—collided with me in the hall, dropping her handbag.

I knelt beside her and helped to salvage the contents: lipstick, powder, a couple of letters, all the usual feminine junk. "Thank you," she smiled. "Neither of us foresaw *that*, anyway!"

The pleasantries jarred on me. This wasn't funny. And over the next week, I almost regretted sharing my secret with the outside world. Professor Smith pestered me for the tiniest details, going over the same ground scores of times, while a tape recorder whirred at my elbow.

But I had to tell somebody about it. At first, those letters in the bank had cleared my conscience. But Smith's advertisement was a godsend. It gave me a chance to talk for a good purpose, not merely to entertain a pub crowd or give some paper a sensation headline.

And I had to admit that, in an odd way, I enjoyed the endless cross-examination. I'm a loner, parents dead, friends practically nil. But a highly intelligent man, backed by Government funds, was eager to discover what made me tick.

The inquisition paused, like everything else, for the Great British Weekend. At seven p.m. on a Friday, Professor Smith stopped the

recorder, massaged his eyeballs, and told me to go away, relax, and return on Monday.

Saturday was a dream day: early to rise, out on the golf course, lunch at a Chelsea bistro, and then a foreign film. Sunday wasn't so good; rainy, and I couldn't settle to anything.

Finally, I chose the telly. Bruce Forsythe was telling a long, complicated joke. I was waiting for the punch-line when, without warning . . . *I saw.*

Sally Regent was hurrying back to her flat. I got no picture of the place, just a blurred doorway. But her long, slim legs and firm young body seemed so close that I ached to reach out and hold her.

Then she was falling, and screaming. Pushed or smashed to the ground.

The picture faded, leaving me trembling in my armchair. On the TV screen, the variety show had been replaced by a yelling string of commercials. Mouth dry, I looked up Professor Smith's home telephone number.

* * *

Smith was soothing, at our Monday session. "I've arranged with your firm to 'borrow' you for a month, so you won't have the strain of keeping two jobs on the go."

I glared at the idiot. "That's the least of my worries. What about Sally?"

He smiled stupidly. "There's no cause for alarm. Don't mention anything to her about this matter."

A horrible thought struck me. He *wanted* her to be hurt, even killed, to prove my weird talent up to the hilt. "She's got to be protected, I tell you!"

"All right, young fellow, all right. Now, to go back to the fire. You're sure that you never visited that house with the yellow door, at any period of your life?" And so on, while I fumed.

I swear that I meant to look after Sally Regent. But on getting home, I realized that I didn't know her address. Smith wouldn't divulge it, that was certain. And she wasn't in any London-district telephone directory.

Wild ideas flew into my head. I could go to the police and explain the whole thing, getting them to tour the city with loudspeaker cars, warning Sally to seek their protection. But they wouldn't believe me. I could . . . I could . . . *do nothing but wait.*

Four hours and half a bottle of whisky later, I crawled into bed.

When I woke up, I thought I was living a nightmare. My bedroom had vanished. Instead, I was lying on a hard bunk, surrounded by grey rubber walls. My hands felt numb and my arms were pinioned in a heavy, stiff canvas jacket.

Professor Smith's gaunt face swam into focus. "The police were guarding Miss Regent's flat, you should have expected that. They stopped you, as you were about to beat her to death," he told me bitterly.

I couldn't believe my ears. "You're mad, Professor. I don't even know where she lives."

He looked away. His tone changed to sadness. "Somebody is mad, my poor man."

Later, Professor Smith and his colleagues helped me to face the truth. That I had a tremendous inward urge to be famous, and unique, above the common herd.

Smith explained that when Sally dropped her handbag, I "photographed" her address on the letters, although one half of my personality never awoke to the fact. And the evil half of me had taken over, driving my body like a robot to ambush and kill the girl—to make my forecast come true.

Just as the devil in my skull had made me kill the Liverpool tramp, and the woman at the station, and the girl in the daisy dress, and that innocent family in the house with the yellow door.

Really, I cannot accept what they have told me. It is too savage a torture for me. But everybody is very kind to me here, and the medical superintendent is like a father.

Last night, playing table-tennis with another patient, I had the clearest picture of the medical superintendent. He was lying face-down on the lawn, behind my dormitory, with something bright—scissors, perhaps—protruding from the patch of blood between his shoulders.

That's why I'm waiting, here on my bed. I *must* tell the attendant to search me, and my quarters.

Somewhere, closer than I know, are a pair of scissors . . . and hands eager to use them to hack a keyhole to tomorrow.



UNCOMMON IN THAT PART OF THE COUNTRY

NOEL CROMARTY

The boy had flaming red hair—uncommon in that part of the country.

RICHARDSON came painfully over the brow of the hill and leaned, panting, against the great rock outcrop that dominated it. He looked down into the valley. There, far below him, where the river ran silver among the line of the trees, was the frontier. And beyond it, freedom. He rubbed his bruised shoulder thoughtfully. This should be it, he thought. He had travelled fast, and he had travelled to where he suspected the frontier was not particularly well guarded. He could see no watchtowers, so it looked as if his suspicions were confirmed. If he hurried, he would make it.

But it was necessary to hurry.

From the last skyline, he had seen the glint on the road that had told him that the patrols were out and had nearly caught up with him. It could only be a matter of time before a keen-eyed soldier spotted the tattered figure moving among the rocks, and, as it was, the fall he had had the previous night was slowing him up. So there was no time to waste.

He began to move cautiously down the hillside, thanking heaven that there was some semblance of a path.

Half an hour later he was hesitating at the top of a rough track leading past a farmhouse. He crouched behind the bush and studied the situation.

The place seemed deserted in the hot afternoon sunlight. It could be that all the inhabitants were at market, it could be that even if they were there and saw a tattered tramp hurrying through their fields they would take no notice, although that was unlikely.

On the other hand, the quickest, most direct route to the river lay through the farm. It was fifteen minutes at the most. Richardson decided that even if the worst came to the worst, he could still run hard enough, and he stood up and began to limp rapidly down the track.

He rounded the edge of the stone wall into the farmyard proper and

paused. The place had a deserted *feel* about it; he had been right, he thought, and made for the sheltering wall of a barn.

Suddenly there was the sound of human movement; heavy clogs on the cobbles, a scurry and a rush, and a small boy stood in terror before him, flushed from some hiding-place by Richardson's approach.

Left behind to feed the stock while the family went to market, thought Richardson automatically. "I won't hurt you," he said, proud even at that moment of his command of the local dialect.

But the fright on the boy's face told him that he was more terrifying a sight than he had thought.

"I won't hurt you," he said again, and thought, a fine-looking boy, flaming red hair, uncommon in that part of the country. And he was idly amazed, as always, at the incongruity of a man's thoughts in moments of danger.

And then the boy ran. His iron-tipped clogs clattered over the cobbles and he ran bounding towards the road.

Richardson started hopelessly after him.

And even as he did so, he saw the boy look round in mid-flight, miss his footing, fall headlong and lie still.

Richardson came up to him slowly.

He had caught his head on a jagged stone and the dark blood was welling from an ugly wound in his temple. His face was white and he was very still.

Richardson knelt over the unconscious boy in the hot sunlight and looked around him desperately. Go on, something inside him cried; leave the boy and get across the river. But all the time he knew that it was useless, that he had to do *something*. There was another farmhouse farther along the valley; there might be someone there; if he moved fast, there would be time, surely there would be time.

The old woman who was the only occupant of the farmhouse along the valley was imperturbable; when she opened the door to Richardson and his blood-stained burden, she listened quite silently as he stammered a garbled version of what had happened, and then motioned him in.

He laid the boy on a settle and straightened up.

"He needs a doctor, mother," he said.

"He will have one," said the old woman, wiping the blood away. "Are you not anxious to continue your journey?"

Richardson moistened his lips. "Thank you," he said. "Goodbye."

Outside, he hurried down the mountain path, keeping in the shadow. There *was* still time, he told himself, and he was just rounding the corner when a shot echoed and a warning bullet ricocheted off the stone wall beside him. A voice shouted an order.

Richardson paused and turned, looking back up to the farmhouse. The patrol was just coming down the track, and he could see the old woman in the doorway. She had undoubtedly told them all about it. He raised his hands hopelessly, and the soldiers came slowly down the mountain.

The lieutenant in command had hot angry eyes, but they looked at Richardson with a kind of compassion.

"You are under arrest," he said. Richardson nodded. He was glad to see that they wore the uniform of the local militia; part-time soldiers only, and, it was rumoured, not entirely sympathetic to the regime. At least he could be sure of decent conduct until he was handed over to the dreaded Politikapolis.

"What happened to the boy?"

"He ran away from me and tripped and fell."

"I thought so," said the lieutenant. "You would hardly have——" he paused and studied Richardson's face. "I'm going to take you into Kelchern. But first, my men are hungry. There is a meal for us back at the farmhouse. I'm leaving you here under special guard. Don't do anything foolish."

He barked an order and a tall corporal stepped forward, unslinging his rifle. The officer said something to him and he walked towards Richardson and sat down on a rock, his rifle pointed menacingly. Richardson sat down too. He felt very tired as he watched the patrol file slowly back to the farmhouse.

Then the corporal lowered his rifle, took off his helmet, and stretched himself. He looked at Richardson without expression, and then looked away.

And Richardson became aware that four or five paces behind him lay the shelter of the pine trees and that the pine trees would lead him to the safety of the river. That was, if the corporal kept staring away at the distant hills.

As he probably would. He was a big handsome man with flaming red hair, uncommon in that part of the country.

* * *

“WELL HATCHED”

A. W. BENNETT

Bird-observing is a happy, harmless hobby. The language of the twittering sparrow, the antics of the robin . . . a study of the love-rituals. . . we observers are a breed, a family on our own . . .

TWO DAMN silly names, Ambrose and Egbert. We blamed our respective mothers for that; two sisters.

That made us cousins of course, he only a month older than I.

Naturally we were in the same class at school, went to college together; were inseparables like two yolks from the same egg.

Ham and Egg, of course—it couldn't be otherwise, boys being what they are—little devils. All the more so because we were broody, reserved, introspective, maybe somewhat inhibited. Didn't take to scuffles, Soccer, Rigger, boxing or anything else that involved physical contact.

“Sissies,” they taunted us and that was about the mildest term.

The same hobby obsessed us too; bird-watching.

When we left college Egbert had more time for bird-study than I, his parents died and left him wealthy: my father was dead and mother had to watch her shillings even in her cottage in the country.

I took a job in a solicitor's office but lodged on the edge of the town where there were plenty of our feathered friends, although different types from those which surrounded Egbert in his big old-fashioned house not far from his aunt, my mother.

But he couldn't stand the solitude, the separateness from me; he sold the mansion and bought a little bungalow almost across the street from me.

We were together again, and most of the time I was free from the office we were in the warmth of each other's company.

“In each other's pocket,” as my landlady said.

From my room we could watch the birds on his garden and roof, and from his bungalow, vice versa.

We were Ham and Eggs again, even in the local pubs which we visited

occasionally: but the banter was good-humoured, kindly benevolence, not the vicious, spiteful sadism of our schoolmates. To these people we were two mild, quiet young men who preferred to "keep themselves to themselves".

"A nice pair," I overheard several times..

If I drank beer whilst he drank whisky that was our own concern, it might be preference of palate or compulsion of pocket. Actually it was of course the latter, but Egbert made sure that he unobtrusively paid twice at least to my once so that he paid at least his fair share and often more.

So we raptly bird-watched. Outside my windows hung nut-cages, coils of wire like windsocks, partly full of nuts from which the bluetits, greenfinches, linnets, could feast and perform their feats of swinging, cavorting acrobatics.

His garden was peppered with bird-houses, nesting-boxes, and swinging baskets innumerable.

Mother died and left me a few hundreds. We made our wills together: all of which he died possessed he willed to me, and I to him. We were never closer, although he had the wealth of the family and I almost none.

Then it happened, what we'd sworn never would. A girl came between us. Bernadette Lewis.

Not really came between us; rather, welded us closer together, but with her as the core of the whole. For she was a bird-watcher too!

Bird-observing is a happy, harmless hobby. The eternal language of the twittering sparrow, the cheeky antics of the robin, the hops of some birds, the walks of others. The soaring notes from the throbbing throat of the speckled thrush, the dapper thieving magpie, the imitative jackdaw, the whole parade of our native and immigrant bird-life is a continual performance fit for any stage.

A study of their love-rituals, their nests, eggs, visiting and eating habits is a fascinating pastime. We observers are a breed, a sect, a family on our own, inviolable.

Such were Ham and Egg and Beans.

For Bernadette was too long for the kindly customers at the local, it was soon plain B; or Bee. Inevitably, we were eventually Ham, Egg and Beans.

Not that we minded. We were happy together; in a fool's paradise.

Yes, fools that we were, we both fell in love with Bee. It took months

and crept up on us unawares, but then we knew it, admitted it, recognized it, even gloried in it.

We were civilized, cultured people. Bee must choose.

She did. Egbert. It couldn't be otherwise; he was taller, handsomer. And richer.

They married, Bee left her lodgings, gave up her job, lived at the bungalow, tended Egbert—and they watched birds.

I watched birds—and their bungalow. I'd never felt so alone, so depressed, forsaken—and envious.

Oh, they visited me, and I, them; but it was different: oh, so different. Into each life some rain must fall and I was drenched—a saturated iota of loneliness in a miserable world.

Then tragedy struck. Material from a bird's nest blocked the flue of the bathroom gas heater at the bungalow and Egbert died from carbon monoxide poisoning. He died alone. Bee was away visiting her ailing mother.

She rushed back. I did everything I could to help her in her sorrow and through all the formalities sudden death entails. She leaned heavily on me and I mellowed under her influence. I preened that someone needed me, relied on me.

In the locals it was now Ham and Beans, the birdwatchers. Yes, we kept to our hobby.

Even when we married.

It was a good hobby. It had enabled me to position and instal that nest so naturally that nobody for a moment suspected that anybody but a bird could build it.

Of course, being in a solicitor's office, I'd made sure that Egbert's will remained valid—and married Bee in case she contested it.

And another egg is coming, Egbert.





TOO STRANGE TO TELL

DINAH CASTLE

THE jet plane streaked by, only a few feet, it seemed, above the trees. She cringed to the earth while the roar stunned her—pinned her down. Then it had passed and the silence was soft, complete, enveloping.

“The brute!” fumed Mabel Tillett, still crouching on the turf under the old apple tree in her back garden. “It’s enough to give an old person a heart attack. It could kill someone!” It reminded her of the war: those flying bombs, when one heard the engine cut out and flung oneself under anything for shelter—a table, a doorway, or even one’s bed.

Miss Mabel Tillett slowly regained her composure. The birds were chirping again, a great drowsy bumblebee zoomed slowly over the clover in the grass. How pungent the grass smelt, and the earth had a

smoky-sweet smell she had never noticed before. But something was wrong.

She couldn't get to her feet. She could move her hands and feet, but she couldn't straighten her back. She had a curious feeling of being very small and light. Something had happened to her—perhaps she had had a heart attack, or a stroke, or perhaps she was dead.

It might be as well to call for help. Her house was one of a pair of semi-detached. If her neighbour had her back door open she would hear. "Peggy," she tried to call. "Are you there, Peggy?" But the words didn't come and the sound she made frightened her.

A blackbird was uttering its warning note, "cavé, cavé," over and over again, as they do when an intruder ventures near their nest or when there is a cat about.

A cat!

Something was affecting her vision. She could see each leaf, each blade of grass, even a tiny ant as clearly as if under a magnifier—but her hands weren't there. Two black furry paws intruded themselves close to her face. She stretched and flexed her muscles and saw protruding claws. Strange waves of feeling vibrated along her back, and beyond her back, a switching—a whisking of a long furry tail.

Mabel crouched motionless, waiting for the nightmare to pass, but it was no dream. She heard the four-thirty bus stop in the road in front of the house. She often came home on that bus after a visit to the shops and library. Such happy jaunts, with a pleasant chat to this person or that, for she was rather talkative, as many people who live alone tend to be.

The blackbird was keeping up its calling note and her special robin came to the bird bath, saw her, and streaked away in sudden fear. Her birds! All the winter she had kept them fed; this very morning she had filled the bird bath with fresh water. Now they looked on her as an enemy. They saw her as a cat.

Thank goodness her back door was ajar. She looked round furtively then darted into the house. She ran crying from room to room, upstairs and down. She mewed piteously.

Everything in the house was in perfect order, Mabel Tillett was very particular. She loved her home. A tub-shaped easy chair was her favourite place for the evenings. She would bring in her tea tray with the little silver teapot that had belonged to her mother. There she would

sit, a piece of knitting at the ready, and the television on. How cosy it all was! What a lot there was to enjoy!

In the kitchen she made a sudden jump on to the cabinet top; her paws landed easily on the small space beside the tray set out with her tea things, three pieces of thin bread and butter and a shortcake biscuit. A cup of tea can cure many ills, perhaps it was just what she needed. But how could one switch on the electricity or make tea with the paws of a cat? She continued to mew.

In her bedroom she forced herself to jump on the dressing-table and peered fearfully into the mirror. There was no mistake—two great sad eyes stared back at her. A cat—a common cat, rusty black with a tatty ruff!

She sprang on her bed. To lie between the sheets, to sleep, to shut herself away from this terrible situation. With extended claws she managed to pull down the top of the mauve and white candlewick bedspread from over the pillows. She curled herself into the small opening and slept.

When she woke the room was dark. For a moment she thought her television must be on, then realized it was the Mintons' next door. Ron and Peggy and their twelve-year-old son were the best of friends and neighbours; it was a comfort to know they were close by. There would be the milkman to pay on Saturday, and what about her food? There was meat in the fridge, but she couldn't open the door. She ate the bread and butter from the tray and was able to drink some of the milk by dipping her paw in the jug.

Mabel wandered out into the garden and was intoxicated by the scented night: flowers and wet soil and leaves, grass mowings and pungent currant bushes. Little rustling sounds distracted her. How could she cash her cheques, telephone her grocery order? The Mintons would have to help.

She tiptoed timidly into the Mintons' kitchen, the smell of the casserole Peggy had just put on the table for their dinner making the saliva run into her mouth. They would not know her as Mabel Tillett, but surely something of their long association must survive. She announced her presence with an ingratiating mew.

"Get out of it, you brute!" That was Peggy, her closest friend!

The boy reached out a hand; his father snapped: "Don't touch it—just when you're having a meal too! It's probably got fleas!"

Mabel Tillett was out of that house, over the wooden fence, in at her

own back door like a jet-propelled arrow. She cowered under a chair trembling with anger. How dared he! Fleas indeed! The insult would never be forgotten. After all she had done for that family; they were always going away on holiday and getting her to water their tomatoes, feed their budgie, and goodness knows what else. Well, never again—a friendship of years had been shattered in a matter of seconds.

Saturday morning the milkman called and Mabel came running to meet him, glad to see a familiar person and hoping he would leave her a bottle of milk. "Hallo, Puss!" he said, rubbing her ears. Mabel, unused to such familiarity, withdrew in disgust and sat on the stairs peeping through the banisters until he had gone.

A minute later she heard his voice at the Mintons. "Anything wrong next door?"

"Not that I know of," Peggy said. "Why d'you ask?"

"The lady didn't take in yesterday's milk. The bottle was upset and the top scratched off. Looks like it might have been her cat that did it."

"But she hasn't got a cat, unless——"

"Back door open, too, and a lot of dirty paw marks."

"Good gracious, there must be something wrong! I'll go straight round."

"I'll come with you, if you like, in case there's help wanted."

Now the alarm will be raised and goodness knows what will happen to me, thought Mabel. She left the house and squeezed herself under the door of the tool-shed and cringed behind the lawnmower.

She heard Peggy's excited voice. "She's not in the house. Looks as if that damned cat has been sleeping on her bed. Her handbag's there. Something must have happened, we'd better call the police."

Peggy had shut the back door and Mabel sat miserably in the shed, hungry and frightened. The upsetting of the milk bottle and lapping some of the milk had been her last source of food.

The police came and she listened to their loud voices and their feet tramping over house and garden. One of them opened the shed door and stared in at her. "A cat here!" he called. "It's not her cat, don't bother about it." Peggy's voice made Mabel's whole body tremble in silent hatred of her one-time friend.

"Will you keep the key until Miss Tillett's niece gets here?" one of the policemen asked Peggy.

Joan, her niece, had been rather a disappointment to Mabel. Being her only relative, she would have liked to lavish affection on her and

that darling little boy of hers. But Joan was much too taken up with her own life to bother with an old aunt. But there! Mabel didn't blame her, she was young, she had her husband and child to look after, and one mustn't expect too much. They came to see her twice a year, arriving in their tiny car, once in the summer and once at Christmas to exchange their gifts and good wishes.

When Joan and Steve, her husband, and little Geoffrey came, they went first to the Mintons. Mabel, who had been a long time without food, listened dully to the babel of conversation. She had crept out of the shed in the night and, overcoming her repugnance, had lapped a little water from a puddle. She felt ashamed of the knowledge that she had left dirty paw marks by the back door, and attempted to wash her paws in the puddle. She withdrew her paw quickly at the unpleasant feel of the water. It might be better to lick them clean, although it seemed a disgusting thing to do. However, it worked very well, her rough tongue rasping nicely through her fur. While her paws were still wet she had freshened up a bit by wiping over her face and ears. Dirty, was she? She'd show those Mintons. She waited for Joan, her last hope of recognition and help.

Joan came round and opened the back door of Mabel's house and Mabel came out of the shed mewing, which was the nearest she could get to saying: Here I am, please don't turn me away!

"There's that ruddy cat again!" said Peggy from her side of the fence. "It wasn't your aunt's, you know."

"Perhaps she had given it food," said Joan; "I'll find something for it."

"You'll only encourage it. The best thing would be to take it to the vet and have it put to sleep."

"Yes, I suppose that would be the kindest thing," Joan agreed. "Have you got a box we could carry it in?"

So that was it—she was to be put to sleep. Peggy went back into her house to make tea for them all, and in Mabel's sitting-room Joan sank into a chair and sighed. Mabel sat at her feet, silently, humbly entreating her to understand.

Useless. She was a stray cat, unwanted. As Joan had said, the kindest thing was death. Well, her life was over—as Mabel Tillett she was already dead. It didn't matter any more; indeed she began to welcome the idea of the box and the prick of the vet's needle.

"Poor Pussy!" Joan murmured, looking down at Mabel. "Poor

Auntie, what can have happened to her? If only we knew. She may have had a terrible accident and no one to help. I wish I'd been to see her more often."

She began to cry, sobbing quietly without trying to stop herself.

Mabel was astonished. Joan, her niece, was grieving for her! Weeping for her—just an old aunt! Oh, the dear girl, how she had misjudged her! In an effort to comfort her she jumped on to the arm of the chair and nuzzled gently under her chin and against her cheek. "You're sweet," said Joan, "somebody's pet, I'm sure." They stared at each other in mutual sympathy.

Peggy came in with little Geoffrey to tell Joan that tea was ready. "We've found a box that will do for the cat. Ron says he will take it to the vet for you, if you like."

"Thanks, Peggy, but I've decided to keep the cat. Look, Geoffrey, nice pussy!"

"Tilly!" said Geoffrey, and two small arms went round her. Mabel was certain that the little fellow knew her; Tilly had been her nickname when she was a girl at school. A wave of pleasure vibrated through her and broke into a strange sound in her throat. She was purring.

* * *

Joan, Steve, and Geoffrey came to live in the house. "After all," said Joan, "if Aunt Mabel has really gone, the house will belong to us, so we might as well move in now. Except for a legacy to the local naturalist trust, she left everything to me in her will."

Mabel heard without paying much attention when the mystery of her disappearance was discussed. Only once did she make any effort to make them understand. She saw a pencil on the table and thought she might hold it in her paws and write her name. But Geoffrey thought it was a game. "Look at Tilly!" he shouted. To please him she pushed the pencil along and pounced on it, it was fun playing with Geoffrey.

When the vicar called, Mabel rubbed herself against his leg; she had been very fond of the vicar. She refused his invitation to sit on his knee; it hardly seemed proper.

"I was going to suggest a memorial service," he said. "It seems we must accept the fact that poor Miss Tillett is dead."

"What do you think could have happened?" Joan asked.

"My opinion, and I think the police agree, is that your aunt went for

a walk by the old gravel pits, a favourite walk of hers. She must have lost her footing and fallen into the water. One day I'm sure her body will be found."

Winter came and her fur grew thick and stood out round her head in a grand ruff. She still loved to watch the birds and was glad Joan put food out for them. In the spring Geoffrey began to go to school and Joan had another baby, a little girl. She would watch Steve gardening in the long summer hours. One year he put up a garage and they got a new car. Then the Mintons next door, not to be outdone, built a garage and got a car. The apples ripened and fell on to the grass, and yet another summer was over. Sometimes she sat in her old tub easy chair and tried to remember the old life that had come to such an abrupt end. It was a long time ago.

The roar of a jet plane would send her scurrying into the house, and she never got over her hostility to her former friends on the other side of the fence, otherwise—contentment, a loving, purring contentment—a cat's life!

The Mintons were away on holiday, Joan having taken on the job of watering their tomatoes and feeding their budgie. It was September, days of clear sunshine and the gardens full of roses, Michaelmas daisies, and golden rod. It was an exciting day for the children—Joan and Steve were taking them to London to see a pageant on the Thames and a firework display. They were packing themselves and a picnic lunch into the car. "Goodbye, Tilly! Goodbye, Tilly!" the children called again and again. Now there was no one in the two adjoining gardens except for Tilly the cat. She suffered a moment of distress, almost as though she would never see them again.

The sun beat down on the dried-up grass and insects hummed through the flowers, the sort of day when a cat could drowse the time away. Mabel walked round restlessly. She missed the family, especially Geoffrey. She stared up at the windows of the house; it had once been hers, hers alone. She would go inside; in the quiet emptiness of the house she could pretend that it was hers again. She jumped through the kitchen fanlight, which had been left open for her.

On a saucer on the floor was a helping of cold lamb. How nice, she thought, if there had been a little of that delicious tomato chutney that she used to make. The Mintons had always given her the tomatoes, and she had made the chutney for them and for herself. For the first

time for years Mabel softened at the thought of the Mintons. If she and Peggy could only have a chat over old times!

Her tub easy chair was getting very shabby, but she was glad it was still there. The place seemed very small, there was so much furniture, it was cramped. In her old bedroom the double bed and child's cot took up most of the room, but her mahogany chest of drawers was still there. In the top drawer she had kept her gloves, hankies, scarfs, stockings, all in neat little piles. Now, she supposed, it would be full of Joan's or Steve's things, all in a jumble.

She reached out to touch the inlaid border with the tips of her—fingers! Good heavens, what was happening to her? Look—her hands! Her arms—the cuffs of that old mauve cardigan! Slowly, with a pounding heart, she turned to face the mirror—she was exactly as she used to be, round faced, greying hair, short, rather sturdy, a country woman. “Just an ordinary person, but me—Mabel Tillett—I've come back!”

She smiled at herself, she laughed. She clasped her hands in sheer excitement. What should she do? Run next door: “Peggy—I'm back!” Then she remembered there was no one at home. Besides, she thought, I must be careful. For years they had all thought of her as dead; if Peggy were to see her suddenly, it would give her a shock. She would stare white-faced, terror-stricken—she would think she was a ghost.

It was a good thing she had the rest of the day to herself. How would she be able to explain her reappearance after all this time? Without even a postcard to warn the family of her arrival, without a suitcase, without money or anything but the clothes she was wearing; the more she thought about it the more extraordinary was it going to appear. First, she must go away, then write to warn them of her return. But where could she go? How could she get any money? It was going to be very difficult. Could she, she wondered, tell them the truth?

Whatever the difficulties, it was wonderful to be herself again; happiness flooded her whole being. The house was not hers now, of course, but the place where she had spent so many happy years. The bathroom, once so spotless, was a jumble of towels and toilet articles and bath toys. A row of Steve's big socks and Geoffrey's little ones were hanging on a string over the bath. The house was too small for the family, there would be no room for her.

A nice cup of tea, Mabel thought, what a treat that would be! She

wondered what they had done with her little silver teapot. She carried the tray into the sitting-room, just as she used to do, and let her thoughts rove over these last strange years. She felt so completely herself again that her experience was already taking on the quality of a dream. But at least three years must have passed.

Three years! Think of the shock for Joan and Steve when they got home and saw her there. To them she was dead, a long time dead. Would they be glad to have her back? Would they have to give up the house and the money they had inherited? No, she wouldn't hear of it. She must not spoil things for the family she loved and who had protected her when disaster had come upon her.

But even if she lived somewhere else, they would feel obliged to support her. However she looked at it, she was going to be an expense and an embarrassment. She smiled to herself now at the very idea of telling them the truth. One thing she saw very plainly, hers was a story too strange to tell.

* * *

The afternoon was passing, and still she sat there thinking and wondering. A great contentment filled her. She had been a happy person and had loved her house and garden; the changing seasons; the walks with members of the naturalist trust along the paths round the old flooded gravel pits, looking now like natural lakes. It had been so lucky for her that she lived so close to such a lovely place.

The shadows were lengthening—time was running out, but she had had a lovely afternoon. She took the tray into the kitchen and put things back exactly as she had found them. One more loving look round the house, one peep into the garden, at the sand pit, the swing, and the long washing line. There was everything for a happy, busy family, but there was no place for her.

Mabel peered cautiously out of the front door as a car passed, then a cyclist. When there was no one in sight she closed the door gently behind her. She walked at a good pace until she came to the lane that led to the gravel pits. She delighted to see the bryony rambling carelessly over the hedges, and there were blackberries in plenty and yellowing bracken. Dew was beginning to wet the grass, and a sharpness came into the air with a foretaste of autumn.

On the first stretch of water a moorhen flapped nervously out of the

reeds at her approach. Far out a pair of swans floated motionless above their mirrored forms.

Mabel Tillett took a long, long look. She wanted to thank the world for being so beautiful, and to show her gratitude that she had been able to find such happiness in it. She stepped into the water, waited breathlessly for the shock of the coldness to pass, then moved out into deeper water. It lapped about her chest, her neck. There was a sudden clamour about her—the swans were beating on the water, they lifted into the air, and flew off with a thudding of their great wings.

Mabel began to lose the feeling of her feet touching the bottom. She was swaying, the water lapping at her ears and mouth. She thought she heard Geoffrey's voice crying anxiously, tearfully: Tilly, Tilly, Tilly! Yes, they would grieve for the loss of their cat, but the few tears at her passing had been shed long ago.

She drew as deep a breath as she could, exhaled steadily until he had emptied her lungs of air, then closing her eyes slipped under the surface and let the cold water rush into her body and carry her away.



I would like to be there, were it but to see how the cat jumps.

SIR WALTER SCOTT



When I play with my cat, who knows whether I do not make her more sport than she makes me?

MONTAIGNE



DEADLY FRIENDSHIP

HERBERT HARRIS

The trouble with Joe Brady was that he panicked easily. There was only a tiny brain in the big hulking body. So he would become quickly scared and do things on an impulse, without thinking.



WHEN Milligan knocked on the door, there was first a pause, then a hoarse voice the other side of the panel asked: "Who's that?"

"It's Milligan, Joe ... Mike Milligan." A silence. "We used to work together for Scanlan's mob a long time ago—remember?"

Another silence. "I've come to help you, Joe. Let me in."

Joe Brady opened the door a few inches, looked hard at his caller, then pulled him in and shut the door again and bolted it.

Milligan glanced around the attic bed-sitter, badly lighted, dingy, stale-smelling. The bed hadn't been made and there were dirty dishes on the table. Brady needed a shave and clean clothes.

"Strewth," Milligan whistled, "you been holing up in this den for two weeks?"

Brady glared. "How come you know so much?"

"I got all the gen from a mutual friend, Joe. Charlie Wells. He told me you weren't going out, that you weren't showing yourself anywhere. He said I should come and talk to you."

"Dare not show myself," Joe Brady growled. "I just want to stay out of sight and out of mind till all the hoo-hah about that Foster girl has died down. I gather you know all about it?"

Milligan nodded.

Yes, he knew all about it, not just from the bits he had read, but what he had picked up along the underworld grapevine.

Nancy Foster had been found lying on the bedroom floor of her flat. The head beneath the crown of shiny blonde hair had revealed an ugly gash, the blood congealed across the shattered skull.

The blonde, formerly a barmaid, now a model, had been coshed, maybe with a spanner or a length of lead piping. The man who had hit her had used too heavy a blow on too thin a skull and Nancy Foster was dead.

It hadn't been a sex crime or anything like that, but just plain robbery with violence. Perhaps not so much "plain" robbery, though. It was crude, clumsy, brutal—the kind of job Joe Brady had done before, although he had never killed anyone before.

The trouble with Joe Brady was that he panicked easily. There was only a tiny brain in the big hulking body, and he became quickly scared and did things on an impulse without thinking.

Brady had not expected the girl to be at home in the first place, because they said she never got back to her flat till after midnight.

It had looked like a cinch. By standing on that pile of bricks the workmen had conveniently left there, he could easily reach the window-sill of her bedroom and haul himself up. A dead cushy number, this job, with some very nice bits of "ice" as a reward.

Nancy Foster had some really nice diamonds, they said. Presents from various gentlemen friends, plus a lot of stuff her old Mum had left her, and her old Mum hadn't been all she ought to be either.

"Yes, I know most of what happened," Mike Milligan said. "And Charlie Wells said you were in dead trouble. He said you couldn't possibly know what real trouble you're in, and somebody ought to tell you, and quick."

Joe Brady's round unintelligent moon of a face slowly creased with suspicion and anguish. "What does Charlie know that I don't know?"

"That's what I've come to tell you, Joe."

"Why can't Charlie come herself?"

"Because Charlie's real sick. He has to go into hospital. He told me what to tell you, though . . . what to advise you to do."

Brady wagged his large head. "A good scout, is old Charlie. He knows me, see? Knows I wouldn't knock off a dame just for the hell of it."

"We all know that, Joe."

"I mean . . . she suddenly comes out of the bathroom. Half naked. She opens her mouth to yell, and I shove my hand over it. She thinks I'm a rapist and fights like an alley-cat. Blimey, how that blonde could fight. I was in a funk. I just let her have it. I never meant to do her in."

"Sure, sure, sure," Milligan said. "But like Charlie says, the cops can only pin it on you when they get hold of that glove."

Joe Brady stared at his visitor, grimacing, swallowing. "Glove? What glove?"

"The rubber glove with the piece missing out of it. You wore rubber-gloves on the job, didn't you, Joe? You never did a job without rubber gloves, did you?"

"That's right—I never left prints nowhere."

Milligan shook his head pityingly. "You did worse than leave prints, Joe. That's why I'm here to help you. There was a rusty screw sticking up out of the Foster girl's window-sill, and you tore a hole in one of your gloves."

Brady licked his lips. "You mean . . . I did leave a print?"

"No, there was no print, Joe. But, you see, the rozzers have a little triangular bit of rubber that was left sticking to the rusty screw, and when they find your rubber glove and that little triangle fits . . ."

"Gawd . . . no!"

Milligan shrugged. "You see the spot you're in, Joe. Now, think. . . . What did you do with the gloves?"

"I know what I did with 'em," Brady said. "I stuffed 'em in one of the pockets of my overcoat. The sparklers are in the coat too, tied up in a handkerchief. It's all in the overcoat."

"And what did you do with the overcoat?"

"I left that with Ma Egan. I didn't want to have it around if they should manage to track me down," Brady said worriedly.

"Who the heck's Ma Egan?"

"Oh, she's a proper old character, Ma Egan is. Her old man was a fence afore he kicked the bucket, and she helped him. She's past it now—the old trout's too old—but she'll always do a bloke a good turn if you ask her."

"And you dumped the coat on the old girl?—with your gloves and the sparklers in the pockets?"

Brady swallowed. "Yeah, it seemed like a good idea. I told her to look after it for me till it was safe for me to go and get it . . . when all the palaver had died down, like. Of course, the old girl didn't know nothing about me doing that bird in."

"You want your head seen to, Joe," Milligan said. "Suppose someone snouts on you, and they go ferreting round this Ma Egan's place, and they find your coat with that glove in it . . . the glove they're busy looking for?"

Brady's face was half scowling, half frightened. "That might be dicey," he said. "What do you think I should do, then?"

"Well, it sticks out a mile," Milligan said patiently. "I mean, some-

body's got to get that coat from Ma Egan and see that the gloves are taken out and destroyed before the rozzers get there."

Joe Brady's face looked quite pale. "Yeah . . . yeah," he muttered. "And you'll do this for me?"

"It's why I'm here, Joe. We've got to help each other, haven't we?"

Brady's face suddenly darkened again, as if obscured by a cloud. "Here . . . you're going to want a cut in them sparklers, eh?"

Milligan shrugged, smiling. "Well, Joe . . . If you feel you'd like to show your appreciation in some way . . ."

"Yeah," Brady said, "but how do I know you won't scarper with the flaming lot?"

Milligan spread his hands. "Look, Joe, I'm a comrade. You've got to trust me, haven't you? You're in dead trouble. So what's the alternative?"

Brady thought for a bit, biting his nails. "Okay," he said at last. "I'll give you Ma Egan's address. It's quite a way from here. You'd better go right away. It's good of you really. I don't want to show my face just yet. . . ."

"That's right," Milligan said. He jotted down Ma Egan's address. "And now, Joe, I shall want a little note from you—to this Ma Egan—authorizing me to collect the coat on your behalf."

"Yeah, of course," Brady said. He wrote laboriously with a blunt pencil, his tongue protruding from one corner of his mouth. He smiled sadly at his visitor. "My writing ain't so good, but old Ma Egan will know it all right."

"That's fine, Joe."

"It was decent of you to come, sport," Brady said. "You'll be coming straight back when you've done the necessary?"

"I'll be back," Milligan answered, "don't you worry."

Brady dashed a fist into his palm. "Dam' and blast it," he said through clenched teeth. "Fancy me being daft enough to leave a bit of glove sticking to that screw! Why the hell couldn't I have noticed it?"

"The excitement, Joe," Milligan said, and he smiled a sad smile as Brady shut the door behind him and nervously bolted it.

* * *

It was funny, thought Milligan to himself, how things worked out. When Mike Milligan had been sent to jail for a sizeable stretch—

that was following what he swore would be his last job—his girl friend had promised to wait for him. They were going to be married when he got out.

And then his girl friend had been murdered. Murdered for nothing, you might say. Her name had been Nancy Foster.

Inspector Greeley would be real pleased to get that coat of Joe's, with the gloves and the sparklers in the pockets. Nancy's sparklers. She was going to sell them and set them up in a little business. . . .

Not that the rubber glove would help the Inspector. And it wasn't at all strange that Brady had never noticed the hole in the glove. There had never been a hole. Milligan had invented that.



WAIT FOR ME!

BARRIE HAMILTON-STAITE

If only he could stay there in the solitude and peace of Passal's painting . . . the immense flat emptiness of the Gobi desert . . .

ALREADY dark outside, the brittle autumn leaves were rustling on the steps, and the gallery almost deserted except for a few late viewers, softly padding from picture to picture, respectfully, as though in some important tomb. And a vague-looking tramp, gazing emptily at a still life, seeing fish and chips, and piping-hot pies, instead of the rosy-painted apples and too-green lettuce on the canvas, concerned only with the brief warmth and shelter the huge building provided.

In a remote, quiet corner, Compton stood, rigid, motionless, dreaming in front of Pedro Passal's "Desert Waste", the immense representation of the flat emptiness of the Gobi, with a blood-red sun dipping below the horizon, and the minute, hardly definable caravan disappearing into it. They said it was the artist's finest work, this masterpiece which had taken two years to create, and which was completed one week before his death, as though the tremendous effort had exhausted him.

There was about the picture a mysterious reality, felt by all who beheld it, and born of the secret and subtle combination of colour and perspective which Passal had used. One thought one could grasp a handful of the gritty sand in the forefront, and actually hear the vast music of silence, where no living thing moved or spoke, save the distant caravan entering that huge ball of red fire, under the glowing tubular sky.

Compton came every day to stare at the picture; night after compelling night on his way home he would slip into the gallery, out of the milling, dodging streets, packed with people hurrying towards the Underground or bus queues, spewing out of the offices and ministries and swallowed again down the steps and escalators, like sluggish human waterfalls. The gallery, with its soft lights, peace and silence, and with Passal's living window framing a greater solitude, was a

sacred sanctuary where he felt safe, tranquil, yet experienced a longing that was so intense it had frightened him at first.

At the hospital, the special hospital, with its spacious grounds enclosed in high, grey walls, they said his fears of crowds, and noise, and movement were due to a guilt complex, arising from his firm belief that he, and he alone, was responsible for his wife's death in a car accident. He had been driving the car, and it took place after a quarrel between them, a stupid, meaningless argument about nothing; and after he'd drunk a sufficient amount to impair his judgement.

He remembered getting into the vehicle, and brow-beating his wife for miles; ranting, raving, blindly blaming her for everything, incensed by her humble, accepting attitude—and her silence. If only she'd argued and stormed as he did, fought him, stood up to him, given him less to reproach himself for; but instead she'd been docile, afraid of his anger, and the last painful mind-picture he had was the vision of her face in the driving-mirror, white, small, so utterly miserable. It haunted him wherever he went, appeared in every reflecting surface, still miserable, still wondering, still not angry with him, yet unforgiving because of its continual presence and sadness.

Despite the glib assurances of the doctors and the complacent deductions of friends and acquaintances he felt everyone knew about it, thought about it as he did. He imagined they all really saw him clothed in the stiff garment of his guilt, thought he heard them whispering as he passed, translated ordinary glances into looks of accusation, read meanings into everyday statements and comments.

"Sorry, sir. We're closing now."

He heard the gallery attendant's voice from afar, as he stood in the tepid sand of Passal's "Desert Waste", in the solitude and peace of the picture, and didn't answer for a long moment, unwilling to admit he was back in the gallery, faced with gentle but inevitable eviction. If only he could stay there, still and safe for ever. Outside were the moving faces and knowing eyes; outside were the winking, illuminated advertisements which banded together and construed themselves into approaching headlights, advancing upon him out of the darkness, prior to the screams of brakes which whined as if in triumph, then changed into the long, high-pitched shriek of fear, her fear, beside him in the car as he fought and prayed at the wheel. Then the whole cacophony of sound, ending with the splintering of glass, before blood, silence, pain and void.

"Come on now, please sir"—the attendant almost touched his arm.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Compton played for time, craftily, carefully, his words calm, almost nonchalant, like a man talking flatly about the weather or statistics, like a man merely trying to be sociable.

"Some likes it, some don't," said the attendant. "Never thought much of deserts meself; too cold in the nights, for one thing."

"Were *you* ever in the desert then?" Compton was deliberately respectful, knowing each moment that passed was precious, was a moment gained against the accusing throng in the streets outside.

"Aye"—the attendant rocked back and fore on his heels, and elsewhere might have spat importantly. "Eighth Army. Western Desert. Tobruk, El Alamein, all that lot. Went right through it all. Eleventh Hussars . . . the 'Cherry-pickers', y'know."

Compton nodded, yawned, swayed a little, forced himself to carry on speaking calmly. "Fine regiment, the Eleventh. I was with the Long Range Desert Group myself. Tell me, do you remember those nights under the stars, with the tank engines stopped, and that great silence, peace and desolation all about you? I used to stare up into the sky for hours on end. It was like being alone on the earth, with no war, no enemy, no other people, no responsibilities, nothing."

"We used to play cards by a shaded torch," said the attendant, momentarily caught up in a fragment of unaccustomed nostalgia. "And brew up under the tank, real sergeant-major's tea, best char ever. We had a chap called—er—Briggs, yeah, Briggs, that's it—who could reel off dirty jokes for hours. Often wondered where he got 'em all from; brewers' drayman in civvy street he was."

"I used to recite poetry into the darkness," said Compton, yawning again, staring at the picture and feeling a strange warmth and elation. "Omar Khayyám, Housman, Sassoon, Rupert Brooke, one could appreciate their thoughts and verses out there."

The attendant nodded vaguely at the unfamiliar names, but would not admit he was a stranger to such reminiscence. "We had a corporal, little fella, Londoner, with a moustache, used to recite monologues. 'Sam, pick up thy musket, Albert an' the Lion, knew em all he did. He used to imitate Stanley Holloway a treat. I remember once, this same fella, everyone called him Sam, or Stan, on account of his . . ."

The voice droned on, recalling some exploit in a bar in Cairo, and Compton let it flow over his head, crouched down in his own, secret depths, disinterested, using it and its owner only to prolong the safety

of the gallery, gaining time. Again he felt the warm sand about his feet, saw the movement of the caravan in the distance, and once again his hand closed round the empty tablet box in his pocket. He experienced the great, frightening, yet exciting surge of weariness, the weakness in his knees and the heady dizziness, stronger each time it returned, like a prolonged, pleasant drunkenness, where "time" could not be called, or the bar shut down. Soon, very soon, it would be time to do what he came to do.

"What's the alternative?" he asked himself, laboriously, wondering vaguely why he should bother asking when he'd been over it all so many times before. The empty house; the vacant chair the other side of the fireplace. The wardrobe, still full of clothes, her clothes, which once moved, sat, stood, walked and bent with her movements. The drawers with their hundred and one accusing objects, photographs, cards, things heavily laden with memories which screamed out their testimonies and associations no matter how deep they were locked away and fastened down; and above all that face, that dear, unhappy face in every pane at night, in the garden, in the dark, peeping into the house.

"What's the matter, sir? Are you ill?"—again the attendant's voice from a hundred miles away.

All that misery waiting behind him, beyond the gallery, beyond the knowing crowds and composite seas of faces, over the tops of the buildings, right back to that intimate empty shell of a house; but in front of him the great, tranquil waste and the minute caravan, journeying into nothingness.

It was almost time to move, to act; another split instant and he would surge, forward, just time enough to relish it, to perversely hang back to savour the gladness of the end of it all. The picture suddenly began to blur, the huge red ball of the sun, enlarged and spinning, seemed to reach out with blunt, hot arms to embrace him. He plunged and pitched towards it, eagerly, crashing and tripping over the guarding, gilt, looped ropes, shouting in silence, laughing without movement of eye or lip, crying with dry-eyed relief, gasping, crawling at last in the gritty sand of Pedro Passal's Gobi Desert.

When the shaken attendant eventually returned, guiding the ambulance men with their stretcher. Compton was no longer there. Certainly the pod, the shell of Compton lay at the foot of the picture on the balding carpet, awkwardly, one arm bent beneath the body,

the other outstretched and clutching at the frame, the head on one side, features expressionless. They looked down at him, shook their heads and scratched them, sympathized with his unknown, secret troubles. One began to examine him briefly, with his limited, first-aid knowledge, found the empty tablet box, with its cautionary inscription, in his pocket, then went to the telephone, frowning importantly.

They didn't see the small, elated, almost-free figure which spun, and danced, and jumped in the picture above them, spattering its minute footsteps on the caked canvas, or hear the laughing, tiny voice calling across the waste to the caravan, which halted, waiting, for an unspecified time in response.

"Wait for me!" called the voice. "Wait for me!"

Then the ambulance sped through the autumn evening, its bell clanging loudly, urgently, like an unmusical, monotonous carillon, calling out the news that someone was trying to escape before his time; and ahead of it, in a huge grey pile of hospital, firmly dedicated figures briskly moved, disturbing the disinfected air, rustling with clinical skirts, preparing their pumps, tubes, and wetly gleaming instruments.

In the early hours of the morning, in the dappled darkness of the gallery, behind locked doors and high, secure windows, no one heard the tinkling bells on the camels in the picture, as the caravan rose on the horizon, at some precise signal, and continued its journey into the sinking sun.



What man or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrils? What wild ecstasy?

JOHN KEATS





ROMAN CANDLE

M. WHITAKER

W

HEN Teresa died, I vowed to get even with Jake Evans at all costs. So I made my plans and I waited. For six months I waited. I cannot deny that this took a great deal of restraint on my part, but then I have always contended that a job worth doing is worth doing well—and I wanted Jake

Evans well and truly dead.

I can still remember so vividly the shock of returning home from work on that fateful evening six months ago and finding my young wife dead. Young to me, that is. I was almost fifty-five when we met and already a widower, with a daughter in her late teens, so I never thought I should stand much chance of winning Teresa, who was twenty years younger than myself and all that I could wish for in a woman. But marry me she did, and all very happily it turned out—or so I thought.

Only after her death did I discover that Teresa had been carrying on with another man. Her suicide note was quite plain on that point. That she had loved him desperately was also clarified, as was her despair on

learning that he intended leaving her for another woman. The only piece of relevant information the note failed to disclose was his identity.

To say that all this came as a great shock to me is an understatement. I had no inkling, you see, none at all. I was overjoyed when Teresa consented to marry me. I showered clothes and gifts upon her, gave her a free hand with the complete re-decorating and furnishing of the house and carried on in much the same manner as any other man besotted by love. Maybe I was foolish in assuming that Teresa was happy too, but she never gave me any cause to think otherwise. It seemed to me that she fitted perfectly into the role as my wife and step-mother to Maureen.

In fact, Teresa and Maureen became good friends, which put the final seal on my happiness. Maureen and I have always been devoted to each other and, although her mother had died when she was very young, I was nevertheless relieved at her taking so readily to Teresa.

“Good luck, Dad!” I remember her saying on the day of the wedding. I was quite touched when she kissed my cheek and did the same to Teresa. “I hope you’ll both be very happy!” she whispered, and went off to spend the next few days with a girl-friend in London, so that Teresa and I could have the house to ourselves for a while.

Mind you, Maureen was so often out pursuing her own interests that she need hardly have felt in the way. A pretty girl, with a happy-go-lucky nature, she commanded her fair share of boy-friends, and it seemed that scarcely an evening went by without her being off on some jaunt or other. It was, nonetheless, thoughtful of her to arrange this brief honeymoon period for Teresa and myself. We had already agreed to postpone our real honeymoon until things were less hectic at the garage where I worked in partnership with Jake Evans.

Jake Evans! How I came to loathe that name! It is hard to describe the mixture of hate and torment I felt when it glared out at me from the pages of Teresa’s diary some weeks after her death.

* * *

It was quite by accident that I came across the diary. Naturally, the police had tried all ways of finding out the name of the unknown man referred to in Teresa’s suicide note, but he had covered his tracks well and had not come forward at the inquest. I had sworn at the time

that Teresa had never kept a diary and fully believed this to be true. Indeed, thorough searching had failed to disclose one, and it was, as I say, only by sheer accident that I found it, wedged between a gap in the skirting board behind her wardrobe on the day I put our bedroom suite up for auction. Somehow, I could no longer bear sleeping in the same room with the shiny new furniture that Teresa had chosen so eagerly when we married. It was too poignant a reminder.

I had always suspected that Jake was over-fond of women. His own marriage had suffered badly because of it and his wife had walked out on him several years ago, but as a business partner he was first class and our relationship was largely maintained on this basis, with little reference made to our private lives. He had shown such genuine sincerity in his concern for me over Teresa's death, it had not occurred to me that he might have betrayed me in this way. But the entries in the diary were indisputable evidence.

My first impulse, on discovery, was to run straight out of the house and into the garage next door to confront Jake with the diary. I was shaking with rage and humiliation and could, I know, have killed him outright with my bare hands. Instead, I controlled myself and, placing the diary carefully in the breast pocket of my overalls, walked slowly out of the room and downstairs.

Jake was in the garage when I entered. It had been a relatively slack day and he was taking the opportunity of replacing the worn tyre on his own Mercedes, a job he had been wanting to do for weeks.

He grinned in the crooked way that must have endeared him to many female hearts and straightened up to his full height of six feet. He was over forty, but looked ten years younger with his frank, boyish face and dark hair hardly touched by grey. I envied him his lithe figure and manner of self-assurance.

"Want the old car especially for tonight," he said, and winked knowingly.

I had never questioned his amorous life, but this time I asked:

"Anyone I know?"

Jake laughed. "No, old boy, never anyone *you* know!" he replied, and went back to the task of replacing the tyre, whistling softly between his teeth.

I think it was his casual manner that inflamed me into wanting to beat the life out of him there and then, but, with an effort, I turned aside and walked out.

“If anything happens to Jake Evans,” I told myself savagely, “I shall see that the blame won’t be laid at my door!”

It was then that I started making my plans. My first task was to burn the diary. I was the only person who knew the identity of the mystery man in Teresa’s life, and I wished to remain so, if only for the fact that it provided an excellent motive for his death and I had no intention of being prime suspect after his demise. Not that I anticipated any suspicions being aroused in this respect, as I intended it to look like a genuine accident, but a little care was a wise precaution.

As far as I could see, there was no other obvious motive for my wishing Jake dead. To all appearances we were and always had been on very good terms. Our business partnership was an excellent one, with myself as senior partner investing the major share of the capital. I also had a generous private income, so that no financial benefit would be gained by his death. Indeed, with Jake’s technical skill and know-how far superior to my own, it would be a distinct disadvantage to lose him and I would meet with some difficulty in finding another partner with his particular flair and knowledge of the business.

So, all in all, I felt that a nice, tidy accident would suit my purpose well—providing it could be contrived in such a way as to include the maximum amount of suffering. By this time, I hated Jake so much that only a merciless killing could appease my lust for revenge. My daily dealings with him, outwardly unchanged, left me seething inwardly, and his continued complacency and goodwill towards me in the face of his own private knowledge was fuel to my fire of hatred, another nail in his coffin for his duplicity.

In the ensuing weeks I thought of numerous ways of killing Jake. Painful ways. Cruel ways. I spent hours devising means of a lingering death for him in my imagination, until finally I decided that I would burn him. Alive.

Throughout this time Maureen, who had proved an unexpected source of strength and a great comfort to me during the ordeal of the inquest and general aftermath of Teresa’s death, tolerated my moods with a sympathetic, if somewhat bewildered, attitude.

“Are you sure you feel all right, Dad?” she asked one morning, her bright face taking on an unaccustomed worried frown. “You don’t look at all well. Why not go away for a while? A break would do you the world of good.”

But I could not go away. I had to be near Jake. I needed the proxi-

mity of his person as a perpetual incentive to my plans. I enjoyed watching him work and carrying on his daily routine, rejoicing in the secret knowledge that I was going to put an end to him soon, at a chosen time—my time! And it gratified me to know that Jake, unwittingly, would be playing the leading hand in so far as that it would probably take place on an occasion when he returned from his philanthropies to put his car away in the garage. That Jake was meeting a woman regularly, I already knew. I had become familiar with his general demeanour at such times and it got so that I could read him like a book.

* * *

So it was that, on the afternoon of Monday, 5th November, when Jake returned from lunch looking particularly buoyant, I knew that I could go ahead with my plans to kill him that night. I never had any doubt that he would be using his car. All I needed to do in the meantime was to await my opportunity during the afternoon to load two spare cans of petrol in the boot of the Mercedes, which was seldom kept locked, and I managed this easily when he went off to the wash-room at five o'clock.

Maureen was out, so I had the house to myself all evening, but it was earlier than I had expected when I heard the Mercedes throbbing up the hill towards the garage. Jake rarely put the car away before midnight on these occasions. However, I ran quickly out of the house and across to the garage. Unlocking the door, I went inside and hurriedly closed it again behind me.

I knelt down behind a stack of used tyres as the car stopped, and I could hear Jake opening the garage door, above the cacophony of exploding fireworks that had become rampant at frequent intervals since dusk.

As Jake slid the Mercedes skilfully inside, I crawled from my hiding-place and was ready, when it finally ground to a halt, to open the boot. Wedging it carefully with a large, economy-size matchbox, I hastily drew from my pocket the firework labelled ROMAN CANDLE and ignited it with my gas-lighter. I then placed it quickly inside the boot, as near as I could judge to the petrol cans I had earlier lodged there.

All this was accomplished in the space of a few seconds, and Jake

had scarcely switched off the ignition before I was out of the garage, closing the door silently behind me and racing for the house.

The explosion rent the air as I reached the shelter of the porch and, turning, I saw the garage roof disperse in a plume of black smoke and flames. The whole building quickly became an inferno and more explosions followed as the fire enveloped neighbouring petrol pumps. It was twenty minutes before the fire brigade arrived, called in from another district. I smiled with satisfaction, thinking of the many accidents that were caused annually through mis-directed fireworks, and what a busy night it always was for them. I had, of course, made some show at attempted rescue, but it was obvious to any layman that the blazing building was impassable, so I retired to the growing group of onlookers when the firemen arrived.

* * *

The questions, when the police came to me somewhat later, were expected and I had all my answers prepared. All except one, that is. For they had found the charred remains of not one, but two bodies in the burnt-out shell of the building.

One had been identified as Jake's, but the other, caught up in the twisted framework of the passenger seat, was beyond all personal identification. All they had to go on was the ring. It was a curious ring, unique in design, and the fire had not entirely diminished this feature, although it was now grotesquely out of shape. But I recognized it easily enough, because I had presented it only last year as a birthday gift. To Maureen.



THE MAN I KILLED

DAVID EAMES

The man stirred, and Foster moved too. He wondered if it were possible that even a man so vulgar and self-centred might not have some psychic awareness of his impending fate?

FOSTER remained very still as he studied the man he was going to kill. Everything about the man was excessively, indeed irritatingly familiar—the inevitable brown suède coat, the cocksparrow felt hat with a feather stuck jauntily in the brim, the smart yet somehow slightly vulgar check-pattern trousers, the patent-leather shoes . . . The man was a cheap show-off; there was nothing else to be said.

However, that wasn't exactly why he was going to kill him. Foster pursed his lips and looked thoughtfully along the line of the gun barrel. The reasons for his impending action were really too diverse to sum up in a sentence or two. If they had to be condensed into a phrase then he supposed it might be called a case of retribution.

He smiled quietly at the rather ironical thought, but did not take his eyes off the image of his victim. The man sat apparently calm and relaxed, looking not at all like someone with only a short time left to live. He was a man in his early forties, with superficial good looks which hid, momentarily, an unmistakable shallowness—it was the face of someone who lived too much on his wits, too little by his heart.

“You cocky bastard!” thought Foster with sudden venom, and for a moment he was tempted to get it over with there and then, but prudence held his hand. He knew that the woman who came in to do the cleaning was still moving around downstairs; it was essential to wait until she had gone.

He thought about the slow, deliberate planning that had led up to this situation—obtaining the fire-arms certificate, acquiring the ammunition and all the other apparatus, and then keeping everything safely hidden from prying eyes. At first it had been worrying, even frightening—but latterly the whole affair had begun to fascinate him.

After all, he thought, curiously, his eyes turning constantly from the gun to his victim, the thing had a certain macabre touch to it that would

hardly fail to appeal. Some killings were claimed to be justified, others were excused as self-defence, a few were perhaps genuine accidents—in most cases the killers were inevitably caught and punished. This was one case which was going to be fool-proof; the killer would never be caught.

He contemplated the shiny barrel of the gun, steadfastly in line with the man's head. For a moment, as he imagined the actual physical result of the explosion, his hand wavered and a shiver ran through his body. But then, he told himself, this was not the moment to lose heart.

Instead, to revive his killer's instinct, he began to think about all the things which the man had done—bad things, cruel things, quite inexcusable things. He remembered becoming aware of him in the Army in the war, a coward at heart without the guts to be even a conscientious objector—and the time he had turned and run abjectly when he could have helped a dying comrade. And then afterwards, because of his superficial good looks, how he had talked his way into a succession of high-pressure selling jobs—well, he supposed he had not been a bad salesman, of a sort. It was an attribute that proved very effective in other ways, too: the number of women the man had casually seduced and then left stranded could be counted on the fingers of several hands.

And then there had been Eve. That had been unforgivable—for that alone the swine deserved to die. Eve had been the only daughter of a nice old-world couple who, when they died, had left her quite a sum of money. The man had known about this and made a dead-set at the girl—only this time, for practical reasons, he decided it was a suitable occasion for marriage.

* * *

They were married with a great amount of show, arranged for by the man but paid for by Eve, and then they moved into Eve's parents' former home. There the man had lived a comfortable life for years, waited on hand and foot by a doting wife who seemed utterly blind to his obvious faults—even when, inevitably for such a man, he began to conduct discreet affairs with other women.

The man stirred, and Foster moved too. He wondered if it were possible that even a man so vulgar and self-centred might not have some psychic awareness of his impending fate. He studied the still

handsome but visibly ravaged face for some signs, noticing at the moment of close inspection those further signs of weakness—the baby lips, the close set of the eyebrows, the unexpected hardness of the blank grey eyes. No, this was hardly the countenance of a man repentant and ready to meet his Maker.

And yet—and yet—— Foster hesitated, a strange warm pain pricking at his eyeballs as he remembered. There had been times when even such a man, yes, even such a man . . . he remembered, inconsequentially, a carefree ramble over the downs, wind blowing in the hair, a gaiety of laughter . . . another occasion, years ago, bathing in the sea in Cornwall, just like a child, with all those worldly cares forgotten. . . . At such times, surely even such a man had been a curiously human being, worthy of some love?

And then another picture came to Foster's mind—of the man with his small son, then only a mite of about two years old, a surprisingly pretty little boy who had obviously adored his father—and, to give him his due, his father had obviously felt the same. Foster had a vivid memory once of the two of them playing in the park; the little boy waddling across the green turf, arms outstretched, and being picked up by his father and whirled round and round and round. . . .

Wasn't there perhaps some excuse after all?

Foster shook his head slowly, half to himself, half at the man's image. Excuses were a short-term currency: they were never good value for a long-term loan. Besides, the man's wife and child had long since left him, driven away by his own selfish behaviour—for a time they had disappeared, but recently word had come that they had started a new life far away, in another country. Foster knew only too well that the man, once he had recovered some kind of Dutch courage, was quite capable of following them, intruding into their new life, perhaps ruining their chances of making a fresh start.

Suddenly Foster gave a start, hearing the bump of the front door as the woman closed it behind her and walked away down the garden path, leaving the house enveloped in a deathly silence. Well, then, there it was. . . .

He swallowed hard and took a last look at the man he was going to erase from the face of the earth. Funny, but in this moment of extremity, his dominant feeling was simply one of pity. After all, everyone was a human being, everyone had desires and hopes, the same yearning for the intangible and marvellous magic of life. Everyone

reached out, few grasped the precious fruit. This man had been like that, too, poor devil. It wasn't altogether his fault that he had turned out to be such a rotter, it wasn't altogether his fault that he was weak and vain, cowardly and cruel. . . . And now look at him, left all alone and unloved in the world. Poor lonely devil. . . .

"To hell with you, you miserable bag of self-pity!" shouted Foster in a last paroxysm of blind railing—against fate, against time, against truth.

Then with a decisive gesture he pressed the button of the long cord leading back to the gun fixed firmly on the tripod in front of the mirror facing him . . . and the gun fired, the bullet passing clean through the centre of Foster's forehead, as planned.

The verdict was suicide while of unsound mind.



The play is done; the curtain drops,
Slow falling to the prompter's bell:
A moment yet the actor stops,
And looks around to say farewell.
Is is an irksome word and task:
And when he's laughed, and said his say,
He shows, as he removes the mask,
A face that's anything but gay.

WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY





THE EMBERS OF HATRED

JOHN TAVERNER

MAJOR-GENERAL Sir Arthur Haig, K.G., M.C., D.S.O., lit his Corona, glanced quickly around the club lounge, and then fixed his startlingly blue eyes on his guest, Inspector Barney Blake.

"My eldest brother, Tristram, is in a spot of trouble," said the General. "He's a crackpot—but a brilliant crackpot, and many distinguished people have a tremendous amount of respect and admiration for him. I hold him in the same high regard, Inspector, and I can assure you my opinion is not warped by brotherly affection."

"Why do you call him a crackpot?" said Blake, smiling.

"He's a religious mystic, founder and leader of a sect who call themselves 'The Brotherhood of the Astral'. They live a monk-like existence in Coldacre Priory near Brampton village on the edge of Dartmoor. . . . You might have read an article about them in the *Sunday Telegraph* recently?"

Blake nodded. "It was reported that your brother inherited a fortune from the late Nizam of Ranapur? I didn't connect his name with yours at the time."

"Correct," said the General. "Well, to cut a long story short, Tristram left India when that country was granted independence in 1947. He brought ten of his followers to England with him, men of various nationalities—but all converts to Tristram's brand of faith. . . . I'm afraid I can't tell you much about his faith except it's a blend of Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Taoism."

"Is it true that Tristram was once Governor of Ranapur?"

"King George V appointed him Governor of that state in 1919," said the General with barely concealed pride. "Tristram's rise from District Officer was meteoric, and he was the youngest Governor in India's history. . . . And Dame Fortune seemed to smile a second time when he met, and fell in love with Mary de Winter at his inauguration ball. She was one of the most beautiful women of her era, and two days after meeting him she consented to marry him."

"And then?"

The General frowned. "They were madly in love with each other, and came to England to be married in St. Margaret's . . . quite a big splash. Anyway, they returned to India, and before long Mary was carrying his child." The General paused, and drew reflectively on his cigar. "Seven months later, tragedy hit them. Mary died in childbirth of puerperal fever. There were bazaar rumours of incompetence at the hospital, but nothing ever came out. . . ."

"A sad business," murmured Blake.

"In more ways than one," said the General. "Her death knocked him off balance. Tristram was crazed and demented with grief. He ranted against the hospital and, immediately after Mary's funeral, he resigned from the Service and fled to Tibet. . . ."

"I was still at Sandhurst at the time, and my parents heard nothing from him except an odd postcard saying he was alive and well. When I left Sandhurst I was posted to my regiment, which was then stationed near the Khyber Pass."

"And you made contact with him?" said Blake, and sipped his vintage port.

The General nodded. "India was rife with wild stories about him. How he'd wandered all over India, Burma, China, and Indo-China studying the hundreds of different religions and creeds. How he'd saved

the life of the Nizam's son and later become the intimate and trusted friend of the old Nizam.

"Strangely, it was nearly all true. I spent one of my furloughs with Tristram in a temple which the Nizam had built for him. But it was like meeting up with a complete stranger—Tristram and I had nothing in common."

Blake sensed the pang of sadness in the General's voice, and said briskly: "And now he's in trouble?"

The General twirled his glass. "Tristram is worth nearly half a million pounds today," he said quietly. "Apart from a small bequest to me, his will directs that this huge sum shall be controlled and managed by the surviving members of the original ten followers who came with him from India. The survivors are enjoined to perpetuate the Brotherhood, and the last survivor shall appoint three more from the ranks of those who've joined since the establishment of the cult in England."

"How many have joined since that time?"

"Fourteen," said the General. "And now there are only five of the original ten still alive."

"Only five?"

The General nodded. "Tristram came to see me last night. He said he'd been harbouring a horrible suspicion for some time that a malign influence is at work in the Priory."

"Why?"

"The day before yesterday, he found Brother Ian dead in bed. This, the fifth death, has spurred him to take action. The manner of their deaths has disturbed Tristram. Not so much the individual death, but the collective . . ."

"How did they die?" said Blake.

"The first man, Krishna Bakha, fell out of the bell-tower and broke his neck," said the General. "Then Teja Lala, a close friend of Tristram's, was killed by a hit-and-run driver. Then Pei Nu, a Burmese, hanged himself in his cell, and soon afterwards Roderick Tremayne, an Englishman, was found drowned in the lake. And now Ian McKenzie . . ."

Doctor Braithwaite, the village doctor who looks after the Brothers' health, says McKenzie died from natural causes. But Tristram isn't satisfied, and won't rest until his suspicions have been confirmed or wiped out once and for all."

"Where do I come into all this?" said Blake suddenly.

The General looked slightly embarrassed. "Your Assistant Commissioner and I are old friends. I told him what I'm telling you, and asked him for help. He mentioned you were going down to the West Country with your wife for three weeks' holiday . . ."

Blake groaned. "The A.C.'s a foxy devil! . . . But what could I do? Scotland Yard personnel can't step into Provincial cases unless they're called in."

"The A.C. said the Chief Constable of the area owes him a favour," murmured the General, "and a 'phone call would clear the way for you."

"My wife'll give me hell if I agreed to this," said Blake. "This is the first holiday we've had together for two years."

"The A.C. said he'd latch on an extra couple of days to your leave," said the General persuasively. "And he tells me you are a keen fisherman?"

"That's right. Why?" said Blake, puzzled.

"Look," said the General, scenting victory. "I've got a furnished cottage on the River Exe and four hundred yards of excellent fishing. If you'll help me out, it's all yours for three weeks. Most probably Tristram's suspicions are ill-founded, but he won't be happy until a competent investigator has proven this."

Blake's mind registered a vivid picture of casting a fly on to a shaded pool, and said slowly: "I admit I'm intrigued, General. . . . All right. Telephone your brother, and tell him I'll be arriving sometime in the late afternoon. . . . Jill can follow me two days later. . . ."

* * *

Horace Bannerman, Curator of the Bodleian Library, ushered Blake into his panelled study. Bannerman was wearing a patched old dressing-gown over his pyjamas, and was making no attempt to hide his ruffled feelings.

"You keep the most abominable hours, Blake!" he grumbled. "You telephone at midnight for information from the confidential files of the Imperial India Service dating back fifty years! And I'm mad enough to get out of my warm bed to look for it! And now you arrive at four o'clock in the morning to collect it! Why?—"

"I wouldn't have inconvenienced you, Horace, but for extreme urgency," said Blake apologetically, and felt a hypocrite for not ex-

plaining that the urgency was related to his leave.

"Well I've found what you want," said Bannerman, yawning. "It's all marked in those files on my desk. Read all you want, but I'll have you shot if you remove so much as a clip from them!"

Blake glanced at the stack of yellowing files bound with faded red tape on the desk. "It's safe with me, Horace. I've brought my equipment to make photostatic copies of anything that interests me."

"It's all yours. I'm off to bed," said Bannerman sleepily.

The train stopped just long enough to deposit Blake at the tiny station, and then drew away haughtily with a sneer of escaping steam. On the way down, Blake had been informed by a bibulous travelling salesman that Doctor Braithwaite was also Coroner for the district, and that a shed in the Doctor's back garden served as a mortuary.

Blake walked to the centre of sleepy Brampton, and a solemn-faced little boy directed him to the Doctor's modest residence.

Braithwaite answered the door, and Blake introduced himself and explained the purpose of his visit. The Doctor was a thin man, partially crippled with arthritis and well into his seventies, but his grey old eyes still sparkled with intelligence.

"You'd better come into my surgery," said the Doctor. "I won't have any patients for the next two and a half hours. They're too damn fit in these parts!"

Comfortably ensconced in the surgery, Blake said abruptly: "Are you one hundred per cent certain that Ian McKenzie died from natural causes?"

"Well," said Braithwaite, frowning. "I'd been treating him for a cardiac condition with digitalis for some time."

"Did you perform an autopsy, Doctor?"

The Doctor's frown deepened. "No," he said. "There was no call for one."

"Would you be prepared to carry out one now?"

Braithwaite blinked, and then smiled faintly.

"I ran two of the Pathological Laboratories in Birmingham before I was put out to grass, and did quite a few jobs for the Yard," he said.

Blake started. "You're the Braithwaite who revised the *Police Textbook on Forensic Medicine*?"

The Doctor nodded and chuckled. "That's why I'm going to agree to carry out an autopsy—even if it's only to protect my good name. Blake!"

"Is the body in the mortuary? Or has it been buried?"

"It's here. How soon do you want it done?"

"How well equipped are you to do it?"

"Don't worry, my boy," said the Doctor with a wry smile. "I've only been pensioned off for the past two years, and I've brought most of my equipment with me!"

Blake took a deep breath. "Then, immediately, please. And to narrow down the time factor, may I suggest you look for something similar but stronger than digitalis?"

Braithwaite's bushy eyebrows jiggled. "I'll give you the answer as quickly as these twisted fingers of mine'll function."

"While you're busy, may I look through the Coroner's records?"

"Help yourself. They're on the top shelf," said the Doctor, and limped out of the room.

For the next two hours, Blake was immersed in the leather-bound records, and from time to time he made notes.

The Doctor returned. He was still wearing his red rubber gloves, and Blake detected a gleam in his wise old eyes.

"Bulls-eye for you, Blake!" said Braithwaite, chuckling. "I found more than two full grains of strophanthin in his kidneys and small intestine. One hundred and thirty times the lethal dose!"

The gloom of dusk was gathering as the decrepit taxi rattled over the track leading to Coldacre Priory, and tendrils of clammy mist swirled over the lonely moorland. Ahead, the Priory lay starkly outlined on a bare windswept promontory, a crumbling relic from medieval times now enclosed by a high, spiked metal fence. Much of the grounds was shrouded by trees and shrubs.

The taxi stopped outside a pair of rusting gates.

"You'll have to walk up the drive," said the surly driver. "That place gives me the creeps."

Blake walked up the gravelled drive. The beech trees arching over him dripped, and the silence was oppressive. He had the unpleasant sensation of being watched by unseen eyes. Then, as he neared the Priory, he heard male voices blending in a mournful dirge he recognized as a form of Gregorian chant.

He stepped into the dark porch and tugged a bell-pull on one side of the iron-studded door. Somewhere in the depths of the building, a bell jangled faintly.

The door swung open, and a man wearing a monk's drab habit

looked at him enquiringly.

"My name's Blake. I believe I'm expected."

"Follow me, please."

Blake was led down a dimly lit passage to a Gothic-shaped door. "Go in, please," said his guide, and went off.

The only illumination in the sparsely furnished room came from an oil lamp on the refectory table and the flickering flames of a log fire in the huge stone fire-place. The man sitting by the fire put down his book and stood up. He was very old and wore a scarlet robe.

"I am Tristram," said the old man in surprisingly resonant tones, and extended a claw-like hand.

They shook hands, and now Tristram's face was exposed by the lamp's soft light. His snow-white hair accentuated the yellowness of the wrinkled skin that was drawn tautly over the fine bones. It was an incredibly old face, thought Blake. But the coal-black eyes belied his age: they were set deep in their sockets, but glowed almost incandescently with a higher intelligence. His personality seemed to exude an aura of peace.

"Arthur telephoned to say you would help me," said Tristram. "It's very kind of you, Inspector."

"Not at all, sir," said Blake.

"How do you wish to proceed with your investigations?"

"I've done a certain amount of preliminary work," said Blake. "I've an idea about what may be behind all this. Just a tenuous theory, but I want to put it to the test, sir."

"Tell me how I can assist you, Inspector."

"I've brought a case containing certain apparatus necessary to my work, and I'm hoping you can arrange for me to be given access to the rooms occupied by the surviving members of the original Brotherhood. Is this possible, sir?"

Tristram glanced at the ormolu clock on the mantelpiece.

"This is the hour given to contemplation, so their cells which face the quadrangle will be empty for the next forty-five minutes. Will that be enough time?"

"Ample," said Blake.

"The evening meal will be served soon after contemplation," said Tristram. "Will you join us? The dining-hall is next door, and we, the original members, eat in a small room behind it."

"Thank you," said Blake with a smile.

Blake stood beside Tristram, and his host introduced him to each of the original members of the Brotherhood as they arrived.

The first two came in together. One, Brother Talek, was thin and stooped with a skull-like face in which were set a pair of myopic blue eyes. The other man, Brother James, was short and plump with a jolly face and merry grey eyes. They greeted Blake, and sat down at the rough-hewn table.

"You've many types and nationalities here, sir?" said Blake.

"Yes," said Tristram gently. "Each one of them has his reasons for being with us. Brother Talek is Burmese, for example, and he suffered much at the hands of the Japanese during the last war."

A tall man limped in wearing a cowl that cast his features in shadow. He pushed back the cowl, and Blake repressed a shudder of horror. The man's face was a mass of ugly, puckered scar tissue. One eyelid was missing, and the blue eye glared in a most unpleasant manner. This was Brother Janis.

"Brother Janis was one of Hitler's first victims," murmured Tristram when the man was seated at the table. "The unfortunate man was burnt during torture by the infamous S.S."

The last two Brothers came in together. Brother Anton with the well-chiselled features of an aesthete, and Brother Boris with the high cheek-bones and almond eyes of the Mongolian Steppes.

* * *

When they were all seated, Blake stepped forward to address them.

"At the request of your leader I've been investigating the deaths of the five members of the Brotherhood," said Blake.

The Brothers stared at him from inscrutable faces.

"The Bodleian Library at Oxford now stores many documents and files related to the history of the once-mighty British Empire," Blake went on. "I was given access to their archives and studied the files covering the period 1919-1928 for the State of Ranapur in India. Fortunately, the records for this period are intact.

"You must all know the tragedy that caused your leader, Tristram, to resign the Governorship. But tonight I want to talk about the man who caused the death of Mary, Tristram's beloved wife. His name—Doctor Edward Carrington."

Tristram's sigh sounded strangely in the tense silence.

Blake continued: "Unbeknown to Tristram, the attending doctor, Edward Carrington, was drunk when he came to minister to Mary, who was then in labour. After her death the Senior Medical Officer for Ranapur reported Carrington's dereliction to the British Medical Association. It was established that Mary's death was attributable to Doctor Carrington, and the Association struck his name from the Register.

"Carrington, cast out of his profession like a pariah, abandoned himself to alcohol. After an incident that shocked the citizens of Calcutta, he was admitted to St. George's Hospital in a critical condition.

He was in a raving delirium for some days, and threatened many times to kill Tristram, because he blamed Tristram for his downfall and disgrace. Psychiatry was in its infancy in those days, but, just before he was discharged, a young doctor judged Carrington to be paranoid and suffering from a persecution complex. . . .

"The last official report on Carrington can be found in the police files for that period. . . . Carrington, destitute and half-mad, was arrested for stealing from an Eurasian. Conclusive evidence lay in the fact that his fingerprints matched those found on a porcelain vase. The Police Commissioner, however, was a humane person and refused to prosecute. . . ."

"What happened to him?" whispered Tristram.

"Some time before 1947 he became one of your followers," said Blake gravely.

His words exploded like a bombshell amongst them. They gabbled wildly for a minute or so, and then began to view each other in suspicious silence.

Blake continued "Ian McKenzie was murdered. He was poisoned with a lethal dose of strophanthin . . . Shortly before I started to talk to you. I found ampoules of this drug hidden in a straw pallet in one of the cells." Blake tossed three gelatin ampoules on the table. "I made photostatic copies of Carrington's fingerprints, which were on record in the files. These matched various fingerprints I found on various items in the cell of the person who had concealed the ampoules. I know——"

"Don't bother with the rest!" said Brother Janis, swaying on his feet with two of the ampoules clutched in his hand. "I'm what remains of Edward Carrington, M.D. I lost my face, Tristram, when I tried but failed to immolate myself in a Calcutta street. Afterwards, it was only my hatred for you that kept me going," he paused, the hideous naked

The next morning was Saturday, and, after a long delay, he could restrain his curiosity no longer, and walked the length of the garden hesitantly to enter the shed. There was nothing unusual to be seen: an old working table; some rusty gardening implements; and stained cans of paint. And the earth above his wife seemed undisturbed.

"Good morning, Fred!" The salutation caused him to lift his head sharply and hit the door frame as he was ducking his heavy bulk beneath it. Harry Jones was grinning and leaning over the fence between them on the other side of the garden. Fred nodded and began to walk back to the house.

"Heard from the missis yet?"

Fred stopped and glared suspiciously, then consoled himself with the thought that his neighbour was just being his normal inquisitive self. He shook his head.

"Hmm. . . . Pity. Wonder if I can borrow your spade, old chap?"

Fred acquired an Arctic chill. "Spade? Huh—— What for?" he asked weakly.

"Broke the shaft of mine. The ground's very hard."

"Oh . . ."

"Just want to bury something. . . . "It's all right! Not to worry! Haven't murdered the old woman or anything. . . ."

Fred gripped the fence for support and forced an anaemic smile.

"Found a poor old mongrel knocked down in the lane at the end of my garden this morning. . . . I shouldn't worry too much about the missis, Fred. She'll be back. Sure of that. . . ." He stepped back a pace at the strange look on Fred's face.

He knew something! Fred trembled as he fetched the spade from the cupboard in his scullery. But how? Perhaps he was toying with him? Always seemed to be laughing behind his back—just like the wife?

It was a relief to mix with the crowds in the nearby town. He bought a few provisions which he stuffed into the capacious pockets of his overcoat, and, several hours later, he turned into the lane that ran past the end of his garden. He was stunned. Jones was talking to a policeman!

He spent the rest of the day in the secure darkness of the local cinema, dismayed, and pondering on where he had slipped up, and even wondering whether his wife was showing her vindictiveness by means he couldn't understand. He returned home late that night to sit

in the darkness of his living-room for a long time. Then the telephone rang.

It was frightening the way it kept on and on, clamouring for attention, and began to sound like his wife's screams as he sat unnaturally stiff with clenched jaws begging it to stop—which it did for a minute—and he nearly leaped out of his chair when it started again.

He had, eventually, to pick up the receiver, and was filled with odd thoughts that he would hear his wife at the other end. It was the sort of thing she would do, for she knew how to turn the screw on a man. But then she was dead, he insisted.

There was no reply to his croak. Just the dialling tone. Must have hung up? Wrong number, of course. No one would be telephoning him at that time of the night? But why ring the wrong number twice?

He retired in the early hours of the morning, but, although craving for sleep, found it impossible, and kept having visions of the strange, glowing light escaping the confines of the shed and moving towards his room. After getting up to look, several times, finally, with a groan, he saw it again. Like the dying embers of a fire, chided by the occasional breath.

Nothing would induce him to step into that black garden. He even—self-consciously—asked his wife's forgiveness. Perhaps six feet of earth wasn't really enough to dampen a vindictive spirit?

That morning, he walked downstairs with heavy eyes to the kitchen; disturbed by the heaving bellringers at the local church. As he filled the kettle with tremulous hands he dropped it with a clatter. There was a policeman in his garden talking to Jones over the fence. This is it then; he pursed his lips as the constable walked towards the house. "Now you can go to hell in peace!" he muttered at his wife and raised his eyes in the wrong direction.

"Mr. Jones has been telling me about the goings on in your shed, sir."

"Oh. . . . Yes. . . . All right, constable. I know he's spoken to you. Doesn't miss much, old Hawkeyes over there!"

"Then you won't mind if I take a look in your shed, sir?"

"Wouldn't make any difference if I did, would it?" He followed the policeman down the garden, watched by the popping eyes of Harry Jones.

"Perhaps it's for the best?" Fred tried to console himself as they entered the shed. "Not had a good night's sleep for— Those lights!

Gave me the creeps!"

"It's fortunate, in a way, your wife wasn't here, sir. I mean, women do worry. . . . Oh, Mr. Jones over the way told me she'd—left you."

Fred leaned against the wall, breathed deeply, and said nothing.

"Pity Mr. Jones didn't report to us last night, about the odd lights and noises coming from your shed, especially as I told him yesterday we were warning local residents about a couple of thieves—tramps they are—who've been pilfering and making quite a nuisance of themselves in the district. He said he telephoned you, and getting no answer went back to bed. Do you smoke, sir?"

"No?"

"Ashes on the table, and one of our friends is a perpetual pipe smoker. . . . That could explain the strange lights?" He picked up a cheap wine bottle that had been lying in a corner. "Probably celebrating last night, after doing the house down the road. Been using your shed as their pad, I should think."

Fred hadn't felt so good in a long, long time, as he walked bouncily beside the policeman towards the gate. Six feet of earth was too much—even for her! he laughed with relief, and knew he could now contemptuously dismiss her from the appalling dreams he'd been suffering lately, for she certainly wouldn't have let him off the hook if she had a spark of—anything left.

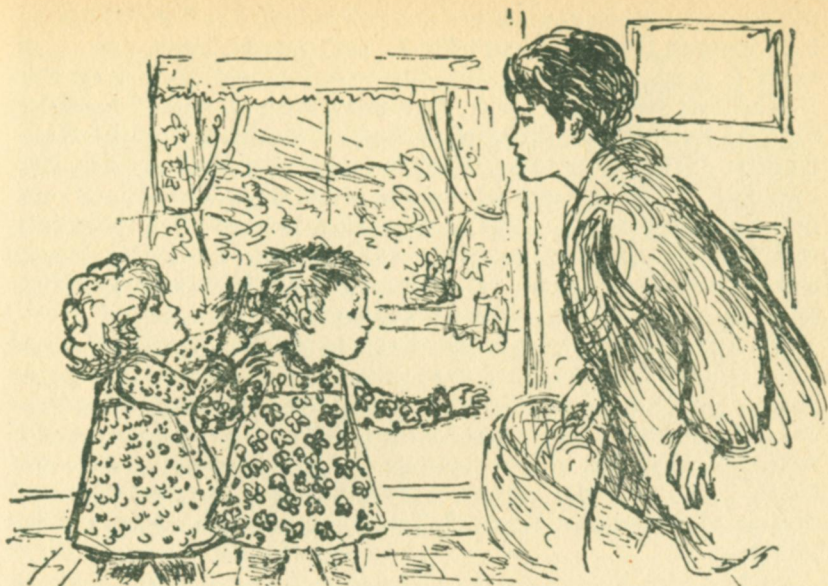
"Probably send a couple of men to wait in the garden tonight," the constable said. "Just in case they return."

Fred nodded goodbye, and smiled genially at Jones, whose head he could see bobbing along the top of the fence as he made his way towards them.

"Fred, old chap!" he called out. "Just want to return this." He lifted a spotless shovel over the fence with a grin.

The constable stopped and pondered a moment. It's unlikely, but just possible, I suppose, they could have buried their haul in the shed? Better make sure. Won't mind if I do a spot of digging, will you, sir?"





STRANGE SISTERS

BLISS NIELSEN-WOOD

MRS. WILMOT, sitting in the Park, embroidering, appeared a picture of tranquillity, but she was troubled. She was disturbed by the antics of her two daughters, one aged eight and the other four years old. The elder, Helga, dominated the younger so fiercely that she felt something should be done about it, but as she was mentally and physically lazy and could not "abide arguments", she decided, as always, to "speak to her husband". One wondered how she had summoned up the will power and energy to marry Mr. Wilmot!

However, today she recalled how she and her husband had adored their first-born, Helga, a beautiful, powerful child from birth, bursting with vitality and strong as a lion cub. She sighed. Perhaps they had been wrong in their decision that Helga needed a sister or brother—or

companion—and so their second daughter, Sara, was born. Helga, at four years old, was a remarkably forceful person despite her small body!

When her father took her to the nursing home to “meet” her baby sister for the first time, she merely glanced at the infant, but said to her parents: “Just you *promise* this baby won’t ever have as many ribbons as I.” (Ribbons were her passion, then.) They laughed and promised, and they certainly kept their promise, because when Helga had said “ribbons” she meant everything had to be hers, first choice always, and her parents acquiesced, never noticing that little Sara accepted this unbelievable favouritism without argument.

But Mrs. Wilmot, sitting embroidering in the Park, heard the dictatorial voice of her elder daughter and the soft response of the younger, and her woolly mind was disturbed. Could it be that she and her husband had neglected the younger for the elder? But Sara never screamed with fury or fell into violent tantrums which they all dreaded, as did Helga. Perhaps it was natural that the stronger personality always dominated the weaker. Weaker? Yes, it must be that. She felt comforted.

Perhaps Mrs. Wilmot did not understand that sometimes when one is weakest one is strongest, and that violence is merely a form of inferiority complex; if you can't get it by reason, use violence. ...

She heard Helga’s voice to Sara saying: “You are my servant, I am your master, so do what you’re told, always. I’m building a house, run fast and collect twigs and some grass and come back, *fast*.”

Master and servant. But these two were sisters! Mrs. Wilmot had been one of four sisters, genteel, stupid females waiting for marriage, spending their time embroidering and “taking walks” together, but there had never been a quarrel between them. Her husband, a downright, successful business man, liked peace in his home when he returned from his endless committees and golf, and so life ran smoothly. So why be disturbed?

But the wretched, childish game continued, Sara obeying always. Mrs. Wilmot thought that the difference in looks between the children was incredible. Helga with her rosy skin, blonde curls, startlingly blue eyes, taller than average, and able to outdo any child in her age group either in learning or sport. And Sara, slight, with black, straight hair and small features. Her eyes were enormous in her small face, dark and soft and shadowed by long, curling black eyelashes—her only beauty,

her mother thought, disregarding her ivory-pale skin, elegant narrow hands and feet; and to most she was merely a dull, plain child. But her eyes spoke, had anyone been sufficiently aware to understand their message.

"Two sisters, entirely different," she thought, "possibly from other ages, and reincarnated into some form of hellish game. One on top this time, the other paying for miseries she had inflicted on the other but could not, obviously, remember. Natural enemies from birth. But this time the younger had no chance to retaliate and was forced to accept.

"But for how long?"

Mrs. Wilmot soon forgot her uneasy conscience and their lives continued as before—the elder girl the master, the younger the slave. Sara was apart from her family, as she was withdrawn and was never invited to voice her opinion or join any discussion, and Helga dominated their little world as she went from strength to strength—swimming champion, tennis champion, hockey champion—and she took examinations in her stride. Many of the boys in her set tried to date the blue-eyed beauty, but she was selective and favoured only the sons of the wealthiest men in their city. By the time she was twenty-one it was considered a "win" to escort her to a dance, theatre, or party. She made it known that she scorned anything but the best (whatever that might be), her clothes were chosen with care and taste and she was inevitably the most admired young woman wherever she went.

Underneath this façade of charm and beauty dwelt a cruel, harmful spirit, intent on furthering its own chances only. "Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, Am I the fairest of them all?" And the reply would have been: "Yes."

It seemed that the elder sister had everything and the younger nothing. She was the shadow, and Helga the reality of their parents and everyone they knew. After she matriculated Sara became a trained librarian and lived in the atmosphere of books and respected the quiet cultured people who came to the library for a purpose.

Have you noticed that when a person is apart, emotionally, no one is drawn to them? Vitality spells attraction. Sara had been too hurt all her life to attract further disregard, and so lived alone, books taking the place of people.

However, life changes, and Sara met a young barrister, Richard Davis, who haunted the library, and they discovered mutual interests such as poetry, painting, music. They fell in love, deeply in love.

Richard was tall, fair, good looking, with an amused look in his green eyes that Sara loved. In fact, she worshipped him. Only with him did she blossom as does a woman in love, and loved; the greatest beautifier that exists. So much so that one evening at dinner when Helga graced her family with her presence for a change, she looked closely at her sister and said: "You look different—not quite so dull. Must be a love affair. Do we know him?"

Sara's heart sank; she saw the cruel, devilish light in Helga's eyes, that light that had ruined her childhood by seizing everything Sara had ever wanted. She never wanted anything until she knew Sara did, then seized it. Sara replied briefly that she was engaged to a barrister named Richard Davis, that they intended to be married as soon as he was established in his profession. Their mother said he must be asked to dinner, Helga having said tauntingly that this was the usual custom!

Richard came to dinner, and Helga surpassed herself in flattery, beauty, and charm. Sara sank into apathy and silence. She knew she was beaten yet again by this ferocious spirit that seemed bent on her destruction. The result of the evening was inevitable. Richard was overwhelmed by the magic personality and spectacular façade of Helga at her best, and Sara did not even try to fight back. She couldn't win against this monster; the old pattern must continue.

One frosty evening she sat in the Park on the bench where she and Richard met after work, and saw him come towards her and try to explain and apologize and analyse his "treachery" as he called it, but she merely rose and walked away. She wondered just why Helga had to seize *her* man when she had so many to choose from, but fell back on her own reasoning and summing up; they were ancient enemies and there was nothing she could do about it "this time round." But her soft eyes hardened as she thought: "There could be a *next time round*."

Sara purposely took her holiday to avoid the wedding, going to a remote hotel by the sea, and watched the cruel waves and water and rocks, despising herself for lacking the courage to end it all by throwing herself over the cliff. She thought: "I know this is some form of re-incarnation whereby two souls have been thrown yet again in each other's paths. But if I can't remember doing anything terrible in another life to Helga, is it reasonable for me to be punished quite so hard?"

It didn't spell reason, but what other explanation?

She returned to her home to long descriptions of the wedding of the beautiful Helga and handsome Richard. She moved to a boarding house, saying it was convenient, as it was nearer her work. Anything was preferable to the adulation of her parents for Helga, and the pain of seeing the pair when they returned.

She neither saw nor heard of her parents and the "happy pair" for a year, people became shadows, books reality. She wanted no more hurtful, emotional entanglements. None.

But Fate decided otherwise. She saw a notice in her newspaper stating that Helga had given birth to twin daughters, but had died in the process, although the twins were doing well. She was aghast—it couldn't be possible, but it was! She went immediately to her parents, knowing how intense their grief would be, and found them aged beyond belief, not interested in her, simply talking endlessly of their beloved Helga. Of the twins they spoke little, of Richard nothing. Sara suggested they might find joy in bringing up Helga's twins, but this was ignored—their reality had gone with Helga.

Sara went to the nursing home to see the twins, and found herself looking at two replicas of herself and Helga, sleeping and, to everyone else's eyes, ordinary young babies. "*Oh no,*" she said, turning to go. But Richard had appeared, silently, and taking her arm, they looked closely at the pair. He said: "It's uncanny. One is Helga, and the other is you, but again Helga is stronger and due to start bullying from about six months old, I should think. Why?" Their eyes met, and she knew he knew. The game had begun again, the only difference this time being that they were the same age.

She looked even more closely at the sleeping infants, utterly unlike, each a replica of another incarnation, and that so near. She trembled with a premonition of evil, until the smaller, dark baby opened its eyes and seemed to look directly at her, and she lifted it impulsively and held it close, knowing it was herself in some way, so helpless and trusting and loving—with no one to love. Putting it down gently, she met the eyes of the other twin, not a sign of affection for life, for anyone, the blue eyes she had always dreaded. She left hurriedly, Richard by her side. He was himself again, sane and loving, and her heart "turned over" as they say.

He asked her if she could forget his treachery and marry him. He said he had been under some form of bewitchment, that he and Helga had disliked each other from their wedding night, when she told him

she had only married him to flaunt her power over her sister. He had been horrified at the depth of her hatred for Sara and by her sadistic, vicious nature.

Sara said: "Stop—she's dead." Richard said he made no pretence of mourning a person not fit to live and causing havoc and destruction to everyone she wished. He said they had decided to part even before the unwanted twins were born.

His face was haggard and strained, eyes shadowed and deeply hurt, and Sara loved him. They were married in a Registry office without frills, families, or friends.

Sara loved their new house—no reminders of the past. When the large, light nursery was ready, Richard engaged a daily nurse and the twins were installed. Sara had decided to watch the pair closely for any signs of persecution on Helen's part (formerly Helga, she thought wryly), and she meant to make their lives wholesome and loving and totally unlike her own childhood. She showed no favouritism, was watchful, tactful, loving, but after the twins were two years old she recognized defeat, although still defying it.

She said nothing of her battle to her husband, who was extremely busy and frequently away on his cases, but she knew too well that Helen had the whip hand from birth, yet again. Despite her indefatigable efforts to control Helen, the latter continued a thought-out persecution of Penny, sometimes in the form of cunningly destroying the latter's favourite toy, hiding her shoes, ribbons, pulling her long, soft black hair until Penny whimpered with pain. Once she seized Penny's hand and forced it on to the hot stove. There was no reasoning with her. Her blue eyes always widened as she repeated: "But Penny *asked* me to do it."

Richard frequently complained that he saw nothing of his wife, that she worked too hard, worried over the brats, and suggested a delayed honeymoon, putting the pair into a nursery school-cum-crèche. Sara thought: "Away from my small control, what chance would Penny have against this little monster? No." She grew to dislike the lovely blonde child with her mop of golden curls and innocent blue eyes, but her dislike grew to something more positive when, one afternoon, she returned from shopping and entered the nursery to find Helen manipulating Sara's large pair of scissors so successfully that she had cut off Penny's dark hair, right down to the scalp. Sara watched in horror. This hair-cut was no childish prank or fun—it was calculated and

hideous, intentional; one could see Penny's head had been hurt in the process by the big scissors so cleverly handled by such small hands. Sara restrained herself with a mighty effort, saying: "Helen, explain what you are doing and why?" But Helen merely glanced at her, though putting down the scissors, and repeating: "Penny *asked* me to do it."

Penny's terrified eyes told the true story. Sara lifted the child and ran her hand over the cruel cropping, seeing the dark hair on the floor, and said: "Fetch a towel, Helen, and sit down. I shall do what you have done to Penny." But Helen screamed with such fury that the nurse came running, astounded at the sight. And then Richard opened the front door and came in, unexpectedly. Sara explained calmly, holding the shaking child Penny to her, while Helen raced to her father, saying: "They want to hurt me and cut off my curls—*don't let them.*"

Richard pushed aside the hysterical Helen, told the nurse to bring a towel, and sat her down, taking the scissors and saying pleasantly: "Excellent idea, Helen; the hot weather is coming, so sit still while I cope, as otherwise I might hurt you as you hurt Penny, unintentionally, of course."

There was silence as all watched the cropping of the golden curls, even closer than Penny's. Richard remarked conversationally that he had thought crew-cuts were more for boys, but why shouldn't girls enjoy the freedom of no hair to brush and comb and wash? Very sensible idea, must be remembered every summer, he would do it himself.

But Sara, still holding the trembling Penny, saw Helen's blue eyes on her twin, and shivered with foreboding.

It had been a hideous exhibition of sheer sadism and brutality. Sara slept on a divan that night in the twins' room, despite Richard's remarks that young Helen had been taught a good lesson. How could he know the message of hate conveyed to her twin as he cut off her precious curls? He could not know that these eyes were *not* the eyes of a child, but of an ancient, implacable, ruthless enemy who had come again from space or time with deadly intent. She trembled at her own childhood memories and recalled those same eyes, but she had had no defence. But this time she was aware, thank God, and the pattern must change.

She held Penny in her arms long that night, while the child slept uneasily, whimpering and clutching her, and then put her back into her small bed beside her sister, and stood watching the hideous crew-cuts

of the pair, and their sleeping faces. Yes, she had to do it, but the very thought appalled her, although she realized it meant dire misery for three people, and many others later, against the extermination of a soul that would become progressively vicious and powerful, reducing all in its path to snivelling fools as she and her parents had been reduced by her sister, Helga. This hideous pattern might continue through time unless it were broken, and only she could break it.

How? Was she wrong, imagining it all? No. She knew from bitter experience that evil spreads like a cancer, leaving only heartbreak and desolation. There was no alternative; her parents refused to have either twin, saying they were too old and tired.

Richard was to be away for a week, so Sara took the twins to a remote seaside resort, saying they must learn to swim properly. She herself was an extremely strong swimmer. Helen enjoyed herself, ordering, commanding Penny to pack their spades in *that* basket, and buckets in *that* one. Then she laughed at Penny's hair-cut, saying: "You look even uglier than ever." Sara's temper rose. She pushed Helen to her low dressing-table mirror and said: "Have a look at yourself, has Penny ever laughed at you? Don't you *dare* do it again. You look far uglier, because you think ugly things, and you thought no one would see what you were doing to your sister." Helen said: "It'll grow again, I don't care."

Sara longed to beat the little monster, but refrained, saying: "Pack your own things, Penny is coming shopping with me." Helen's fierce eyes answered. As Sara dressed the cringing child in a blue suit and tight blue beret she had bought to hide her incredible hair-cut, Helen said: "*You'll pay.*" She was looking directly at Penny. This time it was too much, and Sara seized a hard hairbrush and lifted up the little skirt and Helen felt true pain for the first time. She howled and Penny clutched Sara. The latter said: "From now on you'll behave decently. I'm worn out with your baby bullying and stupid lies. I should have done this from the first."

Ignoring the fury and malevolence of the blue eyes, she took Penny to the shops and bought ice cream and new shoes and a pretty dress for her, and nothing for Helen. Penny came to life, her dark eyes smiled for a change—she was free and loved.

At the seaside the twins paddled and Sara taught them the rudiments of swimming, admitting to herself that Helen seemed to *know* before she was taught. But whenever they talked with others Helen would ex-

plain: "I can do everything; Penny can't do anything." Sara was silent.

On the fourth day she took them to a quiet, secluded spot surrounded by fairly tall rocks; it was avoided by most, as the water was very deep and most people love crowds. As they walked, Penny held Sara's hand closely as always, while Helen raced ahead, chanting some stupidity about how she could do everything in the world and Penny couldn't. Then the twins waded in gently, Sara had told them not to try to swim without her, and she dived from the rocks and swam into the cool sea, trying to persuade herself that all she needed was a psychiatrist. Nothing wrong—could there be anything wrong? She damn well knew everything was wrong with the small monster, but her mind thrust away what she had to do.

She turned to swim back to the children, lazily, happy in the blue water and peace, and then saw Helen's strong small hands on Penny's frail neck, saw Helen duck the child and hold her under until she relinquished her hold, and Penny came up again, and then Helen's ringing childish tones: "This third time you won't come up again, *rabbit*." Sara swam faster than ever before in her life, seizing the savage hands from Penny's neck, holding the child to her but saying calmly: "You're swimming well, Helen, but I'll take Penny to the rocks and change her, she's cold and tired." As she went, holding the exhausted child to her, she saw yet again the familiar, malevolent gleam in the young tyrant's eyes as she half-swam and half-paddled off—cheated.

When Penny had stopped shaking and was dried and clothed Sara thought that this child had suffered enough. Penny clung to her as she said: "I want you to go to our hotel, darling, you know it—very near here—and ask for a hot drink and some hot food, the housekeeper knows us. Then wait for me there."

The child's eyes spoke: "Come with me." Sara passed her hand lovingly over the furiously cropped hair, and the child obeyed. She said: "I'll wait for Helen to come out of the water; don't come back till I return. Promise." Sara watched the forlorn little figure disappear before she dived into the deep pool and swam for a while before glancing at Helen, who was at the edge of the pool, not even paddling. She said: "Come on, Helen, that's no way to learn to swim, I'll hold you while you try." The contemptuous blue eyes met hers as Helen said: "I like it here."

Sara's temper was now at fever point, having just witnessed a scene of deliberate, calculated murder which did not endear her to this mon-

ster child. In the *disguise* of a child, she corrected herself. She swam towards her, picked her up, and swam with the struggling child into deep water, where she dropped her. Helen struggled hard, went under twice, while Sara trod water, watching. When she came up for the third time she was, obviously, exhausted, and she sank, finally. Sara waited for a while, then dived and brought up the lifeless little body, and swam with her to the beach. She felt no guilt. This had had to be done, she was merely the instrument. She took full responsibility.

Feeling a hand on her shoulder, Sara turned in terror, and saw Richard, her husband, looking at the still body of his child. She froze, there would be no fooling *him*. But he said slowly: "You're the bravest person I know, Sara. I meant to do what you've done from the beginning when I saw the havoc and hell this unhappy, but evil, soul was causing and would cause, as her mother before her. But I so hated the thought of doing it that I put it off and so forced you to do it instead of me. Never grieve; you've opened life again to three people at least, and possibly more, and if you hadn't 'let it happen' today, I should have done it tomorrow. All right, we're equally guilty if justice can be called guilt. Come, now, I'll carry Helen's body to the hotel and cope and we will leave as soon as we can after her burial *here*. No reminders or remorse, ever."

From then on life was different; there was no dread of evil, constant persecution from small, fiendish hands or childish, but venomous tongue. When Sara's own children were born they were what she wanted, normal, happy, replicas of Richard, and Penny loved them as much as they loved her.

But sometimes when the sea was high and the wind howled, Sara would dream, and hear a drowning child's cry, and see fierce blue eyes that knew what she was doing, and hear a familiar voice saying: "Just you wait. I'll pay back next time round."

To whom was the wrathful, thwarted spirit speaking—to Penny or herself? Or to both?



PUSS! PUSS!

D. JOHNS

From the library, John borrowed a book on detonators and explosives which gave him exactly the information he needed. After two nights he considered he had perfected his technique . . .

REALLY it was the cat that made John Woolley decide to murder his wife.

There were other reasons as well. Her tireless nagging, her indifference, her constant reminders that only her job kept them in comfort all contributed. But Tommy symbolized their differences.

Alice didn't like cats and for fifteen years John had respected her wishes. Then, with all hopes of parenthood finally abandoned and a marriage which had degenerated into two people sharing a house, he had insisted on his own way.

Tommy had come as a tiny mewling kitten, too young to have been taken from its mother and John had given it the love and care he would have bestowed on his son. Tommy had responded with the sort of singular devotion which usually only comes from a dog.

Alice had accepted the cat because she had to but had never ceased to complain about its presence. She would do nothing for it and, John suspected, secretly ill-treated it. Certainly Tommy would not willingly stay in a room with her.

John had put up with the situation for four years. Then, one evening, sitting in the box room which he called a study with the cat on his lap, he began to think of life without Alice. It was pleasant thinking. No Alice would mean they could sit in the sitting room, that he could make a "cat door" for Tommy to come and go as he pleased. Of course, they would not have her money from the hospital but John reckoned the two of them could manage on his eleven hundred a year from the Town Hall.

So, John Woolley decided to kill his wife and cast about for ways to do it. He thought first of poison. But Alice had not been a nurse for twenty-five years without learning to recognize the symptoms of poisoning and she would know what remedy to use. Accidents outside

were difficult to stage and home accidents rarely fatal. Except electrocution of course. But the police probably had experts who could tell if electrical apparatus had been tampered with. What was wanted was some sort of fatal accident which would destroy its own cause, like a fire or an explosion.

That night on the news there was a report of a gas explosion which almost destroyed a house and John had found what he was looking for.

From the library, he borrowed a technical book on quarrying which gave him the information he needed about explosives and detonators. He looked up quarries in the classified directory and found one about ten miles away.

The next week Alice was on night duty. John drove her to the hospital then instead of going home, carried on to the quarry. The red-painted hut was locked but not guarded and he had little difficulty in breaking in. He took more than he needed, throwing the surplus in a pond on the way back. The police would assume that it was the work of safe blowers.

During the rest of the week he practised. Night after night, with Alice out of the way and Tommy purring beside him, he connected up his wires, using a length of fuse wire in place of the detonator and a bundle of paper to simulate the explosive. After two nights he had perfected his technique and from then on concentrated on speed. By the time Alice returned to day duty, he could fetch the explosive from the garage and set the trap in four and a half minutes flat.

Alice chose the day of her execution by deciding on chicken casserole for supper. She prepared it the evening before and put it in the oven. As soon as she came in at half past four, she would open the oven and light the gas.

Only she wouldn't be alive to light the gas.

At seven-thirty in the morning, John went to the garage, removed two plug leads and began whirring the starter. At seven-thirty-five, Alice rushed impatiently off to catch a bus. Two minutes later, John carried into the kitchen enough explosive to blow the cooker across the room, a bottle of petrol and a detonator. The petrol was to make sure that a fire followed the explosion to destroy all traces of the wires. The glass would shatter and melt to mingle with that of the casserole dish.

He turned off the electricity and went to work.

At seven-forty-one, he closed the oven door and turned on the

electricity. He tickled Tommy behind the ears, replaced the plug leads and drove to the bus stop to pick up a fuming Alice.

"Condensation. Water on the plugs," he said in answer to her angry questions about the failure to start the car.

All that day, he kept thinking about his trap, checking in his mind. Time and again he satisfied himself that there could be no mistake. As soon as Alice opened the oven door, the detonator would go off. There was no danger to Tommy. He always fled into the garden when Alice was alone in the house.

The day dragged, but at last it was time to go home. He felt vaguely cheated that he could not have known the exact moment when Alice opened the oven, but it must have been done by now. With a surge of joy, he realized that he was free.

As he drove home through a cold drizzle, a fire engine rushed past, siren blaring. So someone had raised the alarm. Well, no matter. There would be little to salvage now.

There was no crowd of onlookers outside his house. Only Alice standing at the door, tapping her foot.

John left the car in the road and hurried to her. What had happened? Nothing could have gone wrong. The trap was foolproof.

"I broke my key," she said. "It's jammed in the lock. For heaven's sake get in through a window or something. I'm freezing to death out here."

He hurried round to the garage, took out the ladder and leaned it by the kitchen window. The transom was open and he could squeeze through.

"You wait by the front door," he said. "I'll be a few minutes so you may as well stay in the porch. It's a bit sheltered."

"All right. But hurry."

Hurry. Yes hurry as he had never hurried before. It took four and a half minutes to set the trap. He must dismantle it in a quarter of that time.

He wriggled head first through the transom onto the draining board. Turning, he stretched a foot to the floor.

Tommy, delighted, rubbed purring against his descending leg, pitching him forward off balance.

His outstretched hand met the oven door. Instinctively his fingers tightened on the handle.

The weight of his body twisted it sharply open. . . .



LEPPY

MARGOT NORTH

HAVING not seen "Leppy" Bagnall since prep-school days, my meeting him in the village store turned the clock back nearly forty years.

He had been an odd sort of boy. When the rest of us were at cricket practice, he would be creeping about behind the pavilion netting butterflies or moths. He would peer excitedly through his pebble lenses as his victims struggled in the mesh folds, then transfer them gently to small boxes and later impale them on stiff sheets of cardboard. Having identified them with the aid of the school library he would print their obituaries beneath the motionless outstretched wings.

Inevitably, because of his interest in lepidoptera—butterflies and moths in particular—he became "Leppy" throughout his schooldays.

Leppy had not changed much despite the years. He still had wisps of

sandy hair and observed me through the same thick lenses. He did not look like the man whose expeditions into the lesser known jungles of the world had made front-page news. In his crumpled bush shirt, slacks and leather sandals he seemed insignificant and somehow pathetic; just as he had been on the day I released him from the school boilerhouse where the Lower Fourth had imprisoned him.

"Hello, Leppy?" I said. "Remember me—Andrew Wayne?"

He put down the tin of plant food he was carrying and looked at me. "Andrew—Andrew Wayne—my dear fellow—what a pleasant surprise. What are you doing in these parts?"

"Mary and I moved here a few months ago. London got too noisy to work in."

"Ah, yes, I remember—you write novels, don't you? Ha—it can't be easy finding new themes. Now I can show you something really to stimulate your imagination if you care to visit me sometime. Nothing fictitious, you understand—just plain fact."

* * *

So, prompted by curiosity rather than by ties of friendship, I visited Berry House. It reminded me of secret Army headquarters during the war, so well was it hidden amongst the unlopped trees. The housekeeper answered my knock on the stout oak door and led me through rooms shrouded in perpetual twilight from the overhanging branches outside.

Leppy was in his laboratory, bending over a case of specimens. Beautiful gossamerlike ghosts held by tiny jewel-topped spikes like miniature hatpins. He looked up and smiled at me.

"I promised you something out of the ordinary, didn't I? And, my dear fellow, you won't be disappointed. Come, we'll go into my Floratorium." He unlocked the door saying: "Better remove your jacket, it's hot, very hot in here."

"We went through that door into another world. A world of steaming jungle growth with thick ropelike lianas looped high beneath the domed glass roof. Leppy adjusted a pressure gauge saying: "Must keep the temperature constant—they're delicate creatures, y'know."

I looked up and saw an exquisite butterfly poised over a glossy shrub, its wings flashing scarlet and gold as it darted away. Others, translucent fairylike, hovered, dipped and alighted on the nectar-

heavy flowers. I was spellbound. Leppy was watching me with a faint smile on his lips.

"I felt like that once, too," he said; "you think you have found perfection. But these are only acolytes in the Temple of Flora! Come—see the goddess for yourself. The only one of its kind—and no one else has seen it—until now." He led me through an archway.

I stopped in surprise. I had expected his "goddess" to be some lovely, fragile specimen of brilliant colours. This was a tree! It had a thick fleshy trunk, knotted and veinous, not unlike a human leg. I thought it was hideous. Topping it was a huge purple-grey trumpet flower surrounded by trailing green fronds.

"Watch," said Leppy and he touched a frond with his finger. Immediately the flaccid green tendrils stiffened and started to move blindly from side to side. The trumpetlike flower opened, showing its dark-red throat.

"Don't be impatient, my lovely," he whispered as the gaping mouth writhed and twisted, and the green fingerlike fronds curled and uncurled expectantly. I tried to hide my revulsion.

Leppy took a small net from the alcove and clipped it on to a long bamboo cane. He cast it quickly and expertly over a thick-bodied moth and once more I travelled back over the years and saw Leppy trapping cabbage whites and tortoiseshells behind the school pavilion. As then, excitement shone through the thick pebble lenses.

"Watch," he said again, and thrust the struggling moth into the trumpet mouth. It closed and the throat vibrated slowly. Beads of green moisture quivered, oozed and dripped from the lip of the flower.

"Wonderful! Wonderful! Just like feeding a child," crooned Leppy, caressing the knotty trunk with his hands.

It was then that I decided that he was going mad. Years in hot alien places with only native bearers for company had turned his brain.

"As I was saying," he went on, "her appetite begins to present a problem. I cannot breed these moths fast enough! Tell me, you've seen insectivorous plants before, haven't you, Andrew—but you've never seen anything like this—eh?"

"Never," I said as we went back into the house. I hoped that I never would again.

After that, I did not see Leppy until I ran into him in Town when I was visiting my publisher. His appearance shocked me. His clothes were shabby and unpressed. Wisps of hair straggled round his face. His

eyes moved unhappily behind their thick glass screen and his hands curled and uncurled incessantly. I took him to a quiet pub for a drink.

"Leppy, what is it?" I asked.

Then he told me. He was in danger of losing his beloved plant, and it was irreplaceable. He was running short of the special moths it consumed. Further supplies were impossible to get. In fact the species might well become extinct if he fed his demanding goddess with the few remaining in the Floratorium.

"She doesn't understand—she gets angry with me! You don't believe it? When I cut her supply you should see how her fronds lash out at me!" I noticed the bruising on the back of his hand.

Poor devil, I thought. Why be so secretive about the beastly thing? Why not seek advice from those more qualified than I? But I could not persuade him; he was adamant. He had shared his discoveries with the world in the past. This thing was his and his alone—it was unique. He trusted me not to reveal his obsession. I wondered if he sensed how grotesque his passion would seem to other people?

An idea occurred to me, and half jokingly I said: "Have you tried feeding it with tiny shreds of meat—something like corned beef?" I remembered doing this with a sundew plant years before.

I thought no more about it, but a week later he telephoned and thanked me effusively for my suggestion.

"She takes it straight from my fingers," he told me.

I pictured the purple mouth quivering open, then closing on the proffered titbits, and I felt sickened. I declined his invitation to see the results for myself.

"I'll look in some other time," I said evasively.

It was six weeks later that I did so, and then it was in answer to a telephone call from his housekeeper. She seemed agitated.

"He's spending whole nights in there as well as taking his meals in that place. He says he is working on some diet experiment. Please, sir, would you mind going in to see if he is all right?"

I went in alone. The heat was unbearable and the vast glass dome was clouded with steam. I went over to the panel and adjusted the temperature control as Leppy had shown me. No human could remain conscious in that atmosphere for long. I noticed a tin of the special plant food on the ground. Systematically I searched amongst the heavy shrubs. Insects, comatose in the heat, flopped heavily to the floor.

I think I guessed where he would be. Reluctantly I went through the

flower-covered archway. Every step was an effort in that oppressive humidity.

Then I saw a plate of sandwiches on the stone bench ahead. They looked incongruous there, as they curled up in the heat. I had to pass the plant to reach them. The spiky green fronds waved wildly towards me, as if sensing my presence. I saw that the fleshy trunk looked more distended than ever. The huge trumpet flower was as big as an old-fashioned gramophone horn; it moved heavily, drooling the green saliva-like liquid. There was still no sign of Leppy.

Then I saw one of his sandals on the floor. As I bent to pick it up I felt the soft wet rim of the flower caress my neck. The sensation was indescribable.

There was a pruning hook on the stone bench. I grabbed it and the next moment found myself slashing and ripping at the fiendish belly of that tree. The fronds whipped and lashed my face as the devilish trumpet flower contorted in agony. I almost expected it to scream.

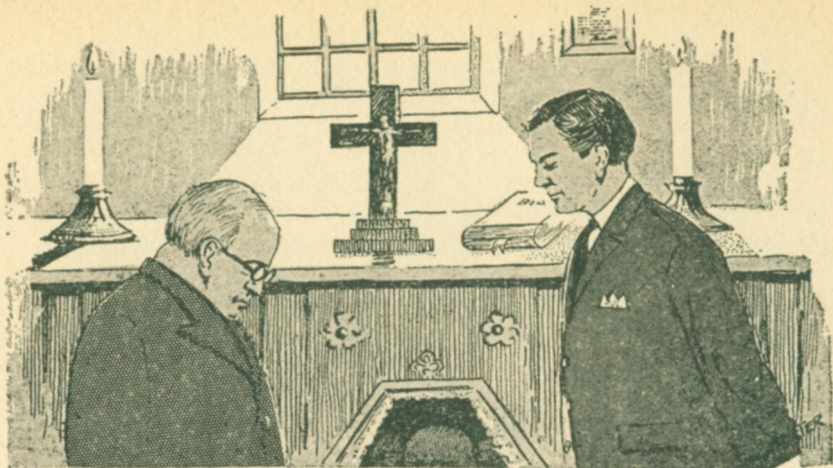
Then the whole trunk ruptured and the stench of the bursting sap choked me. It was a putrefaction that had surely flowed through the sewers of Hell.

* * *

I backed away as the plant disintegrated. Weak and dizzy as Leppy must have been, I averted my eyes. But not before I had seen the glint of glass in the seething spreading mess. Thick precision-ground glass. Like that used in spectacle lenses.

Somehow I stumbled out, still clutching the sandal. I looked at it and wondered if the school would hold a memorial service for Leppy.





WHERE THERE'S MUCK THERE'S MONEY

CYRIL DONSON

THE SLEEK JAG looked dead incongruous, parked outside a row of eight scruffy terraced houses. None of your tatty second-hand jobs either. This one was brand, shining new, like some "nouveau riche" snook being cocked cheekily at every social level above the one represented by that chipped, coal-blackened octet of houses.

I was driving along a new bit of road in the West Riding, on my way to visit relatives. Where the new road now ran there had been a canal. Since my last visit they'd filled it in and given it a coat of tarmac. The houses where the Jag was parked fronted now on to a derelict part of the old road that used to loop dangerously over a hump-backed bridge—a hazard now removed. But the houses looked forlorn, cut off from reality and the busy world that hummed past.

It was as though some chair-borne planner had decided: "We'll brush this tatty lot to one side—perhaps nobody will notice they're there." If it hadn't been for the Jag, I might not have noticed.

A bus in front caused a stoppage. A stream of traffic the other way made it impossible to overtake. Irritably I glanced in my mirror and that was when I saw him come out of one of those isolated houses and get into the Jag.

I'd have recognized him a mile off, though it must have been fifteen years seen I'd last seen him—George Spiggott. There was no mistaking that rolling gait, so easily mistaken for a swagger, the short fat body, red face, podgy hands that seemed to talk to you more eloquently than a politician, even when he wasn't doing anything with them.

The traffic got moving again, but half a mile down the road we stopped again. Looking into my mirror, I saw the Jag close behind, wound down my window, looked back and waved to George. I saw his chubby face light up with what seemed to be genuine pleasure when he recognized me. He wound down his window and called out:

"There's a lay-by just up the road—pull off and let's have a natter."

We both parked in the lay-by. George gave my hand a typically indifferent shake, but I knew the lack of heartiness in his grip did not necessarily indicate a lack of warmth in the greeting.

He beamed at me. "Long time no-see, you old long-and-the-short-and-the-tall. Must be ten years——"

"Fifteen," I corrected, matching his grin. "How's life been treating you, George?"

His expression became mournful, familiarly so—I never yet met anybody who could surpass George when it came to conveying, with one pathetic facial contortion, his dire and urgent need for the sympathy of the world.

"Oh, mustn't grumble," he said noncommittally. "And you? Looks as though you'd prospered. That's a nice suit, and cars like yours don't stand on second-hand forecourts——"

"Listen to who's talking!" I exclaimed. "That car of yours makes mine look apologetically proletarian!"

Mournfully he told me: "It's a nice bus—wish it were mine."

The tone and attitude were familiar. I recalled that when I'd known him in the past acting in this way, he wasn't just wishing that some particular item was his, he was *working* on it. It was a safe bet that before long, the item would become his property.

"You must have some good friends—to lend you a car like that——"

"Well, it isn't mine, and yet, I suppose, it could be——" he said enigmatically.

I frowned. "Sorry I can't stay and listen to a long and laborious explanation, George—I'm expected at my aunt's place, and she's a proper tartar if anyone keeps a meal waiting——"

"Don't let me keep you," he said. "Nice meeting you this way, after so long. How about you and me having a get-together—talk over old times?"

"Good idea," I agreed. We fixed up a mutually suitable date for one evening and parted company.

The house where my aunt lived had a panoramic view of lofty slag heaps adjoining a nearby colliery. Alongside these rose the partially hidden pit-shaft with its twin winding-wheels. There were three slag heaps, more than a hundred feet high, permanently haloed in coal-dust cloud at the peaks.

My aunt didn't appear to have changed in seven years.

"You look peaky," she sniffed. "Always said city life don't do nobody any good, all them petrol fumes and that—sit at table, lad, we'll soon put roses back in your cheeks. There's pork and veg to follow and suet pudding and treacle."

I surveyed the heaped plate of Yorkshire pudding and thick, rich gravy with dismay. I'd known this would have to be faced—my aunt invariably considered that anyone who had not had the daily benefit of her gargantuan meals must be ailing. I knew I'd not be able to shift for an hour after eating.

Her reference to city life being unhealthy made me chuckle. I couldn't imagine a more unhealthy place than where she lived. You literally breathed coal-dust, it was so impregnated into the atmosphere, whole decades of it—and even the flowers were mucky.

I struggled through a meal four times the normal size I ate, my aunt smiling her approval. We sat around and talked, uncle buried behind his sporting paper in his Windsor chair, taking no notice, until I chanced to mention meeting George Spiggott.

With startling abruptness the paper came down. "*Him?*" he snorted with disgust. "Take my advice, lad—keep clear of that one—have nowt to do wi' him. Rob his own grandma, he would!"

Surprised at this vehement outburst, I said: "Oh, George isn't a bad bloke once you get to know him——"

"That's what you think," said my aunt, tight-lipped.

A bit sheepishly I confessed. "I fixed up to spend an evening with him—tomorrow——"

Uncle stared. "You did *what*? You must be joking! Go out with the biggest thieving rogue in the district?"

Aunt interposed. "Uncle is right, lad. It's a wonder to me that man hasn't landed in prison long since. I could——"

Ponderously uncle cut in: "Leave this to me, Mother. I'll put him in the picture. You go get your washing-up done."

For half an hour I listened to uncle's castigation of George and a detailed list of his misdeeds since the war, in chronological order. Uncle ended with the warning: "Don't say I didn't warn you—if you value your good name, keep clear of him! As sure as my arse is in this chair, the coppers will catch up with him one day."

All this only whetted, even more, a secret appetite to find out more about George for myself. I recalled plenty of odd incidents during our time together in the war—things that needed explaining. I'd often had a good chuckle over some of the things George had done. Now seemed as good a time as any to find out answers to questions that had puzzled me for years on and off. Doubt prompted a sudden thought—had I been mistaken all these years and the time I knew him so well—believing him to be the innocent victim—always misjudged by others? Was he in fact what uncle alleged—a smart operator?

George and I drove to the club in the Jag. The club surprised me—I hadn't expected to find anything quite so up-to-date in the Yorkshire coalfield. There was a cabaret equal to anything the best London clubs could put on—and a Casino. Everybody wore evening dress. George signed me in as his guest for the evening and led the way to a room occupied solely by men. Hardly surprising. A young bird was doing a strip act to beat music on a small raised dais. She was at the end of her act, and I saw more eyes bugged than in their sockets. Not a man touched his drink. Airily George guided me to a corner table. "Bore me rigid, these strip acts," he confided. "I mean—once you've seen a dolly naked, that's it—you've seen it all, haven't you? Can't understand what some fellers see in gawping at masses of wobbling flesh."

Absently, my eyes glued to the gyrating bare buttocks of the blonde stripper, I agreed.

George ordered drinks and we talked. Presently I told him how my

uncle had warned me off him—and had given plenty of reasons. George's face assumed the old familiar aggrieved look.

"Surely *you*, old chum, don't believe all these libellous rumours somebody is spreading around about me? Why do people always think the worst of me?"

I quickly assured him: "I always keep an open mind, George—in any case, it's no skin off my nose." To change the subject I said: "I was a bit surprised to see you living in that crummy little house down the town. You running a Jag and all——"

"Oh, *that*—well, it's only a temporary arrangement. I've got plans. Staying with the old man until they bear fruit. Say—you remember the time we had in Catania—there were times, those days, I came pretty close to forgetting we were fighting a bloody war——"

I wasn't likely to forget. Our unit had been left behind by the main Allied Advance—the Front Line was half-way up the leg of Italy. Some of our lads began to moan about the lack of entertainment and soon afterwards George disappeared. It took me ages to find him, finally—in what passed for a club in a sleazy back-street. He was lord-ing it in a bamboo chair in the small foyer entrance, smoking a fat cigar! When he saw me he waved, beaming.

"Was hoping you'd turn up—you go back and tell the lads the entertainment problems are sorted out. They'll find all the entertainment they want here—for cash down—to me—English money or American dollars only——"

The place was a brothel. George had moved in and taken it over. I never got the chance, then, to find out just how he had managed to pull such a stroke. I remember he remarked at the time: "Me—I'm not interested in the wares—just the lolly!"

I reckon on that occasion he must have made quite a packet.

Now I saw my opportunity to find out the truth for the first time. "George—you know, I often wondered——"

He grinned. "How I took over that brothel? It was easy. When the lads started moaning, I decided somebody ought to find them some entertainment. I figured that in Catania there must be at least one brothel. Didn't take me long to find that one—some feeble old dame was in charge. She didn't seem to realize three stripes didn't make me a General. I threw a scare into her—told her the Allies were about to move in on joints like hers, and like as not she'd be shot. She couldn't leave fast enough! But before she scarpered I made her explain to the

girls I was temporarily in charge and they had to obey my orders for the time being. It was as easy as that! ”

He made it sound easy—but he wouldn't tell me how much money he made out of that deal. I bought another round and we talked some more, doing a pretty fair job of turning back the clock a few years.

We recalled the time George and I were sent with an advance patrol into wild country south of Naples. A dozen of us got cut off and had to hole up with no food or drink and ammunition low. There were retreating Jerries all around us. Things were pretty desperate. Once again George decided to take a hand. He vanished for two hours and returned to lead us to a village he'd come across. There had been about thirty "Ities" there. The church cellars were crammed with food, good wine, and cases of ammo. For some reason we never learned at the time, very soon after George had descended on the village everybody had packed up and left. I asked him now how he had managed to persuade them to leave in such a hurry leaving everything behind.

He grinned again. "I used psychology, that's all—told them the Jerries had poisoned the food and wine and had also probably left booby traps all over the place timed to explode any minute——"

In some ways George was quite ruthless—yet—he had never really given *me* this impression. Rather, he impressed me as being gentle and apologetic, and well liked by most.

We talked on through the evening, recalling dozens of mutually pleasant wartime memories, nostalgic either for humorous or other cause.

There was the time when George stepped slap bang into a nest of Germans—a rearguard post left behind to cover the retreat. It was odds-on George had had his lot—these desperate last-stand Jerries weren't taking any prisoners! But astonishingly George again came off best—even got a mention in despatches—somehow he persuaded twenty Germans armed to the earholes that the war was as good as over for them, and that they were completely surrounded. They surrendered to him, and he proudly marched them back to our lines!

I'd never thought so before—but now, I began to wonder about George. Was he quite as innocent and harmless as I'd always thought? Were his sometimes amazing achievements, as he maintained, lucky breaks—or was he in truth a natural-born con-man of highest degree?

The evening passed pleasantly, and eventually I dismissed my vague suspicions as being ridiculous. George, I felt sure, was what I'd always

figure—uncannily lucky at one time, unfortunately prone at others to finding himself in situations where folks misjudged and thought the worst of him.

I questioned him frankly about the alleged crimes he'd pulled against certain individuals (according to my uncle), and he answered with equal frankness and without embarrassment. He was angry too. Indignantly he asked me how I could sit all evening and drink with a feller if I suspected him of such awful things? His pride was so plainly and genuinely hurt, I hastened to assure him that I did not for one moment believe any of the allegations.

This appeared to mollify him, for he became the affable host again and was great company.

Not long after this, however, we were joined, to my surprise, by two of George's acquaintances. George invited them to join us and made the introductions.

"Hope you don't mind," he said. "Like you to meet two good mates of mine. This big, hulking brute here is Trevor Blake. He owns a garage. The little feller there with the grin that won't wipe off his ugly kisser is Sammy Connell—nice job he's got!—he drives a funeral hearse!"

I don't know why—but I suddenly got the feeling that this was no casual meeting, but contrived—none of them said anything that might have confirmed this suspicion, but I felt sure the meeting had been prearranged.

After a time, somehow—and I forget exactly what led up to it—the talk turned to crime in general, and the Great Train Robbery in particular. Before long George, flushed with drink, was expounding what he called a "hypothetical case".

"Where most crooks slip up," he explained ponderously, "they don't do enough efficient pre-planning before they pull a big job. And the biggest problem, to my way of thinking, is where to hide the loot when the job has been done. Always, after a big robbery, the area is blanketed with coppers *and* amateur sleuths—all after finding the money. It's almost certain to be found by some joker, *unless*—"

"Yes?" prompted Blake.

"Unless," said George importantly, "it has been safely stashed away—immediately after the robbery—where nobody would even dream of looking for it! And there it would stay—until the heat is off."

Blake, it appeared to me, seemed inordinately interested in all this,

and vaguely it made me wonder. The topic, frankly, bored me.

"And seeing how you know all the answers, George, just where do you reckon this imaginary gang would hide their loot?" queried Blake, licking his lips, his eyes gleaming. It astonished me anyone could be so fantastically interested.

In his element, centre of the stage, George went on, his round red face shining with enthusiasm and booze.

"Well now—let's take a hypothetical case, shall we? Suppose this gang planned to knock off a security van—like, say, the one that takes wages from the bank here to that big new factory every Thursday. First, they would keep watch on the route the van takes; time it, and go over the route to find the best place to ram the van and hi-jack the money.

"I'm talking, of course, about a BIG job—something worth the bother—and this one could be big—I reckon that van must carry around £200,000 every week. Now . . . having worked out the plan to steal the money—the easiest part of it—this gang would be well advised to start planning every detail of their moves after the robbery, in particular, where they hide the money. They have to remember not many places will be missed when the big search starts. But there is ONE place nobody is going to dream of looking——"

"And where might that be?" chipped in Connell. There was sweat on his top lip.

George beamed at us. "IN THE CEMETERY, mates . . . in the old graveyard! Suppose the stolen money was in a coffin, and buried in a grave—it would be as safe as you could wish for!"

Blake looked sardonic. "You call that a smart idea? Then how does this gang go about getting the stolen money into a coffin, and then getting it buried—it couldn't be done without somebody spotting what was going on. . . ."

"That's where you're wrong," said George. It would not be easy, I grant you—but with planning, it could be done, and nobody any the wiser."

"Tell us how, master-mind," sneered Connell, openly sceptical.

"Right, I will," said George smugly. "First, the robbery would have to be timed right—for a day when a newly dug grave was all ready and waiting . . . shouldn't be too difficult . . . folks are dying every day——"

He took a swig at his beer and went on:

“A new grave means a death somewhere. Who is dead and due to be interred can be checked without much trouble—in fact, you have a set-up here in this town ready-made for just the plan I have in mind! Now let us suppose this gang has found out that some poor old chap has passed away in one of our Old People’s Homes—you know the routine? I’ll tell you.

“Most likely the deceased has no relatives interested, and this would be even more ideal, because there’d be no fear of the chance person interfering with the plan. You know what happens? A coffin is ordered and the body, in the coffin, is moved to the Chapel of Rest at the Cemetery. It sometimes rests there for two days before the funeral.

“So . . . the gang waits until such a coffin is in the chapel, then pulls off the robbery. Naturally they have transport laid on, and the money—which would probably be half ones and half fivers—would be in hundred bundles, which makes something like 200 bundles of fivers and 1,000 bundles of ones—each bundle about an inch fat. The gang drives straight to the chapel with the loot and the money is stashed *inside* the coffin, under the silk padding on the bottom, sides, and ends. . . .

“As an extra safeguard, the bundles could be put into small plastic bags—it might have to stay buried for a few months until the fuss died down. The gang carries on normally, not suddenly showing they’ve become rich. They exercise patience. Later, when they figure it’s safe, they go to the grave one night, open it up, take the loot, and fill the grave in again!”

“And suppose by this time there’s a bloody great headstone on the grave?” said Blake.

“So what?” countered George. “That presents no big problem.”

“And how does this gang explain its sudden wealth *then*?” asked Connell.

“Easy,” said George. “They have a big win on the pools—no publicity, see?”

I began to feel uneasy. All at once this began to sound to me like the real thing—not just a hypothetical case. He must have guessed what I was thinking, because he laughed, and said:

“Well—it might hit snags—but I reckon it *could* work. But let’s not be too serious about it, eh? How about another round of drinks, you blokes?”

Before we parted that night there was another funny little incident

that puzzled me a bit at the time, and came back to me later, in view of what happened, with added significance. Or was it just my over-active imagination?

Before we went our separate ways, Blake remarked to George:

"I'm glad you decided to keep the Jag, George—let's say for services rendered, eh? I consider you earned it!"

I puzzled my head about this exchange for days, but still couldn't make sense of it. Then, just before my visit was due to end, *it happened*.

Two things happened within two days, incidents which, under normal circumstances, would never have appeared to have any connection. Uncle came in one night and told us an old friend, Frank Gledhill, had died at the Old Folks' Home. That night they went to pay their respects at the Chapel of Rest. I don't know why, but I tagged along.

We didn't go until six that evening. By three p.m. news of the security van robbery was all over town. Two men had rammed it, coshed the driver and guards, and got away with more than £200,000.

The coffin rested on trestle supports with the lid off so that anybody who wished to go and take a last look at old Frank Gledhill could do so. I couldn't help wondering, standing beside the coffin, but told myself not to be daft. It was no more than coincidence. But the hypothetical case George had mooted at the club kept coming into my thoughts.

In no time there were police all over town. The big hunt was on. Frank Gledhill's funeral, I learned, was scheduled for the next day—the same day I was due to return to London. I ran into George at seven, after we'd been to the chapel.

He told me he was going to drop in and pay his respects later—old Frank had been a great friend of his family. He added something else which had no significance then—although it did later.

"It seemed such a shame for the poor old feller to be buried with none of his relations here—so, as I happened to know where to contact his son and daughter—they neglected him, you know—still, they're coming to the funeral."

Later, when it was suggested that I should go to the funeral, I agreed without really knowing why.

That was how I got to know about the change of plan. Old Frank's son had undertaken to stand funeral expenses, but insisted on cremation. After the funeral, that morning, I called at the local for a drink.

Blake and Connell were sitting at a table with George, and some-

thing in their attitude made me change my mind about joining them.

It was plain something was wrong—Blake and Connell were as white as death and letting into George like nobody's business.

I just caught one remark, made by George, before I finished my drink and left the pub. Quite distinctly I heard him remark:

"How the hell was I to know they were going to cremate him? It's no use blaming me for *that!*"

Suspicion was now almost certainty in my mind—yet, a tiny doubt lingered. Anyway, I had no intention of rushing in where angels fear to tread. I fancied that stolen loot might never be found—and the irony of it—if it were true, made me chuckle.

Back at my aunt's place Frank Gledhill's son was talking to uncle. And something funny came out. Uncle said he'd been surprised old Frank was cremated. The son explained:

"I wasn't keen myself—until George Spiggott persuaded me it was the in-thing to do these days. . . ."

I was now practically sure—but what proof did I have?

It was not until my next visit, a year later, I heard George, a few months after my previous visit, had had a big win on the football pools. No publicity of course. . . .

They told me George had gone to live in the South of France. I kept what I knew to myself. It didn't take much figuring what *could* have happened—although it was still only conjecture on my part.

If Blake and Connell had pulled that robbery—they'd done it working to George's plan. What they never guessed was that George planned to get his own hands on the money without any risks. Once they stuffed the money in the coffin, George *could* have removed it, having already persuaded the dead man's son to cremate—thus his own robbery of the robbers would be covered and Blake and Connell would always believe their loot went up in flames with the coffin in the crematorium.

"You got something on your mind?" asked my aunt.

I shook my head. "Nothing important."

Everybody agreed George had the luck of the devil. I had a sudden mental picture of him somewhere in the sun. Then my uncle chipped in: "Good riddance to bad rubbish—good thing he left, I reckon, all round!"

And my vision of George's chubby face suddenly had a hurt expression and I could almost hear him saying plaintively, "Who, I? Why does everybody always think the worst of me. . . .?"



OVER MY DEAD BODY

JAMES PATTINSON

EVERYONE who knew her said what a sweet, well-behaved child Virginia Seaman was. Some of them said she was old-fashioned, as though good behaviour were something that you associated with children of an earlier age, but never with those of today.

Of course, if anyone was old-fashioned it was really Aunt Harriet, with whom Virginia had lived ever since the death of her parents in a road accident. She had been six at the time, and four years had passed since that unhappy day—four years with Aunt Harriet in the bleak, chilly house where that stern, unbending spinster lived a life dedicated to good works and Persian cats.

At first Virginia had rebelled against her aunt's strict dictatorship, so different from the easy-going ways she had been used to; but soon she learned that it was no good opposing her new guardian and that the best course was to be obedient.

Aunt Harriet maintained that she was forming the child's character. "My brother never had any, I'm afraid. And as for that silly little thing

he married—well!”

She had never cared for her brother's wife. Mrs. Seaman had been far too pretty; and for that her sister-in-law could never forgive her. Prettiness, according to Aunt Harriet, invariably went with feather brains and general incompetence.

Virginia defended her dead parents against these slights with vehemence and spirit, but Aunt Harriet refused to listen.

“Providence, my child, often works in a mysterious way. Perhaps you have been fortunate to come under my care. It is not yet too late to make something of you.”

Virginia wondered what Aunt Harriet intended making of her. Something in the aunt's own image perhaps—lean, unsmiling, stiff-backed, always dressed in sombre colours, always peering suspiciously over the tops of steel-rimmed glasses with the object of finding fault. If that was to be the end-product Virginia wanted none of it; but she did not say so. Instead, having seen that active rebellion was unlikely to produce anything but punishment in the form of no jam for tea or early retirement to bed, she decided to give at least the appearance of docility and obedience.

Aunt Harriet was gratified by the rapid results of her treatment. She remarked upon it to her elderly maid and confidante, Maria.

“It is still possible, you see, to instil good manners and a respect for their elders into the children of today. It is simply a question of discipline. If parents would only act on these lines we should hear far less about juvenile delinquency and this would be a better country to live in. There is too much moral decay, far too much; and it is all the result of a lack of discipline in childhood.”

With which conclusion Maria, having been well trained in thirty years of service with her mistress, entirely agreed. “She'll bless you for it, ma'am, later on. You're making a proper little lady of her and no mistake.”

The proper little lady herself had no thought of blessing her aunt. Forbidden to wear such outrageous modern clothes as jeans and sneakers, forbidden to watch television, which Aunt Harriet described as a contrivance of the devil, forbidden to read any literature other than such mind-improving works as *Pilgrim's Progress* and the poems of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, she became a kind of exhibit, an example of what could still be done with children under the correct system of upbringing.

Thus there became in effect two Virginias: one known to the adult circle of Aunt Harriet's friends and acquaintances, the other known only to her school companions. And if Aunt Harriet had been able to overhear some of the conversations that took place between Virginia and a girl named Rebecca Smith she would have been shocked to the tips of her bony fingers.

In fact Aunt Harriet would have strongly disapproved of any association whatever between her niece and the raven-haired Smith child. For the Smiths were gipsies and lived in a semi-permanent encampment on the outskirts of the small country town in which Aunt Harriet's house was situated. From that base of operations they sallied forth to earn a living by such varied activities as selling cheap linoleum and faulty carpets, dealing in second-hand cars, old iron, lead sheeting of dubious origin and similar commodities, and doing seasonal work on the farms of the district.

Aunt Harriet said they were nothing but parasites and ought to be driven away. "The Council should see to it. It's scandalous that decent, law-abiding people should be plagued by vagabonds like that. If I had my way——"

If Aunt Harriet had had her way she would certainly never have allowed her niece to make friends with Rebecca Smith; but Virginia felt no obligation to inform her guardian of the attachment. Not at least until the approach of Rebecca's birthday.

That imminent event caused a complication because there was to be a party at the gipsy encampment and Rebecca wanted Virginia to be present.

"It wouldn't be a real party without you. You will come, Ginnie, won't you?"

"I shall have to ask my aunt if I may."

Aunt Harriet greeted the news of the invitation with shocked astonishment and stern condemnation. "Do you mean to tell me that you have actually been hobnobbing with a gipsy?"

"She's in my class at school."

"That is an unfortunate circumstance which cannot be avoided; but at least there is no reason why you should go out of your way to associate with this little ragamuffin. I should have expected you to have more awareness of your social position after all the pains I have taken with you."

Virginia, after four years of practice, managed to retain control of

herself even when her dearest friend was referred to in such disparaging terms. She merely answered quietly: "Rebecca is a very nice person."

Aunt Harriet almost snorted. "Nice indeed! No child with that kind of background could possibly be anything but a nasty, ill-mannered little wretch."

Virginia held her arms straight down by her sides like a soldier standing to attention, as she had been taught to do when making a request of any kind. "I should much like to go to the party. May I?"

"A niece of mine go to that encampment, that cesspool, that seed-bed of immorality and vice! You will go there over my dead body!"

Virginia said nothing more because there was no more to say. She knew that it was hopeless to try to persuade her guardian. That firmness of character on which Aunt Harriet prided herself included the practice of never changing her mind; and in the present instance she had every inducement not to change it.

"I trust we shall hear no more of this matter. You should be thoroughly ashamed of yourself."

As it turned out, Aunt Harriet did hear no more of the matter. Two days later—it was a Saturday afternoon—she was found by Maria lying on the tiled floor at the foot of the stairs with her neck twisted in a grotesque fashion and no more life in her than would be found in a rag doll.

Maria began to have hysterics, decided that there was no point in this, since there was no one to observe her having them, and went instead for the doctor.

Doctor Syms confirmed Maria's worst fears. Her mistress was undoubtedly dead. "Must have tripped, fell down the stairs, landed on her head. These things happen unfortunately. Most distressing."

The police had to be informed. A sergeant appeared and also Aunt Harriet's brother Charles, a plump, rather fussy man who was an estate agent.

Charles wanted to know where Virginia was. "It'll be a terrible shock to the child. She loved her aunt above all things." He blew out his cheeks and made a curious hissing sound as the air was released. He seemed ill at ease. This was the kind of occurrence one didn't normally have to deal with in the estate agency line. "Down all those stairs! I always did say they were a death trap. Too steep. Should at least have had a rug at the bottom. Not bare tiles."

It was Maria who eventually found Virginia in the small back bedroom which she occupied. The girl was reading *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and until that moment had apparently been blissfully unaware of the fatal event that had taken place in the house.

Charles put his hand on her shoulder and patted it reassuringly. "You must try to be brave. You have already had one tragedy in your life. Now, I fear, there has been another."

"Is Aunt Harriet dead?" Virginia asked. They had carried the body into the drawing-room. "Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

"She fell downstairs. Doctor Syms says death must have been instantaneous. You can take comfort from the fact that she didn't suffer."

Virginia looked at the tiled floor, at the smear of blood not yet washed away. "We can't be sure she didn't suffer a little though, can we? Just before she died, I mean. Nobody can be certain of that."

Charles looked uncomfortable. Only his niece seemed entirely at ease. There was no sign of tears in her eyes. They were wide and innocent and perfectly dry.

"You don't have to think about it," he said.

The police sergeant had been writing in his notebook. He spoke to Charles. "The coroner will have to be told, of course. You realize that, sir. Just a formality. There's no question of foul play."

"Why not?" Virginia asked.

The sergeant appeared to be taken aback. "What did you say, young lady?"

"I said why isn't there any question of foul play? It could have been murder, couldn't it?"

"Now, really," the sergeant said, "you shouldn't go getting ideas like that into your pretty little head. Your aunt just tripped, that's all."

"What did she trip on?"

"The stair carpet. Anything."

"But suppose somebody had tied a piece of strong carpet thread between the banisters at the top of the stairs. It's not very light up there. Aunt Harriet would never have seen it. If it had been fixed at the right height—about six inches say—it would have caught her ankles and she would have had to fall. It could have been done while she was lying down, as she always does in the afternoon. Then when she came out of the bedroom there it would have been, waiting for her."

The sergeant stared long and hard at Virginia, who stared innocently back at him. Then he went all the way up the stairs and examined the

banisters. Then he came down again.

"No carpet thread up there."

Virginia was mildly contemptuous. "Of course there isn't. The murderer wouldn't be likely to leave the evidence lying about, would he? He'd clear it away before anyone found it."

The sergeant blew his nose loudly and turned to Charles. "I think your niece has been reading too many crime stories."

Virginia shook her head emphatically. "Oh, no, I haven't. Poor dear Aunt Harriet, whom we shall all miss so very very much, would never let me read anything but improving books like Longfellow and *Paradise Lost* and so on. They've done me the world of good, you know; helping to form my character and all that sort of thing. Are you going to call in Scotland Yard?"

"I don't think that will be necessary," the sergeant said. And he closed his notebook and went away rather hurriedly, as though he had a train to catch.

Virginia took her uncle's hand confidingly. "It could have been Maria who did it. I expect she gets something in Aunt Harriet's will."

Charles was shocked. "I don't think you should talk like that. Maria was devoted to your aunt. This has made her quite ill."

"She could be shamming. Trying to pull the wool over our eyes."

Charles refused to believe it. "Nobody killed Harriet. It was an accident."

Virginia shrugged. "Well, if you say so. But it could have been murder, you know. It could have been."

Later Charles took her away to his own house, where Mrs. Seaman fussed over her and gave her specially nice things to eat because she had had such a distressing experience—and she already an orphan.

Next day they asked her what she would most like to do, and she said at once that what she would most like would be to go to Rebecca Smith's party.

Charles looked doubtful. "Those gipsies! I don't think your Aunt Harriet would have approved."

"Oh, yes, she would," Virginia said. "I know, because she told me so herself. She said I could go there over her dead body." She looked up at Charles with those wide, innocent blue eyes that he found so strangely perturbing; then added simply: "And now she is dead—isn't she?"

THE LAST JUDGEMENT

J. M. M'INTYRE

Black glowered at the frail, elderly man who had just passed sentence. His huge hands clenched and unclenched. It was obvious that the prisoner's one desire was to get those hands around the neck of the judge. "Take him away" the judge murmured wearily.

JUDGE HARDY waited patiently while the three policemen fought to hold Black down. He fought silently, but with a grim ferocity that astounded. His thin, cruel lips twisted in silent hatred as he strove to get the judge.

Finally they mastered him. And he stood still. His great chest and shoulders heaving with his efforts. His eyes glared from beneath thick eyebrows, like the eyes of a wild creature.

The judge passed a thin, weary hand over his face. Then looked at the prisoner with as much pity as severity.

"As I was saying," he continued. "You are sentenced to seven years hard labour. And, let me add, I am being lenient only because this is my last case, my last judgement. Don't force me to add to your punishment."

Black glowered at the frail, elderly man who had just passed sentence. His huge hands clenched and unclenched. It was obvious that his one desire was to get those hands around the neck of the judge.

An inarticulate growl that welled up from the savage depths of his being was his answer to the judge.

"I'll get you. If it's the very last thing I do, I'll get you." And defiantly he spat from the dock.

"Take him away," the judge murmured wearily.

Black paced back and forth in the cell under the courthouse. He was like a wild thing caged. And like all wild creatures that live savagely, the only thing he feared was the confines of a cell. It drove him frantic.

"You had better arm yourselves," the inspector in charge advised the plain-clothes men when they came to collect Black. "That man's a killer."

They both nodded. "We're armed. The last prison break he made he beat up two of the toughest prison officers. We're taking no chances."

Black was strangely quiet as they drove him to the station. His eyes held a strange, vacant look. It was almost as though the prison greyness had already crept into his bones.

They entered their compartment and settled back; before them stretched a several-hours journey. Almost immediately Black fell asleep. His head hanging grotesquely on his thick, muscular neck.

"They certainly gave him a powerful tranquillizer with his meal," one of them grinned, and the other nodded his agreement.

"Why don't you nip along and have a coffee? He'll be all right." And the heavier of the two men patted his shoulder holster reassuringly.

His companion rose and swung himself heavily through the compartment door and along the swaying corridor. Black began a heavy, bestial snoring that brought a quick grin to the broad face of his guard.

Approaching a station the train slowed a little, then, as it rattled over the points, began to pick up speed again.

Suddenly Black struck.

Moving with an incredible speed, he crashed his handcuffs down on the startled guard's head.

Within moments he had unlocked the cuffs, pocketed the gun from the shoulder holster, and pausing momentarily at the door he leapt.

His body swung out and down in a wide arc; yet so poised, so muscularly powerful was he, that even as he struck he ran forward and maintained his balance.

He had no time to lose. Within minutes the police would be looking for him. But before they got him he would get the judge.

His teeth gritted at the thought. He hated Judge Hardy. Twice before Hardy had sentenced him to long years in prison. This time Black was determined that when they recaptured him, they wouldn't throw him into a cell to rot. He shuddered at the thought. But they would hang him for the murder of Hardy. It was several hours since he had been sentenced. It would be past midnight before he got to the judge's house.

Trusting to luck, he hurried back to the station the train had just passed. His luck was in. Within moments he was aboard a train hurtling south.

The money he had taken from the plain-clothes man had come in useful. He was relying on the fact that the police would not expect him to head back so soon.

He alighted at a station outside the city, and made his way quickly to where the judge lived. It was near one in the morning. He was wary.

He knew the judge would not permit a police guard, and therefore there would not be any in the grounds of his house. But Black felt sure that they would be all around.

He knew exactly at what part of the high, surrounding wall he would make his entrance. This time he would get the judge. This time there would be no mistake.

The streets were almost deserted. Now and then a car passed. But no one noticed him. Cat-like, he padded from shadow to shadow.

Once a police car stopped only a few yards from him. He actually heard them mention his name. He grinned ferociously in the dark.

With a quick run and a jump he heaved himself on to the top of the wall and paused. There was no sound. Quietly he slid to the ground. There was no one about.

* * *

Only one light shone in the house. The light from the library where the judge spent most of his leisure hours, probing among his beloved books.

Snake-like, Black wormed his way forward. Hoisting himself quickly to a window, he slid the catch, and a moment later was in the house. His hand sweated a little on the butt of the gun he carried.

The library was easily found—light streamed under the door. He paused for a moment, then thrust open the door.

The judge was looking straight at him. He sat quite still, a faint enigmatic smile hovering on his lips. His silver hair gleamed in the glow of the desk lamp.

With a vicious snarl Black raised the gun and squeezed the trigger until it clicked on an empty magazine. Then with a final roar of hate and triumph, he hurled it at the frail body that had sunk forward.

Then he turned and fled from the house, his seething rage still bubbling inside him. It was this rage that sent him berserk at the sight of a police car.

He charged. His muscular arms outstretched as though to crush it.

It took some time to overpower him, but finally, by sheer weight of numbers, he was overcome.

They threw him into a cell and left him. It was several hungry hours before his captors reappeared.

He grinned ferociously at them. Almost joyously he snarled: "I got him. Like I said I would. Now there's nothing you can do about it."

The superintendent, who had arrived with the inspector, pursed his lips angrily. "Go on, inspector," he prompted. "Charge him. I want to see him squirm."

Black sneered as the inspector began to read the charge sheet. Then his sneer faded to a look of absolute terror.

"Attempted murder?" he raged. "But I killed him. I killed him." His shrieks rang through the cells.

Grimly the superintendent waited until the screams died away, then, shaping every word deliberately, he said:

"Judge Hardy died of natural causes at least an hour before you shot him. And I have not the slightest doubt that Judge James will give you life imprisonment."



As he went through Cold Bath Fields he saw
A solitary cell;
And the Devil was pleased, for it gave him a hint
For improving his prisons in Hell.

SAMUEL COLERIDGE



Fingerprint Books

THE LADY IN THE LAKE
by Raymond Chandler 25s.

CRIME AT CHRISTMAS
by C. H. B. Kitchin 21s.

A CUP OF COLD POISON
by Joan Fleming 25s.

THE LODGER
by Mrs Belloc Lowndes 25s.

UNCERTAIN DEATH
by Anthony Gilbert 21s.

THE LADY VANISHES
by Ethel Lina White 25s.

Hamish Hamilton



CROOKS IN BOOKS

A review of some recent crime, mystery and detective books

“THE SMILE ON THE FACE OF THE TIGER”, by Douglas Hurd and Andrew Osmond (*Collins, 25s.*).

The realism and authenticity of this second thriller from authors Douglas Hurd and Andrew Osmond augur well for success in the political suspense world of writing.

Blackmail and violence play their part in a story that takes us from Red China back to a Conservative Conference at Cleethorpes and from the Malayan jungle to a pheasant shoot at Chequers.

Perhaps too much fact and detail have been packed into this book, but that is bound to happen with double-authorship. No doubt in future books there will be room for more construction and smoothness in the actual writing.

“THE WHISPERING WALL”, by Patricia Carlon (*Hodder & Stoughton, 21s.*).

Few opening situations could be more macabre or stimulating than that of a paralysed old woman surrounded by scheming family and unwanted tenants.

To relieve this gloom, a small child—Rose—manages to make contact with the hitherto speechless old lady and some kind of fight begins for ultimate hope and happiness.

Well written and with sympathy, we are caught up in the drama of the woman's returning faculties and very tempted to turn to the last page. But don't. This is not a book to scamp—read it quietly and slowly, for there is good characterization in it. A rare enough thing today in thrillers.

Michael PEREIRA

WHEN ONE DOOR SHUTS

An Englishman and a girl reporter become dangerously involved in the drug rackets of Istanbul. *21s*

P. M. HUBBARD

THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY

An ex-Indian civil servant returns to Pakistan and is caught up in the repercussions of a murder case he had presided over twenty years previously. **April 21st**

21s

Roger SIMONS

MURDER FIRST CLASS

Murder in the cabin of an international financier; Inspector Wace investigates. **April 21st** *21s*

BLES

All prices are net

"THE LADY IN THE LAKE", by Raymond Chandler (*Hamish Hamilton, 25s.*).

Another one for Philip Marlowe fans, who will not be disappointed.

It is an odd case from the beginning—a woman disappears and, although her husband admits to a bond of mutual hate, he hires a private eye to find her.

When Marlowe gets on the scene they get off to a bad start together, but he takes on the case.

Surprisingly, all—and there are few—clues initially point not to the woman's whereabouts, but to her sordid character.

In the end not only is one crime turned up, but several are revealed, as Marlowe finds himself in a world of unexpected evil.

"GENTLY COLOURED", by Alan Hunter (*Cassell, 18s.*).

Right up to the minute is this new book by Alan Hunter, as it opens with the bodies of 22 illegal immigrants being washed ashore from a sunken sugar boat.

Chief-Superintendent Gently is given by the author many useful qualities for the hero of a thriller story—that of tact, patience, and tolerance—as well as a razor-sharp mind.

All of these qualities are needed in a fast-running thriller set largely in London among West Indians.

CRIME CLUB

Julian **SYMONS**

THE MAN WHOSE
DREAMS CAME TRUE

'A splendid tale, one of
Julian Symon's best for
some time' SPECTATOR
'First rate entertainment'
SUNDAY TIMES 21s

H.R.F. **KEATING**

INSPECTOR GHOTE
PLAYS A JOKER

'Great stylishness and
charm combined with fine
plotting' SUNDAY TIMES
'As ingenious and delightful
as ever' SUN. TELEGRAPH 21s

Rex **STOUT**

THE FATHER HUNT

'Subtle and witty exercise
by veteran author'
SUNDAY TELEGRAPH
'His stories and characters
are as vigorous and fresh
as ever' OXFORD MAIL 21s

CRIME IN FACT

EX.-DET. SUPT. DAVID THOMAS

Seek out the Guilty

The outspoken story of a dedicated crime-buster's thirty-two years in the Monmouthshire police

Illustrated 30s

CRIME IN FICTION



Suspense at 22s 6d

OTTO BEEBY

Blank Cheque for Murder

JEFFREY ASHFORD

Prisoner at the Bar

BILL KNOX

The Tallyman

Thrillers at 18s

**JOHN CREASEY
AS GORDON ASHE**

A Shadow of Death

HAMILTON JOBSON

Smile and be a Villain

JOHN LONG

"PRISONER AT THE BAR", Jeffrey Ashford (*John Long, 22s. 6d.*)

A quite exceptionally good piece of detective and suspense writing in which an innocent man—a barrister himself—is unable to extricate himself from suspected murder.

The writing and plot are quite brilliant, and for those who like to pit their brains against the obvious and slowly practical steps of the law, this is a book for several hours' exciting reading.

"THE SHADOW", by Paule Mason (*Collins, 21s.*)

The second thriller from author of *The Dark Mirror* is an exceptionally quick and engrossing piece of suspense writing.

A doctor and his wife leave a young au pair girl in charge of their three children while they go on a much-needed holiday.

The girl is pleasant, capable, and affectionate and all should go well. But a patient of the doctor's—a psychiatric patient—is lurking in the grounds, and common sense is not enough. . . .

Well written and authentic in its setting, I predict an excellent following for this young author.

"THE FOURTH GRAVE", by John Boland (*Cassell, 25s.*)

A long, quite involved, but in the

end, excellent character-study thriller taking us across Africa in a search for hidden diamonds.

The hunt itself is interesting, but it is the development of car-salesman Joe from a timid young Londoner into a courageous and enterprising explorer, that touches both mind and heart.

"THE FATHER HUNT", by Rex Stout
(Collins, 21s.).

The indefatigable Rex Stout (now 82) produces another story of the equally indefatigable Nero Wolfe.

Nero, as usual, does not over-exert himself physically—when the case of finding out who is the father of his latest young client arises.

Being an attractive 22-year-old, she works her charms on Nero's right-hand man, Archie Goodwin, who finds himself not only running around on her behalf but into some sticky situations as well. The girl's mother had earlier met her death in a road accident, but this turns out to be murder.

Enquiry leads point to power-game types in banking and television who were connected with the late mother's work; the unknown father, it seems, was pretty affluent, judging from the vast sum banked and left to the girl.

Nero and Archie are really in top form when it comes to solving this.

MILLS

Manning
O'Brine's
spy thriller,
intelligent,
readable,
highly
exciting from
the prologue
(one of the
most startling
sequences in
contemporary
fiction) to
the final,
tense,
confrontation.

HERBERT JENKINS 25s

...and from
ROBERT HALE

JAMES HADLEY
CHASE

The Whiff of Money

PAUL MULLER
Good-bye, Shirley

JOHN NEWTON
CHANCE

The Abel Coincidence

MICHAEL
CRONIN

Caribbean Kidnap

H. T. ROTHWELL
*No Honour Amongst
Spies*

ELMORE
LEONARD
The Big Bounce

JOHN D.
MACDONALD
Cry Hard, Cry Fast

18/- each

"THE TOFF AND THE GOLDEN BOY",
by John Creasey (*Hodder & Stoughton*, 18s.).

Good, hard biting and compelling reading is this new offering from a famous author.

A series of attacks on small shopkeepers, with very small sums taken, is the beginning of the mystery of the Golden Boy and his activities. Why such small amounts? And why so many long-haired youths involved?

The "Toff" sets out to find the answers and quite horrid insects crawl out from under the stones. As all Creasey fans will predict.

"DOSSIER IX", by Barry Weil,
(*Hamish Hamilton*, 25s.).

Regretfully, the jacket is without a potted biography of the author, but from the book one gathers that Barry Weil knows his way around France, Switzerland, Israel, the Paris Préfecture and the Service de Documentation.

The *James Bond* of this tale of intrigue is Jay Asher, an Israeli agent seconded to British Intelligence who gets himself heavily involved in an attempt to get French atomic hardware into Arab hands. Asher uncovers a sinister underworld of crime, espionage and perversion. He has learnt every trick The Avengers and the Men from U.N.C.L.E. ever knew and miraculously gets himself out of many frightening and impossible situations.

"MILLS", by Manning O'Brine
(*Herbert Jenkins, 25s.*)

A first-rate thriller from a well-known T.V. script writer. The Mills of the title is a British agent who decides he is retiring. But *that*, he is not permitted to do — once an agent, always an agent is the dictum.

Trying to retire to Italy, Mills finds himself pursued by Russians, Americans, and British alike.

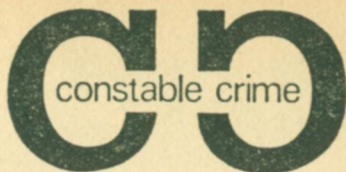
I have only one criticism to make — the dramatic prologue should, I think, have come later in the book — for the ending of Ernst Reincke rather takes from the urgency of what follows.

"A PRIDE OF HEROES", by Peter Dickinson (*Hodder & Stoughton, 21s.*)

Now we move up into the most elegant world of Robert Adam houses, noble avenues, ancient men-servants, visiting tourists and the second adventure of *Superintendent James Pibble*.

I like Pibble as a detective of fiction. He is at home playing "Grandmother's Footsteps" with lions, trying out both ancient and new fire arms and quite happy in the company of Admirals, Generals and very dated old ladies.

Not that this makes the story long or leisurely — on the contrary the whole action is timed for a smart twenty-four hours work — and all taking place in one locale.



Jeremy Potter

The dance of death

'Interesting, original . . . much fascinating incidental lore about Rowlandson and his times' Edmund Crispin, *Sunday Times*.
'A most unusual book . . . the wealth of information makes this a work of real scholarship'
Francis Iles, *Guardian*. 25s

Bill Turner

Circle of squares

A secret society to fight the tyranny of youth. An enlightened group of respectable citizens? A retreat for harmless cranks? Or an ingenious cover for corruption. By the author of *Bound to die* and *Sex trap*. 21s

Anthony Dekker

Temptation in a private zoo

An invitation to the Bear Garden promised a bon viveur weekend of flagrant sensuality. But behind the luxury and the beautiful girls was the stop-at-nothing mask of international crime. 21s

Robert Crawford

The shroud society

'I want you to kill my wife.' It was a chilling prelude to blackmail, double-cross, death and a cool half million. A tense thriller by a well known novelist writing under a pseudonym. 25s

Constable & Company Ltd
10 Orange Street London WC2

Crime & Punishment

Murder on Honeymoon

DULCIE GRAY

A masterpiece of psychological
plotting **21s**

Dead Woman of the Year

HUGH PENTECOST

Urbane and suspenseful, this is
American crime writing at its
best **21s**

The Accessory

MARY LOCKWOOD

A bizarre spinechiller chosen
both by the Mystery Guild and
the Dollar Book Club in America
25s

MACDONALD

"VERDICT OF TWELVE", by Raymond Postgate (*Hodder & Stoughton*, 21s.).

This book is one of a series of Classics of detection and adventure being published by Hodder & Stoughton under the guidance of Michael Gilbert as editor.

Eric Ambler, A. E. W. Mason, Edgar Wallace and Agatha Christie have been included in the twelve previous "Classics" published in this series. Raymond Postgate, who is better known as a writer on the mysteries of the kitchen, has cleverly portrayed a murder trial by breaking it up into its constituent parts . . . ingredients for a recipe! Take a large bowl and put in twelve ozs. of jury, 1 cupful of defending counsel, 1 tablespoon of prosecuting counsel, half a pint of accused, and a generous seasoning of judges, doctors, elderly servants and a pinch of psychiatry. Beat all this up patiently, then put on a low flame to simmer slowly, watching it carefully so that it shouldn't boil over before ready and . . . voila! another good detective novel.

"THE MURDER ON THE LINKS", by Agatha Christie (*Hodder & Stoughton*, 21s.).

This new issue of one of the author's books is, in a way, a test for the new reader.

Perhaps you consider Agatha Christie old hat, or too unsophisticated for today?

On the contrary, I doubt if more than 1 per cent of new readers of this book will guess the identity of the killer one page before it is revealed to you.

A truly classic who-dun-it—written in classic style.

“WHEN ONE DOOR SHUTS”, by Michael Pereira (*Geoffrey Bles*, 21s.).

Again Michael Pereira is happily at home in Turkey—a country he knows very well indeed. In this setting he has “Gabriel Ashton” making a very precarious living from petty crime.

Then an old war-time buddy turns up with a scheme for infiltrating the smuggling racket. To Michael it sounds just possible, and intriguing.

But George—the war-time buddy disappears—and Michael without much sentiment but with an unexpected doggedness, sets out to find him—dead or alive.

Helped by a girl reporter, he plunges into far from petty situations, and a sinister network linking the poppy fields of western Turkey with the capitals of Europe comes to the surface.

An excellent piece of unheroic but quite believable character-crime writing in a setting so authentic that we too, creep along the streets and towns of Turkey in fear and suspense.

JOHN BOLAND

THE FOURTH GRAVE

The story of a strange quest for a hidden cache of diamonds in Central Africa. A thrilling story to follow John Boland's highly successful crime story *Breakdown*. 25/-

CASELL CRIME

GENTLY COLOURED

ALAN HUNTER 18/-

DEATH IN MIDWINTER

J. B. HILTON 21/-

SWINGING MURDER

LIONEL BLACK 21/-

CASELL

Come Back When I'm Sober

Martin WADDELL

By the author of the *Otley* books—now being filmed—a hilarious thriller in which the author of *G.U.N.* and *The Deadly Buttock* finds himself pursued by his own fictional characters. **21s**

John CREASEY

The Toff and the Golden Boy

It starts off with small-scale gang robberies. But when attempts are made to kill the Toff, he finds that Golden Boy is a much more sinister character than at first appeared. **18s**

John Creasey's Mystery Bedside Book

**Edited by
Herbert Harris**

Seventeen gripping stories by top-rank writers make this the finest crime anthology you can buy. **21s**

Josephine BELL *The Wilberforce Legacy*

A macabre and powerful story of greed, corruption and murder, when two rival 'nephews' arrive to shatter the peace of Benedict Wilberforce's life. **21s**

"CIRCLE OF SQUIRES", by Bill Turner (*Constable, 21s.*)

To forget a faithless wife, Kenneth Grant moves his home and at the age of forty, begins his own personal revolution—with the assistance of the enigmatic Alma, whom he meets at night school classes.

The Circle of Squares—which he is prevailed upon to join, is not however merely a revolution against the young and their ways—it proves to be something far more sinister, and now we dip down into a really first class suspense novel—well-written and quite impossible to put down.

"THE CONFESSIONS OF ARSÈNE LUPIN", by Maurice Leblanc (*Hodder & Stoughton, 21s.*)

This selection of nine short stories that have been put together in one book are just a little difficult to assimilate—unless of course you are a connoisseur of this type of French writing.

Originally the tales were written for a newspaper—and usually against a deadline and they take us back to a France that had not yet been bled white in the slaughter houses of the 1914–18 war—or confused by the betrayals of the "Thirties".

So, before you start, imagine yourself back in the gaiety, caprice, and perhaps exaggeration in living of the France of the beginning of the century.

To be read slowly with imagination working. . . .





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