LONDON MYSTERY

No. 82

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QUARTERLY

Original and Thrilling

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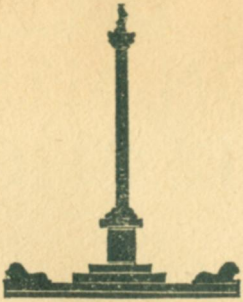
THE LONDON
MYSTERY SELECTION



THE LONDON MYSTERY SELECTION

NUMBER EIGHTY TWO

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CROOKS IN BOOKS

A quarterly review of some of the finest mystery and detective books recently published appears on PAGE 121

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THE LONDON MYSTERY SELECTION

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Our new "heroine" Toni Blake has succeeded in her first target of getting her crippled brother to Paris to study art . . . but now she needs to pay for study for him under a master—and also to find him a studio of his own.

Fortunately Toni has many connections in London and it is from an old friend at the Foreign Office that a dangerous project is offered her, so turn to page 46 to find Toni fighting the drug pushers. . . .

Our first story—"The First Victim" is suspense writing of the highest quality—the middle-aged woman trying to recover from a breakdown—the younger sister torn between pity and a demanding job to hold down—and the man across the way who seems to be watching. But is he? Or is it just "nerves" again and an overactive imagination? A frightening story, but one that could so easily be true.

"The 9 O'Clock Ferry" by Pamela Rainbird is a perfect yarn for an autumn evening of mists and pounding seas. Could this have happened? Make your own guess—for have not you *seen* very strange shapes through a swirling mist in the quiet of our western coasts in autumn?

Adventure, murder, ghosts and some excellent detecting in John Taverner's "Through a Glass Darkly" . . . but that isn't all, for this month we have another new contributor in a very "mod" story of the hippies—Prudence Craig's "The Knife and the Rose." And a poignant little story "Vitae Arborealis" by Sylvia Quincey.

The Editor.

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THE FIRST VICTIM

BETTINE MANKTELOW

Illustrated by Vera Jarman

She just felt in a constant state of apprehension . . . as if something awful were going to happen . . . nobody understood.

THERE was a man on the other side of the road, staring over at the house. Muriel was sure of it, and she was sure it was the same man she had seen before. She stood stock-still behind the nylon curtains, peering out, her yellow duster clenched tightly in her hand.

He was quite tall, the man, wearing a fawn raincoat and a trilby hat. She couldn't make out his face from this distance. It could have been anyone. She wondered suddenly if he could see her, or at least her shadow. He seemed to be looking straight at her.

She dropped back into the room, back against the wall, making herself small, invisible. Her heart was beating hard, as it always did when she had these shocks. She tried so hard to rationalize. A man is staring at the house. So what? Perhaps he is admiring the garden—in winter, came the laconic reply. Perhaps he has just lost his way. Then why loiter about outside? Why stand and stare at the house?

If only they weren't quite so isolated. The detached house with the large garden back and front had seemed fine when they were children, but now, when she spent so long alone, with the neighbours on either side at work all day, and no sounds of happy humanity around her, now she had come to hate their house.

She would have to tell Mary about that man. She had already told Mary when she saw him before, and she knew her sister didn't believe her. "My dear girl, you simply must pull yourself together," Mary had said wearily. "Just because a passing salesman happens to look at the house . . ."

"But, Mary, he stood over the road for a long time, nearly an hour, just looking. What could he want? Perhaps it's someone, someone who knows I'm alone . . ." she hated admitting her fears to Mary. She could see immediately her sister's reaction, the impatience, the repressed irritation.

"Your nerves, Muriel—and your imagination—"

Yes, it was her nerves. It was because of her nerves that she couldn't go to work any more. Suddenly, inexplicably, one day last year, she just couldn't bring herself to go outside the door. The thought of going down the path, leaving the security of the house, had filled her with panic. Sedatives and soft-talk from the family doctor had done no good. So she had spent a little while in a Mental Hospital, and a short course of E.C.T. had shaken her depression and made her absurdly lively—for a whole month. She had even gone back to work. And then the dread had returned.

She couldn't explain it to anyone, or understand it herself. She just felt in a constant state of apprehension, as if something awful were going to happen, but she didn't know what. She couldn't occupy herself in any way. She couldn't knit without dropping the stitches, she couldn't watch television for more than five minutes, or read more than a page of a book. She just had to roam around the house, never outside, not even to fetch the coal, but roam around just the same, with this terrible feeling of dread, haunting and plaguing her. Nobody understood.

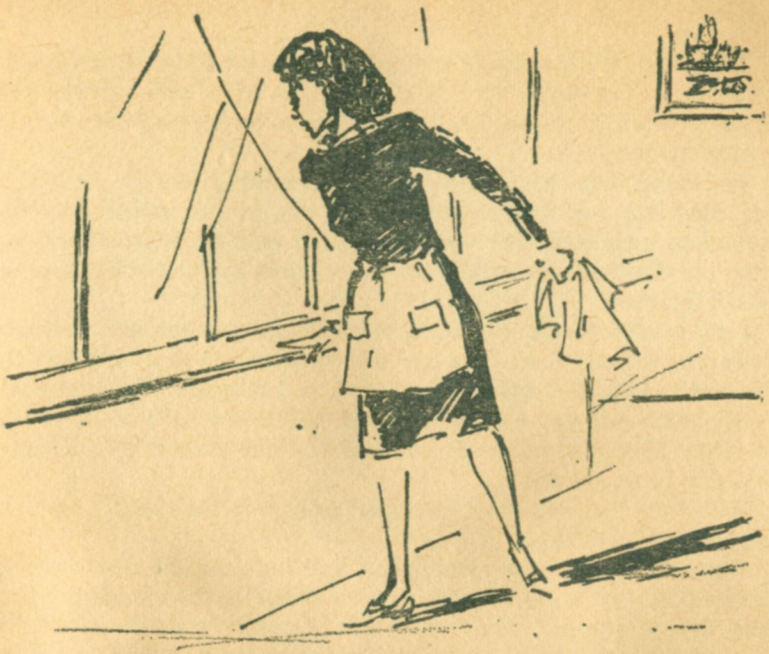
She had heard Mary talking about it to her friend Phyllis, whom they had both known from school days.

"My dear girl," said the staid, and sensible Phyllis. "You are letting your sister ruin your life. Don't you realise that? She simply must pull herself together. Just because she is determined to be an old maid is no reason why *you* should be."

Determined to be an old maid! Muriel could have screamed with vexation. She didn't wait to hear Mary's reply. She dropped the tea-tray outside the door and ran upstairs to cry. Determined to be an old maid! If only they knew how she had longed to be married, longed to have her own home and someone to love her. But she was plain and dull, she knew it. Mary was the pretty one, small and dark and comfortably plump. The boys who had knocked at the door when they were young were always there for Mary, never for Muriel.

She heard her own voice float down over the years. "I hate boys. I'm not a bit interested in boys—nasty, dirty creatures . . ." Yes, she had hated them. Hated them for laughing at her, hated them for never asking her to dance, hated them for not loving her.

Not that it had really mattered until her father died. He was always so kind and affectionate to her. His eyes looked beyond her plain face. He knew her as she really was. She often cried for her father.



The man was still there. Perhaps she should ring Mary after all.

She turned away from the window, and began vigorously to dust the furniture, for the fifth time that day.

One heard such horrible things. There was no reason to believe anyone wanted to harm her, Mary said, and that seemed logical, but what about those other women. What about the victims of Jack the Ripper, or the Boston Strangler? There was no reason for anyone to harm them, either. Perhaps, when people knew there was a maniac at large they could take precautions, but what about the first victim? The first victim didn't suspect that the casual caller could be out to kill her, or that the figure lurking in the shadows behind her was her murderer. The first victim couldn't be on her guard. And there was always a first victim.

One read such terrible things in the newspapers—perhaps it was better not to think about them—men who went mad and shot quite innocent and unsuspecting bystanders, or made a raid on a dormitory of nurses, strangling them or cutting their throats. No, don't think about it, she told herself.

The clock on the mantelpiece had such a loud sound. She wished it would stop. The clock, her father's clock, wooden, stolid, dependable, but so regular. That awful ticking seemed to be keeping tune with her own heart-beat.

The dread that was always present, hovering around in the back of her mind like a dark cloud, was nearer now and threatening to overcome her completely. She was afraid she would fly apart. If someone rang the doorbell, or tapped on the window-pane, she felt sure she would fly apart.

Last month the phone had kept ringing, and when she answered, there was nobody there. She had told Mary about that, so Mary had said not to answer it, and then one day it had rung and Phyllis had been on the other end and had been furious with Muriel for not answering it. It was after that, when she had said all those cruel things . . . determined to be an old maid . .

How long had she stood like this, staring at the clock? She must stop that awful ticking.

She went over to the mantelpiece and knocked the stolid wooden clock off so that it landed with a harsh clatter in the marble fireplace. The ticking stopped. She stood still, appreciating the silence. She would tell Mary it had been an accident when she was dusting. "What, another accident?" Mary would say. But she couldn't prove otherwise. I'm alone here, Muriel told herself, except for the cat. Alone—that was an unpleasant thought. But she was never really alone. There was always her dread, like another person inside her head warning her about something. There was something unseen and ghastly hovering about in her head, she knew it, waiting to pop out—and what? Destroy her. Destroy her mind, or her body, or both. What would it do, if only it could get out?

She must phone Mary. She had to cross the room by the window to reach the hall, and as she crept by she forced herself to look out. He had gone. The man had gone. The relief flooded through her, so that she could almost sing. The man had gone. She need not ring Mary after all.

She was sorry now that she had broken the clock. It had been their father's. Mary would be very cross. Muriel decided she would save what little money she had to buy another one. It was difficult to manage now that she no longer had any sick pay. If it were not for Mary and the supplementary benefits she would starve.

She must, after all, pull herself together and go back to work. It was so unfair on Mary.

She would make her something especially nice for lunch, she thought, and went out into the kitchen to hunt through the cupboard.

But just inside the kitchen door she froze. He was there. The man was there, right outside the kitchen window, steaming the glass up with his breath, smiling a little, looking right through her.

She didn't scream. She was too afraid to scream. She stood there, petrified. The dread was out now. It was outside her. It was real and tangible, not just a vague foreboding any more. This was it! This was the terror she had dreaded for so long.

Yet, somehow, the terror lent her strength, strength enough to move, to run to the back door, to lock and bolt it, and then to run away from those sinister eyes into the dark hall, and to stop by the side of the phone.

She was panting and whimpering to herself, and her fingers were trembling so much she could hardly bear to dial the number.

The number rang. It never rang for long, but to-day every second was an agony of waiting for Muriel.

"Westminster Bank."

She found her voice, a thin wisp of sound, "May I speak to Miss Douglas, please."

And then Mary was answering, crisp and businesslike.

"Mary, it's me—Muriel . . ."

"Oh," bored resignation. "What's wrong?"

The words fell out, jabbered out, despite Muriel's efforts to withhold them.

"That man—that man I told you about, he's here again. He's right outside the window. Staring in at me. Right outside the kitchen window. He looks awful! I'm frightened, Mary . . ." her voice became a thin squeak.

Mary sighed. "Muriel, you must be imagining things. If there is someone there, he's probably a salesman or something. Hadn't you thought of that? Why don't you ask him what he wants?"

Muriel couldn't recognize her own voice as she answered. It was a shrill whisper. "But he looks so evil, Mary, his eyes are so strange . . . he wants to kill me, I'm sure of it." It was strange but she couldn't remember what he looked like now. She had been too terrified to think. It was just a face at the window a pale, oblong face, but those eyes,

she could remember those eyes, full of cunning, staring into her. "Believe me, Mary. He wants to kill me. I know it."

Mary was struggling with her patience, as usual, but in the end duty won.

"Very well, I'll come home. Do you want me to call the police?"

The police! Questioning her, tramping about the house, loud, noisy men!

"Oh, no, Mary, not the police."

"All right!"

She hung up before Muriel could stop her. Still, she would soon be home. The man would go away when she came home. Perhaps even now he had gone. Perhaps he had heard her on the phone and thought she had sent for the police.

Muriel stood in the little dark hall that smelt of polish and paraffin, and wondered if she had the courage to go upstairs. Her legs were like jelly. Perhaps she would just stand here in the hall until Mary came. After all, whichever way he tried to get in now, she could go in the opposite direction if she stayed here in the centre of the house. She couldn't be trapped by him.

Upstairs she might be trapped. Anyway, she hated upstairs since her parents had died. The landing was so dark, and there was that cupboard where they kept all the old clothes. It frightened her. No, she was better here in the hall, then she could see the front door and the back door, and the phone was at her elbow as well. It was comforting having the phone right there.

She didn't know how long she stood there. Her legs had gone dead with cold. She had heard nothing for so long, she felt sure he must have gone, or perhaps indeed she had imagined it all. She had almost persuaded herself that this was so, when she heard a noise in the lounge. It was a distinct scratching noise coming from the lounge. What could it mean? And then she realized with horror—the french windows of course! How easy for anyone to force the french windows. With that flimsy lock a child could force them open. So he must be there at the french windows. She couldn't escape. She knew she would never have the courage to try. She began to weep, as she stood there, shivering with fright, and weeping like a child.

"Oh, Daddy," she whispered, over and over again. "If only you were here, Daddy."

And then the doorbell rang. Instantly she was released from her fear,

hope liberated. It must be Mary. Mary who had forgotten her key.

She ran to the front door and flung it wide, smiling through her tears.

But the smile became a fixed and horrified grimace as she stared at the caller. It was the man.

* * *

Three weeks after the funeral Mary Douglas felt she should really return to work. She had taken Muriel's death much harder than she thought possible. She, who had always been so practical and down to earth and had taken in her stride the deaths of both parents, and all the subsequent responsibility of looking after her neurotic elder sister, had been completely shaken by the sudden and inexplicable death of that same person.

Most of all she felt guilty. She sat in the comfortable lounge, alone, one morning, sipping her coffee and turning over in her mind the events of that terrible day almost a month ago. She forced herself to think about it, to examine it from every angle, to discover if, after all, she had any reason to blame herself.

There was the hysterical phone call from Muriel, and Mary had made her excuses at the bank and come home on the bus. She wondered whether to take a taxi, but it seemed an unnecessary extravagance. It was not as if this sort of thing were infrequent. It had happened all too often. Even the Bank Manager was beginning to lose his patience.

"Your sister simply must try to pull herself together," he said that morning when she had to ask his permission to leave early, yet again.

Mary felt weighed down with the worry of it. It was worse than having a child to look after. Yet she felt sure Muriel couldn't help it. It was no good saying she must pull herself together. She just couldn't help it. Nevertheless, Mary rehearsed a little speech of admonition to deliver to her sister when she reached home.

She knew at once that something was wrong. As soon as she stepped into the hall. The house was too quiet. Muriel should have been there to meet her, waiting for her, ready to pour out her latest fears, but she was not.

Mary called out her name once or twice, but there was no reply.

She looked in the lounge, and noted that the clock had fallen off the mantelpiece, and then she went upstairs.

She noticed that the door of the landing cupboard was ajar and instinctively she went to shut it, when she saw the little stool over-

turned in the doorway. Apprehensively she stretched out a tentative hand and parted the musty old clothes that hung there, relics of her father's days.

Her sister's face looked out at her. Yet a travesty of her face, swollen and blotchy, with eyes bulging and tongue protruding, with a bright red nylon scarf wound tightly round her neck and the other end tied to the clothes-rail. Her feet, in their laddered nylons, were just out of touch of the floor.

Mary was too bitter and miserable even to cry. Even now, almost a month later, she still felt bitter and resentful. Why had Muriel done such a thing? For, it was obvious, she must have done it herself. The police had been over the house from top to bottom and they could find no evidence at all of a forced entry. And Muriel would never have opened the door to a stranger, not with her nervous temperament. As for the man she had seen, or said she had seen, there was no way of proving he even existed. The police had found some strange footprints by the kitchen window, but they turned out to belong to the window-cleaner.

The verdict of the Coroner's Court was the only possible one in the circumstances. "That Miss Muriel Douglas had taken her own life while the balance of her mind was disturbed."

The words hung heavy in Mary's mind. She should never have left her sister alone. No matter what it cost her she should have provided a companion, a daily help, even a nurse, but someone should have been there all the time. Mary would never forgive herself.

The cat was scratching at the french windows. Mary got up and let him in. He purred around her legs.

"Tomorrow," she whispered to him, "I shall have to go back to work, Sandy, I really shall."

She picked up her coffee cup and turned to go into the kitchen, and as she did so, something caught her eye outside the window. She stopped and looked out.

There was a man on the other side of the road, staring over at the house. He was quite tall, wearing a fawn raincoat and a trilby hat. And he seemed to be smiling.

EYES IN THE NIGHT

DAN ROSS

Illustrated by Buster

WHEN THE rotund Chinese art dealer Mr. Mei Wong returned from his late afternoon stroll to the stucco mansion on the hill high above San Francisco Bay he had no idea that within a dozen hours it would be the scene of a murder. He had taken his usual leisurely walk past the many fine homes that dotted the exclusive residential area. And he had followed his regular custom of pausing at an imposing white house a mile distant to chat a few minutes with the estate's gardener Joe Chan.

He had met Joe Chan quite by accident one day when he'd stopped to admire the fine gardens of the estate. The bent, gnarled Joe Chan had suddenly presented himself as the designer and chief caretaker responsible for the array of flowers. Mei Wong had congratulated him and to his surprise found that the veteran gardener came from the same province in China as himself. Soon they were smiling and gesturing

as they spoke in their native dialect. He learned that Joe Chan had only two passions, the flowers and gambling. The old man visited a gaming parlour in Chinatown every night.

It was a pleasant friendship between two old men and Mei Wong derived enjoyment from it. His stay in the United States had been prolonged and presently he was in the home of millionaire James Rawlins to advise him on the sale of his fabulous collection of Chinese art. Mr. Wong was anxious to get the project under way as the atmosphere in the Rawlins home was not a happy one. James Rawlins was drinking to excess and his much younger wife, Meg, was continually bickering with him. There was also another cause for strain between husband and wife in the presence of Clayton Williams, a handsome young man who served as Rawlins' personal secretary. It was no secret to Mei Wong that Williams and the wife of his employer were having an affair.

Now as Mei Wong entered the living room of the richly furnished home he was greeted by the florid-faced balding James Rawlins who was holding a half-empty cocktail glass in his hand.

The coarse-voiced millionaire weaved toward him and said, "I'm glad you're back, Wong. I've missed you. Been looking all through the house for you."

Mr. Wong, inscrutable and immaculately dressed in his familiar white linen suit stood regarding him like a disinterested Buddha. "I had finished my cataloguing for the afternoon and decided to take my daily walk."

Rawlins downed the balance of the liquid in his glass and nodded with drunken approval. "Take care of your health! Most important thing!" Then he turned to a large painting on the wall near them, a work dating back centuries and called, "Monk Among Tigers". He pointed to it and told Mei Wong, "I have no more chance to survive than he has. I'm surrounded by tigers in this house!"

Mei Wong was used to strange utterances from his host. He merely raised his eyebrows. "I am not sure that I follow you," he said mildly.

Rawlins' florid face took on a nasty smile. "You know they want to kill me," he told the old art dealer. "I mean Meg and Williams. I should have let him go a couple of years back. When the thing between them was just starting. Now it's too late!"

Mei Wong by way of changing the subject said, "I hope to have the cataloguing of the collection complete by tomorrow."

"Good!" Rawlins said. And then with tipsy confidence he seized Mei Wong's lapel. "I'm going to sell the whole collection and the house as well. I'm moving East and I'm divorcing Meg. She's given me plenty of grounds. I'll leave her and that young puppy Williams without a dollar!"

Before his words had been fully uttered a dramatically beautiful dark-haired young woman with olive skin and high cheek bones entered the room. Dressed in a striking black evening gown she came up to them with an arrogant smile. "Is my husband venting his marital woes again?" she asked Mei Wong. "He has little sense and no dignity."

Rawlins bowed to his wife in a mocking fashion. "And no wife I can trust!"

Meg Rawlins regarded him with a mixture of defiance and disgusted pity. "I'm sure Mr. Wong would prefer not to hear your vivid descriptions of my failings. And it is past time for us to attend the Wilson cocktail party." She turned to Mei Wong with a smile. "We'll be gone until late tonight as we're moving on to an affair downtown. But I'm sure Clayton will see that you are well taken care of."

"I shall be quite comfortable I'm sure," Mr. Wong said with a nod.

James Rawlins gave him a knowing wink. "Remember what I told you Wong. As soon as I get the complete listing of the paintings from you I'm placing them on the auction block."

After the two had left, Clayton Williams joined Mei Wong in the living room. He was an effete young man with thinning blond hair and a nervous twitch at the left corner of his too-thin lips.

With an embarrassed glance in Mei Wong's direction he said, "Mr. Rawlins was in a nasty mood tonight."

Mei Wong shrugged. "He is a man with problems."

Clayton Williams sneered. "His biggest one is his drinking too much. Does he really mean to sell his complete art collection?"

"He has spoken of it, "Mei Wong said carefully. "But I do not actually know."

"Meg tells me he's going to sell and clear out. But not before he raises a scandal. He's going to try and prove that Meg is in love with me! The liquor must have rotted his brain."

Mei Wong said, "I am a mere stranger in this house. It is useless to offer such information to me. I can make no fair comments."

"Rawlins is asking for trouble," the young man said bitterly. "He's given Meg a bad life with his abuse and liquor. I've only tried to be her

friend. For a long time he terrified her by threatening to commit suicide whenever he became really drunk."

Mei Wong stared at the young man. "Mr. Rawlins does not strike me as the sort of person to contemplate suicide."

"You don't know him as I do," Clayton Williams assured him. "He has often talked of suicide and I think he means it."

"He has never spoken of such a thing to me," Mei Wong said gravely. "In fact he has always seemed to be making some plans for the future."

"You've not seen him at his worst," the millionaire's secretary said.

The evening passed uneventfully for Mei Wong. He had dinner with Clayton Williams and afterward they spent several hours listening to classical music from Rawlins' extensive record collection. At eleven o'clock Mei Wong excused himself and went up to bed. Some time after midnight he was awakened briefly by the sound of a door banging closed but he soon went to sleep again.

He had risen and was on the point of leaving his room to go down for breakfast when the knock came on his door. When he opened it Clayton Williams was standing there with a pale, distressed face.

"James Rawlins has committed suicide," he told the old art dealer.

Mei Wong's broad features showed no hint of the real concern he felt. While he had not particularly liked James Rawlins, the man had been his host and temporary employer. And with the situation that existed in the Rawlins mansion he had serious doubts that the millionaire really had killed himself. It seemed much more likely he might have met with foul play. But when he followed the young male secretary down to the living-room to join a weeping Meg Rawlins as they waited for the police, he was impressed by the apparent truthfulness of her account of things.

The dark-haired woman was wearing a thin dressing gown over a shortie nightgown, neither of them offering much concealment of her slim, lovely body. But she seemed quite unaware of this as she slumped in an easy chair sobbing into a diminutive hankie.

Mei Wong asked, "When did you make this distressing discovery?"

Meg Rawlins stifled her sobs and raised her eyes to Mei Wong. "Just a few minutes ago," she said. "I realized he had not been in his room all night. I asked Clayton to go down and see if he were still in his car."

"And he was," the nervous young secretary said. "The engine had been left running with the garage door closed and he was dead of carbon monoxide."

Mei Wong listened attentively and turned to the attractive widow. "When did you last see your husband alive?"

"I drove back here after the party," Meg Rawlins said. "He was much too drunk to drive." She hesitated a moment. "It was raining hard and I was very nervous at the wheel. To make it even more difficult he kept taunting me and threatening me with violence. As soon as I parked the car in the garage I got out quickly and ran upstairs."

The old art dealer asked, "And you did not shut the garage door?"

"We never close the garage door," Meg Rawlins said. "You must have noticed that. We leave it open all the time. It's a careless habit, I suppose. Normally I always bring the car keys up with me. Last night I was too upset to think of them."

Clayton Williams spoke up, "Mr. Rawlins must have got out of the car and then had one of his spells of depression. He then shut the garage door and started the engine. He was seated behind the wheel when I found him."

Mei Wong nodded. But he was at a loss. He could not picture James Rawlins as a suicide. Yet the stories these two told seemed logical enough. And searching his memory he could not think of any time he had seen the garage door closed. So even though it had been raining last night it would have been the normal thing for Meg Rawlins to leave it open as usual. But he still wondered. He was a stranger in a strange land, not used to local customs. He wished his good friend from the Bombay Homicide Division, Inspector Bannerjee, might be there to advise him.

When the San Francisco police arrived the Inspector in charge was of an entirely different type from the bearded, turbaned Inspector Bannerjee. The rosy-cheeked young man in trench coat and soft hat introduced himself as Inspector Cassiday. And Mei Wong could not help but wonder what experience he might have.

Still, Inspector Cassiday had shrewd blue eyes and his questioning of Meg Rawlins was sharp enough. Now he turned to Mei Wong and asked, "Have you anything to contribute to this information, Mr. Wong?"

"I regret that I have nothing to add," the old art dealer said politely.

The young police inspector sighed. "I understand you were here to catalogue Mr. Rawlins' art collection?"

"That is so," Mei Wong said.

"Perhaps you might show me around and explain the value of a few

of the paintings," Inspector Cassiday suggested.

"I shall be happy to," Mei Wong said politely. As he and the Inspector left the room he noticed the tense expressions on the faces of Meg Rawlins and her lover, Clayton Williams. He was certain that the two did not like him going off with the police officer. And he was also beginning to appreciate Inspector Cassiday as a competent young man who had deliberately created this opportunity.

When they were alone in James Rawlins' study for the supposed purpose of studying an ancient water colour of distant mountains the Inspector turned to him and said, "I assume you have learned something of the relationships in this house during your stay here. Would you consider Mr. and Mrs. Rawlins a happily married couple?"

Mei Wong sighed. "They were most unhappy."

"I guessed that," the Inspector said. "Mrs. Rawlins' tears seem to flow too easily. Was the source of their trouble temperamental differences or was another man or woman involved?"

"I know little about it," Mei Wong admitted. "But Mr. Rawlins showed great jealousy of his secretary. He accused his wife of infidelity with the young man."

"That fits," the young Inspector said quietly. "Williams is very jumpy. One other question, did James Rawlins ever speak of suicide to you?"

"Never."

The Inspector regarded him silently for a moment. "Then you doubt that he did commit suicide?"

The old Chinese spread his hands. "I cannot say."

"I don't think he did either," Inspector Cassiday went on as if Mei Wong had agreed with him. "But these two have a neat story. It's all logical. Almost too logical. She left him in the car with the garage door open. He closed the garage door and started the car. An easy form of suicide. Exactly the means a muddled, drunken man might take."

"True," Mei Wong said.

"And the neighbours back up her story that the garage door was always left open," the young Inspector went on. "Yet we have only her word for what happened last night. It was raining heavily so few people were out at that time. We have no witnesses. If it is a murder they have planned well." He looked directly at Mei Wong. "I suppose you'll be leaving here soon."

"Almost immediately," Mei Wong said.

"Well, if anything should turn up, anything you think might help, I'd appreciate your calling me at headquarters," the young Inspector Cassiday said.

"I'll be most happy to," Mei Wong assured him. But he knew there would be nothing to tell. He had slept all through the time of the unhappy events.

Later, when the police had left, Meg Rawlins came to Mei Wong in the study, where he was seated at the desk completing the information he'd been hired to prepare.

The beautiful dark woman had an arrogant air about her as she stood before the desk. "There'll be no need of your continuing that work," she said. "I have no plans for selling the collection. I'd appreciate it if you left tomorrow morning."

"That will be quite satisfactory," Mei Wong said rising.

"Mr. Williams will give you a cheque to cover your fee," Meg Rawlins went on. "I'm sorry to be so curt about this. But you know the strain we're all under."

"Of course," Mei Wong bowed.

But her manner and her evident desire to get him out of the mansion as quickly as possible made him more suspicious of her and Clayton Williams. He was almost sure they had together committed a perfect murder. But without witnesses there could be no proof!

Feeling troubled and anxious to be alone he went out for his daily stroll. When he reached the big estate at the very top of the hill he was glad to note his old friend, Joe Chan, was out kneeling beside a rose bed. The white-suited Mr. Wong padded along the gravel walk to join his friend.

Joe Chan, hearing his approach, looked up with a smile of greeting on his wrinkled, bronze face. "It is good to see you, Mr. Wong," he said. "I was afraid you might have gone away."

"I'll be leaving soon enough, friend Chan," the old Chinese said. "I am in a sad state of mind today. The owner of the art collection I have been cataloguing was found dead in his car this morning."

The thin old Joe Chan nodded. "Yes. I know," he said in his sing-song way.

A half-hour later Mr. Wong returned to the Rawlins' mansion and the first thing he did was go to the study and behind closed doors put a call through to Inspector Cassiday. He gave the young police officer certain instructions and went to the living-room to await his arrival.

Inspector Cassiday summoned Meg Rawlins and Clayton Williams to the living-room to join the old art dealer the moment he got there. The young Inspector eyed them stonily. "Some new information has come to my attention," he said.

Meg Rawlins glanced at Mei Wong accusingly and then at the Inspector. "What sort of information?" she demanded.

"If Mr. Wong has been repeating any of the wild fancies of Mr. Rawlins for your benefit you need pay no attention to them," Clayton Williams spoke up with the familiar nervous twitch showing in his pale face. "Rawlins was drunk most of the time and no one ever listened to his crazy ravings!"

Meg Rawlins gave the young man a warning look. "I'm sure the Inspector is not going to bother us with such nonsense!" she said in a cold voice.

For an answer Inspector Cassiday went to the doorway and brought in a frail, dark-garbed figure. It was Mr. Wong's friend, gardener Joe Chan. The young Inspector said, "This is our witness, Mrs. Rawlins. Mr. Chan testifies that he was on his way up the hill when you drove into the garage last night. He stood across the street in the shadows and watched as you parked the car inside. Then he saw you get out of the car and drag your husband's limp body across the seat until he was directly behind the wheel. *But you didn't turn off the engine!* You came out of the garage and pulled the door down and locked it securely. Then you went around to the house by means of the front door."

Meg Rawlins was on her feet. "It's a lie!" she said hoarsely. "Why should he pay so much close attention to what I did? Why didn't he just walk by?"

Inspector Cassiday turned to Mei Wong. "Because of Mr. Chan's difficulty in expressing himself in English I suggest you speak for him, Mr. Wong."

Mei Wong bowed and turned to Meg Rawlins. "My friend, Mr. Chan, lives up on the hill. He is fond of gambling and almost every night sees him at a favourite spot in the city. He is an old man and often tires on his way up the hill. Because of your habit of leaving the garage open he has regularly used it as a place to rest when there is a storm. Just as he intended to do in the rain last night. But as he watched he was surprised to see you change your pattern by closing the garage door." He paused. "We all become victims to our habits. In this case it means a murder charge for you."

VITAE ARBOREALIS

SYLVIA QUINCEY

Illustrated by Carolyn Dinan

Could a tree have a life of its own . . . could it hate those who planned to cut it down and insist upon going on living for the children who raided its brown conkers?

THE TREE was there before the builders came. It was a beautiful tree, a horse-chestnut, a hundred years old, they said. A pity to disturb it.

The builder wasn't very pleased when the Council made an Order that it should stay. He had to re-shape his plans and make the corner house garden a funny shape. But there it was, he had no option.

Whether it was the oddly-angled garden, or the rather isolated position, or the wicked winds that whistled round the back from Penny Lane and the open fields beyond, but the corner house was the last to be sold.

The Denhams were retired. They liked the house, in spite of its size and its exposed position. Tom Denham had spent his childhood in a rambling, country farmhouse. In fact, he'd have liked to settle right out in the country.

"Give me plenty of good fresh air, the wind on the heath, brother," he quoted. Martha Denham didn't altogether agree.

"When you're not getting any younger, it's as well to be handy for shops and the doctor," she'd advised.

In the first few months of their occupation, Tom worked like a Trojan in the garden.

"That tree makes the sitting-room very dark," Martha remarked on a dull Sunday afternoon.

"It's lovely," Tom said. 'I hate looking out on bare bricks and mortar."

The garden, however, turned out to be a bit too much for Tom. Never a really strong man, his heart began to play him up. Some days he hadn't the strength to rise from his bed.

"Eh, Martha, I'm a right trouble to you," he would say. "Never thought I'd take on like this."

Throughout the summer he ailed, sometimes in bed, sometimes lying in the big armchair in the sitting-room. His greatest joy was to watch the tree, the play of the leaves in the sun, the antics of the birds in the branches.

"There'll be some mighty fine conkers on that old tree this year," he said. "I was a champion with them, when I was a boy."

For Martha, the "conkers" were the start of the trouble. From far and near the children came, turning the once quiet road into a screaming hullabaloo. They were impatient; they didn't want to wait till the fruit fell naturally. They threw sticks, they lassooed the branches with ropes, they climbed the tree and shook. Only, more often than not, to be disappointed with an empty shell.

Martha was of the "seen and not heard" generation. Childless herself, the children she had known had always been strictly brought up. These inheritors of the permissive society were strangers to her.

"Get away from there," she would shout. "I'll have the law on you."

The children ran away, name-calling—"Old Misery", "Crabface" and the like—putting out their tongues and making grimaces. As soon as the old woman's back was turned, they came back, making more noise than ever out of spite.

"Leave 'em be, they're only lads," old Tom would reprove her. "Reminds me of my boyhood, you know."

"I reckon you weren't allowed to carry on like that," she grumbled.

"Mebbe not. Times change." Secretly, Tom encouraged the children. On his better days, he would roam the garden, collecting "conkers" and saving them for the smaller boys who were apt to get pushed on one side by the elders.

"I'm going to complain to the Council," Martha asserted. "That tree's a nuisance in every way."

"You'll get nowhere with *them*," Tom assured her, hoping he was right.

But one December morning, they came—three men in a lorry with ladders and tools. Martha invited them in for a cup of tea.

"They're not allowed to fell it—some Commission or other," she told Tom later. "They've cut it low enough to stop the horse chestnuts forming for a year or two."

"What a shame!" Tom said. "To sterilise it—so cruel! No creature likes to be barren." He looked at his wife.

Martha flushed painfully. She knew that bitterness, and felt a momen-

tary pang of pity for the tree. Then she shook her head irritably.

"Don't be silly, Tom," she said. "A tree can't feel anything."

When the men had finished, the five pollarded branches stood out against the skyline, gaunt, like a claw, the fingers curved towards the house. Menacing.

Tom grew worse. He spent almost every day in bed now, staring out at the forlorn chestnut.

"You shouldn't have had them lop the old tree," he mourned. "It was company for me, with all the birds in the branches."

Coming back from Christmas shopping in the dusk, Martha caught her foot in something by the gate and fell heavily. Daylight investigation showed that the tree roots were lifting the paving stones. Another complaint to the Council brought more workmen, who, after several days spent vainly trying to level the stones, gave up and compromised with a low railing surrounding the base of the trunk.

"Them roots!" said one man. "Great twisting things, just like they were alive."

Tom heard and smiled. "You town folk think nothing lives but *people*," he murmured. "That tree was my friend, I miss it."

Those were the last words Tom Denham spoke. That night he was struck down with paralysis; he lay like a log for three days before he died.

Just before the breath left his body, he tried to raise himself. His failing eyes turned towards the window and his swollen tongue tried to mouth words which would not come.

Martha followed the direction of his glance. She shrank back. The claw-like stumps of the chestnut tree seemed to be right against the window trying to get in. The room spun round her, then her vision cleared. The window was blank. The tree stood in its old place.

She turned to the bed. Tom's eyes were closed. He was dead.

After the funeral, Martha's sister, Jane, wanted her to sell up and go to live with her.

"I'd like to stay on for a bit, get the garden right for the spring," Martha said. "Tom would have liked me to."

Hastening to the post with a last-minute birthday card, Martha forgot the low railing which separated the passer-by from the protruding tree roots. She stumbled over it and fell heavily against the trunk, grazing her leg painfully and raising a large bruise on her forehead.

She was reading when the tapping began, quietly but regularly, on

the sitting room window. She peered out. One long thin branch lay against the glass, moving in the wind.

In the morning, she went out with secateurs. But now not one of the new growths was anywhere near the window. She searched around. "Wind must have broken it off," she thought.

That night there was no wind. Martha was sewing when she heard it again—tap-tap, tap-tap! Irritably, she pulled aside the curtain. There it was, plain as the nose on your face, a thin, straggling branch. She took the secateurs from the drawer and opened the window. There was nothing there. Her hand explored the sill and the maintaining wall—nothing. Brrh! She closed the window, it was icy cold.

There it was again—tap-tap! Snatching up the secateurs she ran outside. There was *something* there, perhaps caught in the guttering. The night was very still. She groped her way round the front of the house. Suddenly she cried out, and put her hand to her cheek. The branch, or whatever it was, had scratched her. She looked at the dark mass of the tree—surely it was too far away for any of the new growth to extend such a distance? Perhaps it was some overgrown shrub.

There was no sense in scrabbling about in the dark. She went indoors. The tapping continued until, her nerves on edge, Martha went to bed.

There was no sign next morning of any possible cause of the noise. Last night, Martha had heard it, felt it, and her cheek bore a livid weal to prove it.

The following evening, as she returned from a solitary visit to the cinema, she again stumbled over the railing round the tree trunk. She was getting short-sighted and no mistake; she could have sworn the railing wasn't so near to the gate.

It was only when the tree scratched her face again, this time in daylight, that she began to be afraid. It seemed to her that the branch twisted against her with deliberation—she had instinctively ducked her head as it came for her, swift, like a whiplash.

She turned and stared at the tree, all its new branches now high above her. "You hate me, don't you?" she whispered. "You're trying to hurt me, to drive me away."

One or two passers-by looked curiously at the old woman talking to a tree. "Poor soul," one said. "She's never been the same since her old man died."

Martha was resolved. She would, after all, go and live with Jane. Being on her own wasn't good for her—she was beginning to get fancies. How could a *tree* hate anybody? It was all in her own mind—if it wasn't those dratted kids playing a joke. Whatever it was, she wasn't having any more of it.

She wrote to Jane and went out to the pillar box. As she passed the tree, a light breeze seemed to rustle through its branches. They reached out all around her. She flung up her arms as if to ward off a blow. The sharp twigs scratched her right and left. She ran right out into the middle of the road to escape, but the branches grew longer and followed her.

The headlights of an oncoming car, slowing down as it turned the corner, picked up the huddle of clothes in the road. There was nothing anyone could do for Martha Denham. Her face was serene in death—and unmarked. Heart failure, the doctor decided; could happen to anyone at Martha's age.

When, later on, a big estate car drew up at the gate, a gaggle of children burst out and swarmed over the grass.

"Ooh, Mummy, look at the lovely tree! A conker tree! "

The horse-chestnut tree glowed in the sunshine. Next year it would bear again. Next year, the children would come. And no-one would drive them away.

THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY

JOHN TAVERNER

Illustrated by Vera Jarman

The boy Jem was completely dominated by Harkness—as though under a spell—but how far could such spells work? Could for instance the boy be hypnotised into driving a cleaver into a woman's head?

DETECTIVE Superintendent Ben Logan planted his size ten shoes squarely in front of the bar, picked up the pint of bitter, and quaffed half of it without moving his adam's apple.

"You're a lucky devil, Sammy," he said, belching gently. "There's not a beer in London that can touch this wonderful home-brewed stuff."

"I'd swop this village for the Smoke any old time," said Sergeant Sammy Coles wistfully." Nothing ever happens in Brampton. Give me the old days. There was never a shortage of excitement when I drove a Flying Squad car."

Logan looked at him quizzically over the rim of his pint pot. "You couldn't drive a car with that stiff leg, Sammy," he said quietly. "When you crashed into that smash-and-grab car, that was . . ."

"Don't think I'm moaning the odds, sir," Sammy said hastily. "I'll always be grateful to you for getting me this job. The Missus and I should've found it tough going on a bare pension. Not only which, the Missus loves it down here in the country."

Logan changed the subject. "I've got ten days leave to fish three miles of the Neve," he said. "What flies do the trout take in these parts?"

"March Brown and Bloody Butcher," said Sammy. "March Brown is more popular than . . ." He broke off as a uniformed constable came into the bar.

The constable, ruddy-faced and bucolic-looking, said: "Sorry to butt in, Sergeant, but something odd has come up."

"What is it, Torrance?"

"A diddy-kai has just reported the death of his wife."

"A diddy-kai?"

"A gypsy, Sergeant."

"What's so odd about that?" said Sammy impatiently. "Spit it out, man."

The constable shifted his feet uneasily. "I asked him how she died—but all he'd say was 'she's dead', 'she's dead'. Kept repeating this over and over again, as though he were in a sort of daze. He struck me as acting peculiar, Sergeant, so I thought I'd better let you know."

"Where's he now?"

"He's waiting at the station."

Sammy swallowed the remains of his beer, and said: "I'll come down and have a word with him."

"I'll come with you," said Logan. "I could do with a stroll."

They walked down the street to the far end of the village, and turned into the small ivy-covered police station. A tall, broad-shouldered man was sitting on a wooden bench in the charge-room, and he rose to his feet as they came in. He was a handsome man in his late thirties with oily black hair that curled in ringlets at the nape of his neck, and he had coal-black eyes. He was wearing navy jeans supported by a black leather belt with an ornate brass buckle, and a loud-checked open-necked shirt. Around his swarthy neck was tied a red bandanna scarf.

"Good evening, sir," said Sammy. "I'm Sergeant Coles. The constable here says your wife has died. Is that correct?"

"She's dead," said the man tonelessly, and Logan caught a glimpse of a gold-capped tooth amid the strong white teeth.

"What's your name, sir?"

The man stared at Sammy with unblinking eyes, but didn't answer.

"Answer the Sergeant's question, please," said Logan sharply, and clapped the palms of his hands together.

The sudden clap made the man blink. "Harkness," he said slowly. "Saul Harkness . . ."

"Where do you live? Your address?" Logan said swiftly.

"We live in a couple of vannos in Kit's Wood," said Harkness.

"Vannos?" queried Logan.

"I think he means caravans, sir," volunteered the constable. "I saw two horse-drawn caravans passing through the village yesterday."

Logan looked thoughtfully at Harkness, and then said to Sammy: "You might save time by going straight to Kit's Wood . . ."

"Care to come with me, sir?" said Sammy. "I've got my car outside, and there's a cart-track running right through Kit's Wood."

Logan nodded, and said wryly: "A busman's holiday."

Sammy grinned, and turned to the constable. "Phone Doctor Penny at the Cottage Hospital, and ask him if he'll follow us up to Kit's Wood in the ambulance. Tell him briefly what it's about . . . We'll be along at the Hospital in five or ten minutes time."

Logan sat in front of the Mini-Minor with Sammy at the wheel. Saul Harkness sat in the back beside the constable, and Logan's nose wrinkled at the ferine smell of Harkness's unwashed body. Hurriedly, he wound down his window.

Doctor Penny was seated beside the driver of the white ambulance as they arrived at the Hospital, and he waved them on. Logan sniffed appreciatively at the sweet scents of the countryside as they sped along the narrow, winding lane. A half-moon was peeping over the edge of a grey cumulus cloud, and, way ahead of them to the left, he picked out a large dark area of towering trees outlined against the purple sky-line.

They turned off the lane on to a rough cart-track, and the Mini's steering-wheel bucked under Sammy's hands as the car bounced over the pot-holes. Then they entered the forest gloom, and now the moon was shut out by the interlacing green canopy of the trees. Twice, startled pheasants fluttered across the swathes cut by the headlights, and once a fluffy-tailed rabbit ran ahead of them for a hundred yards before bolting off into the protective darkness.

Then they pulled to a halt in the dell. Two gaudily-painted caravans were brilliantly illuminated by the headlights, and a girl and boy were squatting around the glowing embers of a log fire. The girl and the boy stared blindly into the glare of the headlights but made no attempt to stand up. To the left of them were two ponies. The ponies were hobbled and presented a sorry, spavined look; their rib cages clearly outlined under taut, scarred hides.

Sammy switched off the lights, and they all climbed out. Now, Logan saw that each of the caravans was dimly illuminated by oil lamps. Then, once again, the encampment was flooded with light as the ambulance pulled into the dell, and Logan had a strangely-stark second impression of the girl and the boy.

Logan judged the girl to be around eighteen or nineteen years old. She had a mass of tangled, tawny-coloured hair, tawny eyes huge in the headlights, and a large sensuous mouth the colour of wet cherries. The boy, barely in his teems, had very fair hair, china-blue eyes, and he was thin to the point of emaciation. Their faces were devoid of expression, but the girl was hugging herself and rocking to and fro.

Doctor Penny joined them, and Sammy introduced him to Logan. The doctor was a short, tubby man with a bald head and pale blue eyes that were enlarged by an old-fashioned pince-nez.

"Well, gentlemen. Let's get on with it," said Doctor Penny briskly. "I have to get back to the bridge table as soon as possible."

Sammy turned to Harkness. "Which caravan is your wife in?"

Silently, Harkness pointed to the far caravan. Logan led the way, and noted that Harkness did not follow them. The three wooden steps leading up to the open door of the caravan creaked under Logan's weight.

The caravan was odoriferous; a composite cloying smell of stale cooking, filthy clothes and blankets, and something else that, at first, was not definable. But it was not the smell that turned Logan's stomach, it was the shocking sight of the woman lying sprawled on her back on the grey blankets that did it.

The woman's sightless brown eyes protruded from their sockets, and her thin, brown, wrinkled face was contorted in a final rictus of agony that was framed by a pool of scarlet. The thing that really sickened Logan was the gleaming meat cleaver deeply embedded in the dead woman's skull. He heard someone vomiting behind him, and turned to see the young constable retching out of the door.

"Get Torrance out of here," said Logan to Sammy. "We're crowded enough as it is. He can keep an eye on those three."

"I don't need to tell you she's quite dead, or how she died," murmured the Doctor.

Logan turned to examine the dead woman. She was somewhere in her late forties, and the hair not matted with congealing blood was long and greasy and black. Her nostrils were pinched and thin, and deep lines were etched on either side of her lips which were parted in a hideous grin that revealed carious teeth.

"This is one for the book," breath Sammy, peering over Logan's shoulder.

"Have you got a camera and flash in your kit?" said Logan.

Sammy nodded, and Logan said: "When you've taken the photographs, I suggest you remove the cleaver. But be very careful how you do it because I'm hoping there'll be a set of dabs on that wooden handle."

"I presume you want an estimate of the time of death?" said the Doctor.

Logan nodded, and the Doctor took out a clinical thermometer which he placed beneath the dead woman's tongue. He noted the woman's temperature, gave a factor to the temperature within the caravan, and made a mathematical calculation.

"She's been dead for between four and four and a half hours," said Doctor Penny.

Logan wrote this down in his note-book, and then he and the Doctor drew back to let Sammy get to work with his flashlight and camera.

Three-quarters of an hour later they had completed their unpleasant tasks in the caravan. The murder weapon had been removed from the dead woman's skull, and had been carefully wrapped in newspapers. The corpse was wrapped and roped in a blanket, and the ambulance driver and a white-faced Torrance carried it out to the ambulance. Then Logan sealed the caravan.

"We'll take this little lot back to the station, Sammy," said Logan.

"Harkness can travel down in the back of the ambulance, and the boy and the girl can come with us in the Mini."

"Shall I leave Constable Torrance here?" said Sammy.

"Yes. It'll probably give that young man a bad dose of the creeps," said Logan dryly. "But he'll have to stay here until you can arrange for both the caravans to be driven down to the station."

Logan went over to Saul Harkness who was standing by the dying fire. The red embers of the fire were reflected in Harkness' coal-black eyes and his eyes seemed to glow incandescently. Harkness was twirling a large silver medallion which was suspended on a fine chain, and the medallion winked and gleamed as it revolved.

"Did you share your wife's caravan?" said Logan.

Harkness' mouth worked, but no sound came out of it.

"Please answer my question," Logan said sharply.

Speech bubbled reluctantly from the man's mouth. "Nelly do live in the other vanno," he said in a deep husky voice. "Jem do kip under the rig."

"The rig?"

Harkness pointed to a black tarpaulin attached to one side of the caravan and pegged to the ground; a black hypotenuse slightly sagging in the middle.

Logan went over to the crude shelter, and played the beam of his torch over the interior. There were three rumpled, evil-smelling blankets on a groundsheet—and a small, lidless wooden box. Logan pulled out the box. Inside were three empty medicine bottles labelled phenobarbitone, a live mole in a small wicker cage, and a battered teddy bear that was minus one eye and one arm. Logan went back to the group around the fire with the box under his arm.

The boy, who'd been squatting, jumped to his feet and his china-blue eyes were riveted on the box. He made as if to seize the box from Logan, but cowered back when Harkness growled something at him in a language Logan didn't understand.

Logan held out the box to the boy called Jem. "You want something out of here, sonny?" he said gently.

Jem glanced warily at Harkness who nodded, and then the boy grabbed the caged mole and the teddy bear. The boy hugged his possessions to him, and gazed suspiciously at Logan with his china-blue eyes.

Logan pocketed the three empty medicine bottles, and said to Sammy:

"We can leave now . . ."

Not a word was spoken on the return trip to the station. Logan was deep in thought, but every now and again he caught a glimpse of the two young faces in the driving-mirror that he'd adjusted before Sammy drove off. The two young faces were expressionless: they might well have been carved from stone.

The ambulance followed them to the station to deliver Harkness, and Logan had a quick word with Doctor Penny before he departed.

"Have you a freezer in the hospital, Doctor?"

Doctor Penny nodded, and Logan said: "Please keep the corpse on ice until further notice, Doctor."

As they were ushering the three gypsies into the station, Logan whispered to Sammy: "I'll take their dabs while you make a quick job on the cleaver. I've a hunch we'll save a lot of time this way . . ."

The three gypsies submitted silently to Logan's polite demand for their fingerprints. Logan noticed that the boy's fingernails were bitten to the quick, the girl's hands were beautifully shaped but dirty, and Saul Harkness wore a big gold ring on the little finger of his right hand. As he was labelling the fingerprints he glanced up and caught the girl exchanging a look with Harkness. A faint smile curved the girl's sensuous mouth, and her large tawny eyes seemed to reflect a mixture of triumph and adoration.

Logan picked up the sheets of fingerprints, went into Sammy's office, and shut the door. Sammy had just completed his task.

"The killer used both hands," said Sammy. "There are two very clear sets of dabs on the handle of the cleaver."

Logan, using a magnifying-glass, took only a few minutes to match the fingerprints on the murder weapon with those of one of the gypsies. The two men looked at each other grimly.

"Beyond all doubt they're the boy's prints," Logan said heavily. "Bring in Saul Harkness. That man is going to start talking . . ."

When Saul Harkness was seated, Logan said harshly: "Jem's fingerprints are on the cleaver, and this presupposes the boy killed your wife. You must stop beating around the bush and co-operate with us . . . Do you understand me, Harkness?"

Harkness nodded, and Logan continued: "Tell us exactly what happened."

Harkness' coal-black eyes were steady. "Beulah, my wife, gave him a real beatin' in the evenin' and this brought on one of his turns later

on . . . He grabbed the meat chopper, ran up into the vanno, and did for her before I knew what was happening . . ."

"What do you mean by 'one of his turns'?"

Harkness shrugged. "He do go all peculiar at times . . . Sometimes he do fall about and hurt himself . . . It don't usually last long . . . But this time it was different . . ."

"Has Jem been violent before?"

Harkness hesitated before shaking his head, and Logan said: "Were you married to Beulah? I mean, in a church or registry office . . ."

"We were churched some fifteen years ago—I think it was . . ."

"Is Jem your son?"

"No," said Harkness. "A Somerset girl ran away from her village when she was in trouble . . . She joined up with the carnies when she'd had her babby . . . I met her when I was working the coast towns with Scard's Circus . . ."

"Where's his mother now?"

"She ran off with one of Scard's clowns, and left Jem with us," said Harkness. "He's travelled around with us ever since."

"How old is Jem?"

"Mebbe twelve—mebbe thirteen. I don't know . . ."

Logan's eyes bored into Harkness: "Who's this girl, Nelly?"

Harkness' eyes flickered, and his adam's apple jumped as he swallowed. "She's just a girl who's travelling around with us," he said, and shifted uneasily in his chair.

"How long has she been travelling around with you?"

"A couple of months . . . When I left Scard's," said Harkness.

"What's her relationship with you? What's she to you?"

"Nothin' . . . We're just friendly like," said Harkness scowling.

"We'll have more questions later, but we want a word with Jem," said Logan, dismissing Harkness.

Harkness smiled mirthlessly. "You wan't get much sense out of him unless I'm present," he said.

Logan pondered this before saying: "Then you can be present . . ."

Harkness was standing by the window behind Logan when Sammy ushered the boy into the room. Logan started, and a pang of the old, buried sorrow tugged at his heart. The boy bore a strong resemblance to Logan's dead son; the same sort of thin features and the same china-blue eyes. But Jem's eyes seemed to mirror a strangely empty, apathetic character . . .

"Sit down, Jem," Logan said.

Jem glanced at Harkness before sitting down, and then Logan said gently: "Did you kill Beulah Harkness, Jem?"

The boy's face was immobile except for a faint quiver of an eyelid. "Yes," he whispered.

"Why did you do it, Jem?"

The boy looked at Harkness who said: "Tell him why, Jem."

A light flickered briefly in Logan's eyes, and then he spotted the small mirror on the wall opposite him. In it he could see Harkness' reflection.

"She hurted me bad," said the boy almost inaudibly.

Logan sighed. It was all cut and dried—except for a medical report on the boy. He'd never be charged, of course. He'd be committed to a home, and—. Then a tiny cell opened in Logan's brain, and a thought squirmed out to set off his thinking at a tangent.

"I'm going to take you up to London to see a doctor, Jem," said Logan. "He's a very kind man, and he won't hurt you in any way. Do you understand?"

Jem's brow furrowed, and he glanced at Harkness before nodding.

Logan looked at the boy's matted fair hair and filthy clothing. He was probably alive with—.

"Jem, I want you to go with Sergeant Coles to the Cottage Hospital," said Logan, and turning to Sammy: "Ask the hospital to give him a bath, and see if you can scrounge a clean outfit of clothes for him."

Sammy nodded, and Logan said: "Harkness can wait in the charge-room, and you can send in the girl now . . ."

The girl sat down, and her tawny eyes locked briefly with Logan's before looking away. She had a rare wild beauty and an animal-like grace of movement. Her bare brown feet and cheap green cotton frock did not detract from her looks; rather, they accentuated them.

"What is your full name?" said Logan, pencil raised.

"Nelly Cullin."

"How old are you?"

"Eighteen—going on nineteen."

"That caravan you live in—is it yours or Harkness'?"

"It belongs to Saul."

"Why are you travelling around with him?"

The girl's long lashes drooped slyly over her tawny eyes.

"I got fed up with Scard's, and when Saul said he was packing it in

there I asked if I could go with him," she said, pouting.

"Did Beulah Harkness object to this arrangement?"

"She didn't mind at all," she assured him coolly.

"Did you see Beulah Harkness beat Jem?"

"Yes . . . She really beat him bad . . ."

Logan stood up. "I want you and Saul Harkness to write out full statements of everything that happened."

"I can't write—neither can Saul," she said, sullenly.

"Then the constable will write down your statements. Then they'll be read back to you both in front of witnesses before you make your marks."

The constable was still laboriously writing their statements when Sammy returned with the boy. The boy's very fair hair was damp from the bath, and now he presented a freshly-scrubbed appearance. He was dressed in a navy sweater and a pair of grey flannels that were far too large for his thin frame.

Logan took Sammy into the inner office, and said: "I'm taking the boy to a top-flight psychiatrist in Harley Street who owes me a few favours. Then I'm going to see the circus people—Scard's. . . .

"When will you be back?" said Sammy.

"As soon as possible," said Logan. "Make sure Harkness and the girl don't do a bunk. They'll be needed for the inquest."

"Why take the boy to a top psychiatrist?"

Logan shrugged his heavy shoulders. "Just a hunch—maybe . . ."

Arbuthnot came back into the waiting-room as the first grey light of dawn grasped feebly at the misted window-panes.

"Sorry if I was abrupt when you arrived," said Arbuthnot. "My temper's always brittle when I'm dragged out of bed in the night."

"How far have you got with the boy?"

"I've given him a thorough overhaul, an I.Q. test, and a few preliminary questions based on psychogenetics . . ."

"What, if anything, did the medical examination reveal?"

"His tongue is scarred in eight places . . . You know what that indicates?" said Arbuthnot.

"Yes . . . I expected it. Anything else?"

Arbuthnot's mouth tightened. "The poor little devil's been badly beaten—quite recently . . . And, apart from this, he's every indication of malnutrition . . ."

"What did the I.Q. test reveal?"

"Very low indeed," said Arbuthnot, yawning. "The boy's quite illiterate . . . but his case it not that simple . . ."

"Where do we go from here?"

"Psycho-analysis under sodium pentothal," said Arbuthnot. "You see, Logan, the individual's character is the result of a three-cornered struggle between the primitive biological drives (represented by the ID), the hard facts of reality (represented by the Ego), and the moral dictates of society (represented by the Superego). The Superego is the censor which forbids thoughts or actions not allowed by society. The Superego is a sort of psychological gyroscope which places control within the mind and avoids, in varying degrees, the need for outward compulsion."

"This particular policeman is too bloody tired to absorb a lecture at the moment," said Logan. "Tell this yokel in simple terms what you're driving at . . ."

"I suspect that something has crushed his Superego," he said, with a pitying look at Logan." The boy is locked mentally . . ."

"Call me in as soon as he's under," said Logan wearily. "I've brought a tape-recorder . . ."

Four hours later, Logan thanked Arbuthnot profusely and stepped out into the late morning sun. The boy was sleeping now, and after lunch Arbuthnot was going to arrange for him to be admitted to St. Thomas' Hospital.

Logan's feet ached, and his rumbling stomach demanded sustenance. To hell with a shave, he thought—and flagged a passing taxi. He directed the driver to take him to the Golden Salamander; a comfortable old pub that was renowned for the quality of its steak and kidney puddings.

He ordered a steak and kidney pudding, and then put through a telephone call to his Number 2 at the Yard, Detective Inspector Pelling. From Pelling he learned that Scard's Circus was playing at Southampton. Logan thanked him for digging out the information so promptly, but Pelling just grunted. He knew from experience what Logan would have said if he, Pelling, had failed to dish up the goods on time.

After the satisfying meal, which he washed down with a tankard of draught Bass, he set off for Southampton. He found the circus pitched on the Common. He interviewed the owner, Phillip Scard, the ringmaster, and half-a-dozen performers. All these interviews were tape-recorded and edited. Before setting off for Brampton he had a ten minute telephone conversation with Sammy.

Dusk was melding into night as he drew up outside the police station, and Sammy hurried out to relieve him of the tape-recorder.

"They're here, and the other tape-recorder is ready to be switched on. It's hidden in the well of the desk," said Sammy.

They walked past Harkness and the girl who were sitting on a bench in the charge-room, and went into Sammy's office. Logan set up the tape-recorder on Sammy's desk, and Sammy switched on the second tape-recorder concealed behind the desk. Then Sammy went out to fetch Harkness and the girl.

When they were seated, Logan said quietly: "I interviewed various members of Scard's Circus today, and I recorded everything on this machine . . . I want you to listen carefully . . ."

The girl gazed apprehensively at the machine as Logan switched on. The voices came clearly from the loud-speaker unit.

Logan: "What sort of an act did Saul Harkness have in your circus, Mister Scard?"

Scard: "Hypnotist, and his act was in two parts. . . He used the boy,

Jem, as a dummy for the first part. Then he demonstrated mass hypnotism on the audience... You know the sort of thing..."

Logan: "Why do you call the boy a dummy?"

Scard, hesitantly: "Jem was completely dominated by Harkness. He did everything Harkness said—just like an automaton... I often wondered if Jem wasn't permanently under a spell—or some such thing..."

Logan: "Why did Harkness leave your Circus?"

Scard: "His act went wrong one night. A woman didn't come out of her—er—trance for a long time, and when she did she was screaming and shouting... Her husband went for the police, and Harkness scarpered..."

Logan: "Did Harkness get along well with his wife, Beulah?"

Scard: "They led a real cat and dog sort of life, but when Harkness got in tow with a girl called Nelly, Beulah really did her nut!"

The machine hissed for a moment, and then Logan's voice came on: "Tell we what you heard, Mrs. Pinelli."

An Italian-accented voice: "Their vanno was a next door to a mine... Harkness and a his old faggot hava helluva row... Then a sounds of broken crockery... Then a I hear him a shout, 'One day I'll keel you, you withered old a bag.'"

Logan switched off the machine and gazed steadily into Harkness' coal-black eyes that were smouldering with resentment.

"What the hell's all this got to do with me?" he said. "The boy killed her—not me..."

Logan made no reply. He switched on the tape-recorder, and reversed the run of the spools until the tape was set at the beginning.

Arbuthnot's voice, gentle and coaxing: "Who always gave you the medicine, Jem?"

The boy's voice, sleepy and whispering: "Saul Harkness."

Arbuthnot: "Why did you always do what Harkness told you?"

The boy: "His—his eyes do make me... His eyes and his silver medal what goes round and round with light on it..."

Arbuthnot: "Did Harkness tell you to kill his wife, Jem?"

The boy: "Yes... I didn't want to do it at first... but Nelly held me while he did beat me hard... The beating made me ill, so he gave me more medicine... Then his eyes and the medal..."

Suddenly, the girl screamed out: "I told you we'd never get away with it, Saul! I told you!"

Logan switched off the machine as Harkness snarled: "Shut your

fool mouth! They can say what they like—but it was the boy who killed her, not me. The Police can't touch me!"

"You're quite wrong, Harkness," said Logan icily." Under the law of this land, an accessory before the fact is a person who procures, advises or aids another to commit a felony. And if the accessory was present when that felony was committed, he would be a principal . . ."

"And what does all that mean?" sneered Harkness, but his voice shook.

"Jem will never be charged with murder. He'll be committed to a special home where he'll be properly treated for all the damage he's suffered at your hands. . . In God's time, if so He wills, Jem will recover and he'll be returned to normal society," said Logan.

"And Saul? What'll happen to him?" said the girl hysterically.

"In my opinion he'll be sentenced to life imprisonment," said Logan evenly. "And I'm fairly sure that the Director of Public Prosecutions will confirm my charge against you, Nelly Cullin, of being a party to a conspiracy to murder. . ."

An hour later, when Saul Harkness and Nelly Cullin had been formally charged and locked up in cells, Sammy and Logan went off to the inn for a much-needed drink. Logan was very tired, and his feet ached abominably.

At the bar, Sammy stared broodingly into his beer and said: "That cruel basket should've got the rope. . . They should never have abolished the death sentence. . ."

"Can you imagine what a life sentence can mean to a true Romany like Saul Harkness?" said Logan.

"That's true," agreed Sammy.

Logan sipped his beer, and then said sleepily: "Later on, if and when that poor boy recovers, he'll be given some sort of education. I wonder if he'll ever get around to 1 Corinthians Chapter 13 . . ."

"How does that go, sir?"

Logan smiled. " 'For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. . . .' "

THE KNIFE AND THE ROSE

PRUDENCE CRAIG

They were well-named as a pair of the "beautiful people". To them, the only crime was any form of violence, the unforgiveable sin was the taking of life . . . so for turning the other cheek, they rang a bell or gave a flower.

THE ADVERTISEMENT lights flickered like demented eyes in the dark, and reflected their banal messages on to the wet shiny pavement, even gazing shop windows repeated their words mirror-wise, like idiot children.

The summer storm had passed, it no longer rained but the atmosphere was still like a hothouse.

Johnny, with his arm round Maggie's waist, walked with his shirt open down to the navel, exposing the beautiful flower pattern painted all over his torso; and Maggie had unbuttoned her long Slav-type blouse-cum-dress so that you could see the incurve of her breasts and the delicate painting which climbed up towards her nipples.

Johnny was tall, slender and blond, Maggie was shorter and dark, with big, black dog-like eyes. They were well-named as a pair of the "beautiful people".

As they walked out of Shaftesbury Avenue into Piccadilly, a young policeman frowned a little at Maggie's near exposure.

Johnny smiled at the copper and rang his little bell; even the policeman grinned as Maggie did up a few buttons and handed him one of three wilting flowers. The policeman smiled because he appreciated that she had saved him the trouble of carrying out his duties, and also because he knew that as soon as they had moved a reasonable distance away from him, Maggie would undo her buttons again.

Scarcely two hours later that same police constable was feeling very sick indeed.

Much earlier than their first meeting with him, Johnny and Maggie had been to a "Love In" with their hippy flower friends. Some of them had perhaps been a little over "hep" but nobody there thought anything about it. If that was their way of life . . . so be it.

Johnny and Maggie had the same feeling about the couples who

made love amongst the feet, legs, arms and noise, and the constantly changing lights, flashing different colours on their legs and thighs. It was their belief that everyone should live their own life, their own way.

To them, the only crime was any form of violence and the entirely unforgivable sin was the taking of life. (As Johnny used to say, for turning the other cheek, ring a bell or present a flower.)

* * *

When Johnny was dying, he held Maggie's dislocated body in his arms, and as his blood trickled across her, his glazed eyes and slashed face looked up at the policeman whom he had met earlier and he said, "Not even Christ could do it, could He?" The young policeman hardly heard him, his stomach had lifted and was stinging his throat with vomit.

He leant away, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and looked up at the little hushed crowd, bunched around the "happy people".

"What happened?" he asked. Nobody answered; during the long wait for some voice to say something, the constable heard the silence broken as Johnny made a little croaking noise; he fell on to his back and as his throat arched backwards, the young policeman saw the revolting slash. A combination of fear and anger gripped him. This time he shouted, "*What happened?*"

An elderly woman stumbled forward and looked at the rest of the crowd with an expression of contempt on her face. "I can tell you," she said. The young policeman got up and took out his notebook; by now more policemen, summoned by someone, joined the scene and listened as the elderly woman said: "I was passing Vigo Street when I heard a scream, and then silence, then I heard men's voices, then silence again except for the tinkle of something like a little bell; then another scream."

"Did you *see* anything?" asked one of the policemen.

"Not then . . . I just thought it was something like what the youngsters these days call a "rave-up" I believe. . . . I mean they're always shouting and screaming, aren't they?" said the elderly lady.

"So you didn't *see* anything?" asked a policeman. The elderly lady seemed to ignore the interruption and continued: "By now I heard a young man's voice shouting . . . leave her alone . . . then I heard two or three other male voices laughing, and one said, 'Come on Hippie Boy, let's see how beautiful you both are.' " She paused and then

said . . . "At this point I heard a girl scream again, it was then that I peeped at the end of Vigo Street."

"Why didn't you call us?" asked a policeman. The elderly lady gave him a direct stare and said, "Young man, I saw that there were four men against that young couple, I should have had to pass all of them to get to the 'phone box, I have an arthritic hip, I shouldn't have stood a chance. As it is I did manage to hobble to the Underground and telephone you from there, eventually."

"Why didn't you ask someone else to do the 'phoning for you?" asked another policeman.

The elderly lady drew herself up and folded her hands over the head of her walking-stick, and with contempt in her eyes she looked at the crowd and said: "Because, young man, when the screaming continued this piece of London suddenly became empty of people . . . it might have been a desert."

"Not quite!" shouted a throaty voice in the crowd. A blousy, Latin-looking woman elbowed her way through the silent knot of people. "I saw it all from my window," she shouted, and there was an odd look of triumph on her face.

"Why didn't you ring us?" asked a policeman. The woman spat and said: "Copper, you must be joking; for one thing I've got no 'phone and even if I had and used it, you bright boys wouldn't have believed me—you'd have said I was imagining things and I should take more water with it!"

The crowd was gazing at her as the ambulance men took away the bodies of the two beautiful people.

The policeman gazed at the blousy woman too and it was obvious to everyone that she was only temporarily shocked into sobriety, her speech still slipped a little. The police sergeant had arrived by this time and whispered to one of his colleagues: "Not *another* case of Annie's 'Cry Wolf', for heaven's sake?" "No, Sir," said the constable.

The Sergeant sighed and looked across at Annie, calling to her very gently: "Tell us what you saw, Annie." "You won't believe me," said Annie. "Try me . . . or shall we go down to the station?" the Sergeant called, still softly.

Annie pointed to the bloodstained pavement and said: "That young couple were walking down Vigo Street peacefully enough, when suddenly these yobbos came up from the other end. One of them whistles at the girl but she takes no notice so he goes up to her and grips her

arm and seemed to say something to her. She smiles and hands him a flower she's carrying, silly bitch, and the feller she's with, rings a little bell, so help me.

"Then another of the four goes up to her and says something, which I also don't hear. The next minute this second bloke grabs her arms behind her back and the first bloke looks like he's kissing her, but I believe he bit her because she screamed like a frightened rabbit.

"Her chap shouts and rings his little bell again, then the third bloke holds the girl by the ankles so that she falls over backwards, and by now the first one has practically got her dress off. Then she *really* screamed and her young man shouted . . . 'leave her alone, leave her alone' . . . The fourth fellow went up to the poor devil and kneed him hard in the groin and by now the two other blokes were holding the girl whilst their mate tried to rape her.

"I've never seen anybody fight like she did, they must have dislocated every bone in her body, she fought so hard.

"Then she stopped screaming and I heard one of them say . . . 'who wants it cold, anyway.' . . . By now her young man was vomiting and crawling in circles like an animal, but he pulled at the leg of one of the blokes. I just saw the flash of a knife as the ad. lights flickered across and I saw this knife carve patterns into his face and slice across his throat, he screamed as his girl had done, and the four blokes rushed off.

"I thought they were both dead, but the young man slowly crawled to his girl and dragged her as far as here, then he put a silly battered flower in her hair."

* * *

The firemen cleaned down the pavement, but nevertheless, next morning a young lad found a small, battered bell. His mother threw it away.

"I don't care if it *is* a symbol of peace, you don't know where it's been," she said.

Toni Blake has achieved her first target—that of getting her crippled brother Timothy to study art in Paris.
Orphaned in a recent air-crash, Toni is taking life at full tilt—righting wrongs, but also removing ill-gotten gains from criminal pockets.
In this, her second adventure, Toni unexpectedly meets an old friend—Michael Johnson-Percy of the Foreign Office, who has a personal target needing her attention . . . . against the ugliest racket of all in London's West End.

TONI TAKES THE PUSHERS

DERWENT VALE

Illustrated by Vera Jarman

TONI WAS standing on Cherry Garden pier, a lugubrious little pier as piers go, which sometimes sat on the Thames mud and sometimes floated on the grey indolent water, according to the state of the tide. She was staring downstream at a Port of London launch, fussily going about its routine surveillance of that particular reach of the Thames. She wasn't particularly interested in the launch, but found pleasure in the muted river sounds and the ever changing patterns of light on the river's face with long echelons of waves from the launch's bow moving across it.

She often walked from her little old cottage on the river bank at Rotherhithe to Cherry Garden pier just to enjoy these simple things. Sometimes she came in the early morning and saw the Thames as Turner saw it when he painted the "Fighting Temèraire" at Rotherhithe, the sun low down in the estuary, its light splintered by the haze into reds and golds in all their variations of tone.

She wore black slacks and a red turtle-necked pullover, which accentuated not so much the perfect lines of her figure as her grace and litheness. Her dark hair moved in the river breeze.

There were quick footsteps on the wooden boards of the pier, instinctively she noted an urgency in the sound and half-turned.

"Toni!" called a voice she knew.

"Michael! what brings you down here?" She ran to meet him laughing with pleasure and holding out her hands to him, but he ignored them, took her round the waist to swing her in a full circle before kissing her.

"A Japanese type, who was painting your front door a startling shade of orange, told me you would most likely be on the Cherry Garden pier. I asked the way and here I am!"

"That 'Japanese type' is Sigimoto and a very good friend, Michael, I would have you know."

"Toni, you look wonderful!"

"And so do you, Michael! I take it that gorgeous tan indicates skiing, at this time of the year. Or maybe you acquired it under the chandeliers of the Foreign Office?" Michael she knew, was secretary or something equally vague at the Foreign Office.

"Right, first guess!" he grinned and the sudden illumination of his smile transformed the rugged ordinariness of his face into a quite charming extraordinariness—one could say it was a beautiful smile. He was tall and well-proportioned and his movements were swift and economical.

Suddenly he became serious, which caused Toni to take a defensive step backwards. That disarmed look in his eyes she knew well.

"Michael, you haven't come to propose again? Because if you have the answer is still 'no'."

"Toni darling, I'll never give up asking, but it isn't that this time. I—well, to be honest, I did think of slipping one in incidentally. It *is* definitely 'no' again?"

"I am afraid so, Michael darling."

"Well, no matter. I'll try again later. It's Sophie."

"Sophie?"

"You were always good friends."

"Of course. We still are. I—I—well, since Father's death and so on, things have not been the same. I have to work for a living."

"I understand, Toni," he said hurriedly. "I can't understand, though, why you should cut yourself off. Anyhow, that's your business. Look, Toni, Sophie's in trouble. Serious trouble and I think you are the only person who can help her, now."

"Sophie in trouble, Michael?"

"Drugs. Hard stuff and she's going to pieces rapidly. God knows how she started. Maybe at one of those weird parties they throw nowadays. Toni—will you talk to her—or do something——?"

He was staring across the river, seeing nothing for his eyes had a blind, flat look, in them, and his face was ugly and hard. He's thinking of what he would do to whoever supplies his sister with drugs, thought Toni, but the probability was that Sophie was as secretive about the source of the heroin, cocaine or whatever it was, as she would be about the actual taking of the drug.

"How did you discover this, Michael?"

"It was not difficult. The symptoms."

"Yes, of course." She was not particularly surprised. Sophie had a reckless streak in her obsession for new excitements—never one to take a long view of things.

"You'll talk to her, Toni?"

"Talk? I don't know, Michael. Addicts are very suspicious of well-meant talks, aren't they? I'll do something nevertheless," she promised.

She was staring beyond him at the seagulls circling and wheeling over the moored barges their white scything wings sharp against the grey face of the river. Such perfection of movement; such predatory swiftness! That was it! She would go for the drug traffickers who had got hold of Sophie like a seagull scavenging on the river filth—with predatory swiftness.

"Michael—I'll need some help from you."

"Well, naturally—anything! Just say."

"You will have to trust me. I might break a rule or two."

"Who doesn't. But what are you trying to say?"

"Michael, just leave it to me."

For a moment he was thoughtful and looked at her quizzically.

"Toni, you haven't changed—to use contradictory terms, you're just as calculatingly impetuous as ever! I think I know what you are up to and up to a point I am with you, but I will not permit you to put yourself in *any* danger."

"There you go, Michael! Insubordination at the very start! You've just got to trust me."

He pondered this for a moment with a serious expression on his face. "O lord, yes!" he said at length rather cryptically.

"Well then, that's settled," said Toni with relief that an argument

hadn't developed. "Now we'll go and find Sophie."

"That won't be easy,' said Michael despondently. "She disappears for days, but I know of three parties we might investigate tonight. She might be at any one of them."

"That sounds a good idea. One more thing, Michael—I am going to take Sigimoto along. He is discreet and he could be very useful if anybody wanted to play rough games. He would do anything I ask without query. He wouldn't even show surprise at any odd request."

"Er—I say Toni—have we to take your Sigimoto just yet awhile —I was—er—going to suggest dinner before we start looking for Sophie." He looked cautiously at her, his head whimsically half-turned as if he was expecting a sharp rebuff.

"Michael——!"

"Well, one has to eat!" he said reproachfully.

"So one has. We'll pick up Sigimoto later. I would love to have dinner with you, Michael, but if this is another gambit for a quick proposal of marriage after the third or fourth glass of champagne——"

"Cross my heart—no proposal," he vowed. "Where would you like to eat, Toni? Caprice? Savoy? Or some quaint little place in Soho?"

"A quiet place, please. And a simple meal, please. We might have a strenuous night ahead of us."

"Leave it to me Toni dear. I haven't forgotten. I know just what! The memory of every meal I've had with you——"

"Is etched indelibly in letters of gold—or is it fire——" They laughed together for this was a joke of long standing.

She laughed happily as they ran hand in hand along the pier to the river wall where Michael had parked his Lotus Elan.

At the cottage Toni dressed appropriately for the West End, not too formally, for this was not to be a serious dining-out occasion. Later she had an earnest talk in Japanese with Sigimoto, whom they had found still at his painting job on the cottage woodwork. Michael, looking slightly out of the picture, smoked a cigarette with exaggerated nonchalance in the window overlooking the river.

"May I enquire what that was all about?" he asked when the conversation had ended.

"Sorry for bad manners, Michael, but you may not," Toni apologised her dark blue eyes twinkling mischievously.

"He's got a grin like a hungry alligator!" grumbled Michael. "I'll bet he loves doing hari kari on people he doesn't like.

"An impossibility," Toni laughed.

An hour later they were sipping Martinis in the lounge of a Soho restaurant favoured by film actors and T.V. stars, the evidence of whose patronage was to be seen in the numerous signed photographs which adorned the dark panelling of the walls.

When the head waiter came for their order he said, "Good evening madam, Good evening Mr. Johnson-Percy! Very nice to see you again," with the proper emphasis on the right words to give the impression Michael was indeed, his most treasured patron. Michael waved the menu aside.

"Observe, Toni dear! " he said triumphantly as if he were about to produce a large sized rabbit out of a small hat. To the head waiter he said, "Cantaloupe, Tortue Claire au Sherry, Poularde Farçie Perigoundine and please tell the wine waiter Taittinger Rosé '53.

He gave Toni a wide beautiful smile and asked, "How's that?"

"Letters of gold—or is it fire?" she laughed, whilst the head waiter

made a cheerful grimace as if he too were in the conspiracy.

They discussed further details then went into the dining-room where a well-loved T.V. comedian gave Michael a mock look of envy and Toni a sad, smile of hopeless infatuation.

"Toni," said Michael over the rim of his champagne glass. "Do you know what you are up against? I am probably assuming more than I should, but, you see, I know you of old."

"Yes, I know Michael! I think we can do a lot in an unorthodox sort of way. More than the police could by orthodox methods. But the point is, Sophie won't be out the wood even then. She'll need medical care. Can we persuade her do you think?"

"Perhaps. When we tell her—— However let's cross that bridge when we come to it."

"Good idea." Toni agreed. "Now I think, back to Rotherhithe for Sigimoto and a change of clothes for me. You'll do if you don't mind ruining a good suit—perhaps."

He made a wry face at that. "All in a good cause," he sighed.

At the cottage Toni changed into black slacks and a black pullover. She tied her hair severely back with black ribbon and put on light ballerina pumps. Sigimoto had turned up in dark clothes also. His face was inscrutable though in his eyes was a curious narrow glint of some vague emotion that could be somewhere between anticipation of pleasure and anticipation of rumpus.

"Kensington, first stop," said Michael as he drove the Elan down Rotherhithe Street. "What's the plan of action, Toni?"

"We first find Sophie. Sophie tells me where she gets the drug—the pusher I believe he's called. He leads me to his supplier. The supplier leads me to the organiser. The organiser to the boss."

"Oh very true!" Michael laughed. "All worked out by simple logic —woman's simple logic! Sohpie doesn't talk for fear of losing her supplies. The pusher doesn't talk for fear of losing his good looks. The supplier doesn't talk for fear of ending up in the Thames!"

"Roughly, that's the picture," Toni agreed.

Michael thought about this for some time and as he crossed Southwark Bridge gave his considered opinion in one word: "Marvellous!"

"Cynical about something?" Toni asked.

"Hysterically!" he almost shouted.

It was midnight when they found Sophie after having looked in at two West End parties. They found her at a house in West Kensington,

one in a row of high Victorian mansions, once very dignified in a Gothic sort of way, now slightly raffish with gloss paint and a lot of exterior ornamentation never contemplated by the mid-nineteenth century architect who planned the street—for example the porcelain bath full of plastic geraniums under the portico or the old workhouse lamp on it.

The assortment of cars in the street, the musical sounds within the house and the shrieking voices behind lighted windows exuberantly proclaimed the existence of a party of some dimensions.

A heavily-built young man with Gladstonian whiskers and wearing a d'Artagnan sort of hat barred their way at the door.

"You invited?" he asked.

"Naturally!" said Michael. "Do you doubt it?"

"No—not really!" said the other, assessing Michael's potentialities for malevolence, noting Sigimoto's evil grin and appraising Toni's exquisite figure and prussian blue eyes.

"You one way, Sigimoto, and I another," said Toni once they were inside. "Meet here in half an hour if no luck."

The house reeled and seethed and roared. With Sigimoto close behind Toni fought her way from room to room, pushing, apologising, being pushed, again apologising, stepping over embracing couples, breaking impatiently through one very resilient, unyielding group postured like people awaiting a revelation. If there were any revelation to come it was nothing more than a pipe dream, almost literally, for reefers passed from hand to hand and a hairy modern philosopher in pre-Raphaelite angel robes ranted, sing-song to his acolytes. In a bathroom two naked girls and a man in a top hat and a frock coat were reading poetry in the bath with its taps full on and overflowing in all directions. "Join us, darling," the man invited. "The rhythm of running water—the poetry of liquid motion——" Toni fled.

On a staircase she found Sophie—a Sophie she hardly knew for her face was as if carved in ice and the irises of her eyes pin-points in the frozen blue of the pupils. Her hand was tightly clutched round the balustrade as if she were trying to control the shaking of her body. She was oblivious of the bedlam around, only aware of an insensate craving.

"Sophie!" Toni exclaimed, appalled at the change in her friend.

"Toni!" There was a terrifying intensity in Sophie's voice. "He promised! He promised!"

"Promised Sophie?" said Toni. "Who promised and what did he promise?"

"I hadn't the money. I said he'd get it tomorrow!" She grasped Toni by the arm in a gesture of despair. "Toni, *you* know, I have money. It's —it's only that I——" She stopped, a sudden gleam of suspicion in her eyes. "Toni, what are you doing here?"

"Sophie dear, can I help? I have money. Oh don't look like that! I'm your friend remember. Sophie, Sophie, take a grip of yourself! All I know is you're in trouble and I can help, if it's a case of money."

The hard stare of distrust in Sophie's eyes faded; she shivered as if at that instant a sharp, icy wind had blown up the staircase and a gleam of hope showed momentarily in her eyes. Then it was gone and sly intelligence followed: "Toni, please let me have twenty pounds and wait here until I return."

"Can't you tell me——?" began Toni hesitantly.

"Oh for God's sake, Toni, don't dither! It's just a few pounds!" Her voice was slightly hysterical. Toni rummaged in her purse for the bundle of five pound notes she kept there and silently handed it to Sophie who almost snatched the money and ran down the staircase.

Toni followed and from behind the modern philosopher's pre-Raphaelite draperies saw Sophie accost a sleepy-eyed middle-aged Italian, who, at first, regarded her with annoyance and as the girl talked, with growing suspicion. The Italian held out his hand; Sophie passed him a packet of Players and Toni was in no doubt that the bundle of notes she had given her was concealed under it.

"Pot?" whispered somebody behind her but she was at that moment signalling to Michael, who was flirting with a girl dressed like Lady Windermere, fan included.

When he joined her she said, "Sophie's talking to an Italian by the door, Michael. Don't look, but make a pass at me and when I kick your shins go after him. Don't let Sophie see you. Find out where he goes.

"He is——?"

"Yes. He's going for the stuff—— Now Michael!"

Michael attempted a crude embrace and Toni kicked his shins with a great show of indignation. People standing nearby, tittered. Pretending affront, Michael turned away abruptly and stalked angrily towards the door, skilfully managing to pass behind his sister's back.

Toni returned to the staircase where shortly she was rejoined by Sophie, looking less distressed, though there was pain still in her eyes.

"Heroin?" asked Toni softly.

"Toni! Of course not! Just—Just—Oh hell what is the use of lying?

Yes! Yes! Yes! And whose business is it, but mine?" She became wild-eyed and uncertain. Toni took her hands gently in her own. Sophie muttered incoherently but her eyes constantly sought the faces in the vestibule below. "He wanted to know where I got the money. How bloody impudent can they get? Toni, don't let him see us together—please! He will guess—and—and—you might be—well—it's—Toni, please go! I will see you later." She trembled violently.

She would not keep her promise Toni was certain. The Italian would return with the drug: Sophie would hide herself away somewhere—

Toni found Sigimoto listening politely to a stout youth whose sole article of attire was a dhoti. His torso, back and front, however, was gaily painted with improbable flowers. Sigimoto bowed and grinned and left the flower gentleman scratching at his navel.

"We leave when Michael-san returns Sigimoto-san," she said in Japanese. Sigimoto bowed and his eyes narrowed to bright black slits.

The Italian returned, casually sauntering through the crowd, with Michael on his heels. Toni and Sigimoto quickly caught Michael and without a word being spoken the three left the house.

"Five minutes away by car," said Michael. "He went to a small café in Notting Hill. He went over to the juke box and selected an old Rolling Stones disc. When the waitress came he ordered coffee and iced cakes. Then a fattish fellow came from the back premises and had a look at whoever was playing the Rolling Stones disc. When the Italian saw the fat man he said, 'Hello, Len! You've got a late customer'. The two of them went into the back where I presume the Italian had his coffee and iced cakes for he came out shortly afterwards and returned here."

"Into the car all," said Toni. "Michael, take us to the café."

As the Elan sped through the side streets of West Kensington Michael said, "I'm going back to talk to that droopy-eyed Italian, later."

"No Michael!" said Toni. "We have only just begun. The next move is to find where the fat man's supplies come from. The Italian is only small fry—the pusher if you like. We must scare the fat supplier to the pusher into running to his boss so you and Sigimoto will go into the café, order coffee and iced cakes and play the old Rolling Stones disc on the juke box. That will make him awfully suspicious."

"And you, Toni?"

"A little breaking and entering?" she suggested.

"Toni! For heaven's sake!"

"Exactly!" she laughed. "You know well enough I can take care of myself."

"Too well!" he acquiesced wryly.

Whilst he and Sigimoto found a table for themselves in the café Toni entered the rear premises—not quite a simple matter, but she knew a trick or two about breaking and entering taught her by the teenage delinquents of her judo class, not that they expected her to make use of the information, but passed on to her as a sort of exchange courtesy for the judo tricks she taught them. They would have been very astonished to see her putting to use the knowledge they had passed on to her so ingenuously.

She flitted silently from room to room, avoiding the ground floor where the café's small staff were occupied. She found nothing unusual until she came to a second floor bedroom which contained a locked cupboard and a telephone, both of which seemed to her to have significance. She opened the cupboard with a picklock on a bunch given to her by Robert—one of her judo students—as a Christmas present. He had also shown her how to use them. The assortment of jackets and suits hanging within she pushed to one side and after a little trial and error discovered a simple sliding panel at the back of the cupboard. Behind the panel were shelves on which were two or three neat little packets, some capsules and a bundle of notes of various denomination. The outer layer of notes were five-pound notes and she had no doubt they were those she had given to Sophie. She stuffed the money into the top of her slacks. She tore open one of the little packets and discovering it contained a white powder assumed this was either heroin or cocaine.

After a moment's consideration she deliberately kicked over a chair.

Putting on a theatrical air of dismay she stood in the middle of the floor, where there was room for manoeuvre, and waited.

For a fat man he came up the stairs with considerable agility and almost silently, and once in the room did not hesitate though momentarily his face showed surprise at seeing a girl in the room, then he came at her with an open flick knife in his hand. The knife was almost at her throat and he was spitting vicious epithets when Toni made her move. The Rolling Stones were rolling heavily underneath when he hit the floor and Toni hoped the sound of his fall would have been drowned in the pandemonium.

She regarded the fat man impassionately for a second or so and, satisfied he was out for the count, she hid herself under the bed and

waited, confident he would regain consciousness in a short time.

He came to with a groan, rubbed the back of his neck and muttered: "The little bitch!" Reconsidering he qualified his statement with an obscenity and asked himself plaintively: "How the hell did she do it?" When he saw the open cupboard he wailed, "Oh Gawd!" and getting unsteadily to his feet made for the phone and began to dial frantically. Toni heard the ringing tone stop and then the fat man began to talk excitedly: "I must see you Mr. Robinson—— Yes, urgent—— Some funny business here—— No, Mr. Robinson—— Yes, Mr. Robinson—— Of course, Mr. Robinson—— Yes, Mr. Robinson——"

In his voice Toni detected subservience, anxiety and towards the end of his talk perhaps a tremor of fear. As he replaced the phone in its cradle, he muttered, "Ah Gawd, what a mess and it ain't my fault!"

Toni was elated. Things were moving faster than she had anticipated.

She slithered from under the bed as he hurried out of the room and silently followed him down the staircase. She was close enough behind him to note the look of surprise on the waitress's face as he shot out of the café with a hurried injunction to her to shut up the café and go home. Her surprise changed to perplexity when Toni appeared.

"Here, what goes on?" she demanded shrilly, but did not pursue the matter when Michael jumped up from his table at the sight of Toni and thrust a pound note into the girl's hand and told her to keep the change.

The café proprietor walked to a Hillman Hunter parked nearby in a side street; Michael following with the Elan in low gear, looked at Toni for instructions.

"Don't stay too persistently behind him, Michael. He will soon spot your car in his driving mirror. Pity it is so distinctive."

"As you say, Toni. At the moment the traffic is heavy and we shouldn't be too noticeable. If we get into quieter areas I'll think of something."

It wasn't necessary. The Hunter never left the central parts of the city and Michael was able to keep two or three cars behind without losing sight of their quarry.

When they turned into Greek Street and headed for Soho Square Michael exclaimed, "Soho! Soho!"

"You sound like a fox hunter, Michael," she laughed.

"Well we are hunting," he said, dropping a gear as he saw the Hillman parking. "Tally ho! or Soho! Soho! Both hunting yells. They hunted something or other here in Soho fields in Stuart days—or there-

abouts. Their hunting cry was 'Soho! Soho!' "

"Soho! Soho! it is then," said Toni. The café proprietor was by now walking hurriedly away into Soho's narrow alleys. "Out everybody on the scent! "

"He's in a panic," commented Michael. "Your burglary act, plus our Rolling Stones and coffee and sugar buns have upset his apple cart. He's not even looking back."

They saw the heavy figure of the café proprietor slip into a dismally lighted cul-de-sac. As they passed the narrow opening into it he was standing in a dark doorway half-way along the cul-de-sac.

"Now what?" asked Michael.

"Difficult! " said Toni.

Sigimoto said something rapidly in Japanese, the sibilant language hissing through his strong square teeth like a gas escape. Toni smiled and said to Michael, "Over the roof tops."

"You're not serious Toni?" Michael said incredulously.

"Never more so! Come on Michael show us how you climbed the Eiger! " she teased him.

Toni led the way into an adjoining alley, which, as she anticipated, so late at night was deserted. Sigimoto pointed to a drain pipe and receiving a nod of approval from Toni immediately leapt onto the pipe and clawed his way upwards with the agility of a cat. Even more swiftly Toni followed and finally, Michael, with a mournful downwards glance at the immaculate creases in his Savile Row trousers, followed.

"Thank the lord for the ubiquitous British drain pipe! " Toni whispered as Michael's head appeared over the parapet of the roof.

"Toni?" said Michael heaving long legs over the brickwork.

"Yes, Michael?" she said hurriedly for she and Sigimoto were studying the various skylights around them. To Sigimoto she said "That one, Sigimoto-san" and pointed to one particular skylight.

"This is going a bit far, isn't it, Toni?"

There was a faint rasping sound and a whimper of rusty hinges as Sigimoto pressed open the skylight with some implement he had evidently had concealed on his person. It was actually a long Samurai dagger.

"Yes, Michael," Toni agreed, preparing to drop into the musty gloom of the attic below her. The light of a pencil torch showed it to be bare and squalid with peeling mildewed wall-paper and fallen plaster.

Michael shrugged his shoulders in resignation at Toni's nonchalance

and quickly followed Sigimoto into the attic.

The house below was quiet and their swift and stealthy investigation of room after room hardly disturbed the damp dreary atmosphere around them. There was an empty unlived-in feel about the upper part of the house; but when they reached the first floor the atmosphere changed abruptly. Yet though there was now this lived-in feeling around them and dim light from the ground floor there seemed no sign of people. The reason they soon discovered. The occupants of the house were all assembled in one room from which there came a low murmur of voices.

Toni placed her ear against one of the door panels. After a time she whispered: "Our friend is being bullied and he is scared to death by the tone of his replies. I rather think the others consider he has let the side down."

"How many?" whispered Michael.

"Five I should say. Could we tackle five, do you think? In the corridor in this half-light as they come out? They wouldn't be expecting anything. We should have——" Abruptly she stopped and hissed at Sigimoto, who was along the corridor to her right.

Sigimoto was not a moment too soon. The man who stepped out of the door adjacent to the one they were standing by had a stubby little Walther .32 in his hand and a taut expression on his face, such as a man with a profound opinion on the way to deal with trespassers, might have. He did not see Sigimoto flat against the wall on his right and in consequence never knew what caused a flash of excruciating pain at the base of his skull and the long period of oblivion, which followed. Sigimoto caught him before he collapsed and lowered him gently to the floor, at the same time deftly removing the Walther from the nerveless fingers.

Michael, though dumbfounded by the ruthless action and lightning speed still managed to stutter, "How—how—did you spot it?"

"Click of the light switch in the next room. Heard us. Obviously listening to the conversation next door. Somehow. Microphone. Mirror see through maybe," she answered jerkily.

"Must be Mr Robinson, eh?" whispered Michael.

"Could be," she answered tersely.

"Nobody seems to have heard us. Very silent and efficient in the art of mayhem, Sigimoto!"

Sigimoto showed appreciation with a formal little bow.

"Now for the others," murmured Toni. "We have a gun——"

"So might they!" said Michael dubiously.

"Perhaps not. English gangsters prefer coarser weapons, such as razors, bicycle chains—so my students tell me. Let's risk it."

Michael grinned and Sigimoto showed his teeth in a mirthless grin and his eyes became oblique slits, always a prelude to action on his part.

Toni opened the door swiftly, gasped, "Oh lor'!" in mock consternation and slammed the door shut again. Inside they heard sudden exclamations and loud above the general hub-bub the fat café proprietor yelling an urgent warning: "Watch it! Watch it! She's the one. If that——" but his shouting was ignored. They surged through the doorway like hounds at a view and found wolves, not foxes, awaiting them. Sigimoto and Toni executing remarkably complicated movements with devastating effect, Michael dealing out upper cuts and straight rights and lefts with gentlemanly punctiliousness soon had the gang in serious trouble. Seeing razors and coshes uplifted Michael yelled a warning to Toni and saw her take a savagely high kicking foot in a judo twist and a screaming tough suddenly hurtling head first into the corridor wall.

Knives, coshes, knuckledusters, chins, kicking, butting, it soon became apparent were sadly insufficient ways and means against super-human speed of movement and techniques of malevolence they knew nothing about. Three men lay silent in the corridor, two were dazed and bloody against the wall. One had a broken leg, the other a broken arm.

Toni stepped into the room from which the owner of the Walther had appeared. When she returned she was smiling innocently: "Lots of evidence of a big organisation in drug peddling," she said. "There's also a safe in which there'll be more evidence, I guess."

"How do we conclude the act?" asked Michael, alternately flexing bruised fingers and dusting down his suit. "Police?"

"Well," said Toni mock contemplatively. "I really think the police should have all the credit. I should be quite happy to fade out over the roof tops and leave them all the glory."

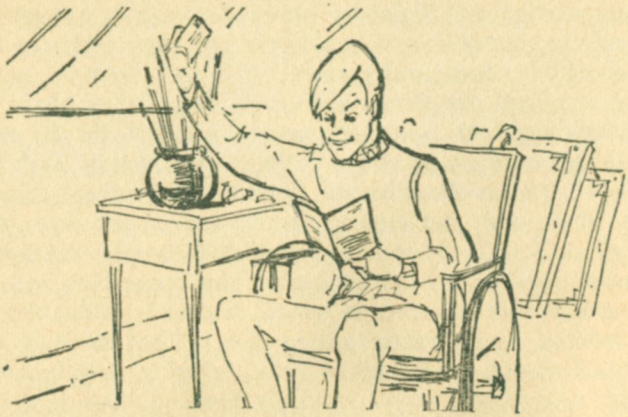
Michael looked at her suspiciously. "Toni—you sound too smug. You've been up to something in that room."

"I have, Michael! Sorry! I've robbed the till."

"You've what?" he shouted. Then he laughed. "Why not?"

Toni took the Walther from Sigimoto and emptied its magazine through the window into the chimney pots of Soho. Glass tinkled onto paving stones, a voice called, a whistle shrilled in Greek Street. After

some minutes they heard the strident blaring of a police car siren and then they quickly slipped onto the roof tops and with cool effrontery descended to street level through a delicatessen store.



In Paris crippled Timothy, working so hard in his one room, dwelt for some time over a passage in Toni's letter: "—and of course, with this investment proving so remunerative, all of a sudden, you could now rent the small studio you spoke of. Father little realized—but there's no point in going into all that. He made one wise investment which compensates a little for his many failures——"

"Odd!" murmured Timothy to himself. "Must have been something he invested in before I was born. Anyway, Toni, you're an angel—no one ever had a sister like you!"

At Scotland Yard, Chief Inspector Dawkins of the Narcotics Squad was a very puzzled man. "A wonderful stroke of luck," he told the Assistant Commissioner, "but so far, we haven't a clue as to what went on in that house before we arrived. Six men more or less seriously injured, revolver shots, but nobody shot, a hundred thousand pounds worth of drugs in a safe and more concealed elsewhere—some obviously having been inspected. We have a list of pushers from the safe. Nobody will talk naturally. Well who am I to look a gift horse in the mouth?"

* * *

In an expensive clinic, Sophie, pale, ill and distraught looked across at her brother. "It's hell, Michael, but after what you and Toni have done for me, I'll try and stick it out . . . "

BRANDT'S WAY

M. N. MADGWICK

Illustrated by Buster

The morale of the whole country was now undermined—but what could be the explanation for vanishing men and bodiless brains?

SHOULD THIS thing be true, it would be simply terrifying. Cronin must be wrong, he just had to be, or sanity was in danger. Cronin had been so positive. That half-formed sneer on his lean white face, the whistle of breath as he blew on the fold of paper he had been using to tap his teeth, evinced his bland contempt for the almost terrified disbelief on the face of Brandt.

"There must be another explanation," Brandt had muttered at last. "Your information must be faulty somewhere. Smith was overwrought, he imagined . . ."

"And when has Smith or any of my agents, been known to be overwrought? My men are not afflicted with imagination, Herr Brandt. They are trained to report only what they see."

"And Smith saw . . . ?"

"Just what I have reported. A pickled brain in some sort of fluid attached to a sort of microphone. Exactly as in the hundred or so other cells discovered by my agents."

"Nothing else?"

Cronin shrugged. "Nothing but a few wires from the mike to the ceiling."

The scientist roused himself as a distant clock struck three. Three in the morning! He must get some sleep or he would not be fit to deliver his report tomorrow. No—today. Not that it would matter. They wouldn't believe any of it. Who could? He still didn't really believe it himself, although it seemed there could be no other explanation.

The door behind him creaked slightly and slid open to admit a stealthy figure, but Herr Brandt was too tired to notice.

The Headquarters of the Bureau of Secret Investigation was buzzing with activity. All the top Ministers were present as well as the Com-

missioner of Police and the Supreme Military and Naval Command. About them clustered satellite groups of secretaries, Press men and detectives. Armed sentries who were posted at all exits carefully scrutinized the credentials of everybody they admitted.

The one topic of conversation was the unknown, unseen force that had, for the past three months, undermined the morale of the whole country. An important group of eminent biological scientists had vanished in mysterious circumstances; the chief technicians in the nuclear power houses had disappeared together with many key men of the fighting forces. There was never any sign of struggle and nothing was heard of any man who vanished. Lesser scientists and technicians were known to be getting the jitters and questions were being asked in Parliament and Press.

It was believed that the unknown enemy had infiltrated alien agents into the country and that they were communicating with each other and receiving orders in some totally new manner. Herr Brandt, top scientist attached to B.S.I. who had been working on this for the Government, was to address the assembled company today.

Promptly at 10 o'clock, a small group stepped on to the platform. The Prime Minister; tall Cronin, the Chief of B.S.I.; a wizened little man with close set eyes and neat grey hair—Thompkins, who was Brandt's confidential secretary, and two rather retiring men, Cronin's agents.

"Gentlemen." Cronin stared round as silence fell. His voice was harsh and angry. "I have to report that Herr Brandt, who was to have addressed you, has disappeared." A rising tide of talk was quickly hushed as he raised his hand. "Herr Brandt was preparing his report when I spoke to him last night. Since that time he seems to have completed it and I propose, with the Prime Minister's approval, to read it to you. I must assure you," he looked slowly along the sea of faces, frowning and serious, "I do assure you, gentlemen, that though this report may sound like the wilder sort of Science Fiction, it is coldly factual, based on information supplied by my department. Herr Brandt's Report, gentlemen."

Ten minutes later Cronin sat down to a stunned silence, quickly followed by a deafening outburst of incredulous laughter.

"Brains without bodies! Ho, Ho!"

"Thought messages by floating brain! Ye Gods!"

"The Super brains strike again!"

Cabinet Ministers wiped streaming eyes and high-ranking officers slapped each other's back. Secretaries sniggered and Press men angrily tore up copy they would never dare to offer to sub-editors. Only a few detectives and the group on the platform nodded grimly, their trained and suspicious minds more open to the possibilities in this "wilder sort of Science Fiction" as reported by the absent Herr Brandt.

"Thompkins," snapped the Chief as they left the Hall. "As from now I shall be taking over Herr Brandt's investigations. You will bring all the pertinent files to me in his office."

"Yes, Herr Cronin. You do not expect Herr Brandt back then, sir?"

"We must act on that assumption, Thompkins. I must not be disturbed when you have brought the files. Understood?"

"Yes, Herr Cronin." The little secretary shot an inscrutable glance at Cronin and opened the door into Brandt's office.

The files were long and complicated, the evidence carefully documented and very absorbing. Cronin read on in the silent room.

"Cronin. Cronin."

It was not so much a whisper as a thought. His name repeated in his brain. Urgently.

"Cronin, be careful. You are terribly vulnerable."

"Who are you? What must I be careful of?"

"I'm Brandt, Cronin. They got me. But they didn't have time to brainwash me. They've set up the apparatus and left without realizing their mistake. Until they do, my thoughts are still free. Don't let them brainwash you, Cronin. Get out while you can. Leave the work."

"I can't, Brandt. Tell me who they are, quickly. And where are you? Can I get you out?"

"It's too late, Cronin. My body is in the incinerator and my brain floats in Cerebral Brine. They can control my thought waves, Cronin! You were right, Cronin. The brains are the medium of thought control. You *must* escape, Cronin. Don't let them brainwash you. They will try. Because you know."

"Brandt! *Who are they?*"

"They're coming, Cronin! I can hear them. Goodbye. Save yourself from Tho . . ."

The Chief's head was empty of thought, the channel abruptly cut off. Cronin had a mental vision of a greyish pink, quivering object being whipped out of the bath of—what had he called it, cerebral brine?—tossed into the discard, an inert pulpy lump, a dead man's dead brain.

He shivered and looked down sombrely at all the evidence on the desk. So they were right. The disappearance of technicians and scientists, the hundred known cells containing, presumably, their 'pickled' brains, and mikes. The report he had read out to an incredulous audience was substantially true. Brandt had said so. Brandt . . . He got up hastily and strode to the door, hesitated and walked back more slowly. Was that really Brandt's thought wave he had received? Had Brandt been killed and yet still managed to send out his message? Or was this already an attempt by the enemy to break him? How was he to know?

And who were They? "Tho . . . ? Thomas Somebody? Thompson? Topham? Tho . . . ?"

Perhaps he would go away as Brandt said. Have to contact the P.M. first, of course. Put him in the picture. Perhaps he'd have a clue as to what Brandt meant, Tho . . . ? He caught up his hat and brief-case, hesitated a moment and then pushed into it his copy of Brandt's Report and rushed out of the office, slamming the door behind him.

Another door along the corridor opened and the face of the confidential secretary peered out, watching the retreating figure.

Herr Cronin was in a great hurry.

Once more Cronin felt that strange sensation, a voice in his mind. But it wasn't Brandt this time.

"Cronin . . ."

"I will not let you in. Brandt warned me."

"Cronin. You're running away."

"I am *not*, damn you! "

"Where are you going, Cronin?"

"Home— No, I mustn't think of where I'm going."

"Are you going to see someone, Cronin?"

"Mind your own business! " Even as the thought flashed, he felt like a schoolboy.

"Cronin, don't be so jumpy."

"Is this brainwashing?"

"Cronin! What a thing to think! Cronin, do you know who the Brain of the brains is?"

"I only wish I did! After what happened to Brandt, I'd . . ."

"Yes, Cronin? You'd . . . ?"

"I'd expose him and then personally shoot him! "

"Good. Good. You have friends, you know, Cronin. We want to

help you find the Brain."

"Who's *we*?"

"Come and see us, Cronin. Come and meet our Leader. He will help you avenge Brandt."

Silence for a moment as Cronin's mind revolved wildly. He seemed unable to think straight while this coaxing, gently persuasive thought was filling his head.

"How do I know you are not the Brain?"

"Should we want to help you avenge your friend if we are responsible? Our Leader is as angry as you are, Cronin."

"Oh, God! How do I know? How can I tell?"

"Don't worry any more, Cronin. Don't fight us. We are trying to help you. The Leader is waiting for you now, Cronin. Why don't you just come and see him?"

He had left the B.S.I. building and was walking through a doorway into a building some way along the main street. His eyes were glassy, his step uncertain. He had no idea who had directed him. He felt nothing now but the imperative need to see the Leader. The Leader would take the burden of worry from his shoulders. The Leader would help.

He fumblingly opened a door into a long, gloomy room, an empty room it seemed except for the shadowy group who stood around a kind of throne at the further end.

Cronin stumbled towards them.

"You are welcome, Herr Cronin." His voice spoke gently.

"The Leader? Take me to . . ." His tongue felt too thick and clumsy and his speech was blurred. Blinking hard, he vaguely saw a man sitting on the throne. Cronin stared at him. He knew that face. The familiar figure of the wizened little man he had last seen at the B.S.I. seemed to swell to immense proportions before becoming focused and normal. Cronin hesitated for a moment.

"*You* are the Leader? Herr Thompkins? I did not realize . . ."

"How should you, Cronin? Welcome to our company."

Something clicked in Cronin's mind. "Tho . . ." The name Brandt had been going to say was Thompkins! Thompkins, who had been getting at his senses all the way here. It had worked too, but not quite enough. He was sane again, but it was too late. He was trapped, caught like Brandt. He'd never be allowed to leave here alive to tell his tale.

Or was it too late? Brandt had found a way to get his message through. Could he do the same? Had he got that sort of guts? Had he any option, though? His number was up, that was for sure. His mind racing, his legs had carried him forward towards the group.

"Kneel, Cronin." The silky voice of the Leader had never stopped. *He* didn't realize, then, that the thread had snapped. "Kneel down friend. You are going to lend your brain power to our great project, aren't you? Join the illustrious company of brains that I command, aren't you, Cronin?"

The Chief of B.S.I. knelt, simulating confusion. There was only one thing left to him now. He *must* keep his mind alert and get his message through to the P.M. as soon as these fiends made it possible. One of the group bent over him and the needle jabbed his arm. His world died almost immediately.

It seemed no time at all before he regained consciousness. He felt free and strangely light hearted—which was a ridiculous thing to feel for, if he knew anything at all, it was that he now had no heart—he could not have said whether he had any vision but his perceptions were greaty magnified so that he knew he was floating in a warm fluid. He was a 'pickled' brain! Also he knew he was alone. Incredibly, Thompkins had made the same mistake that he had made with Brandt.

He must act at once if he were to accomplish anything at all. He threw all the force he could into thought and tingled as he felt contact with another mind.

"Prime Minister! Prime Minister!" Now, say it fast! "Arrest Thompkins of the B.S.I. *Thompkins* is the Brain."

"I don't understand. Who is this?"

It was an extraordinary sensation, feeling sensory waves beating through him.

"I'm Cronin. I'm telling you, you must get Thompkins. The Report this morning, all Brandt mentioned . . . it's true. And Thompkins is the Brain. Are you writing this down, P.M.?"

"Yes, but—I don't . . . know . . . what . . ." The shocked disbelief was so obvious that Cronin would have wept if he could.

"Never mind what you think. You must arrest him at once. You'd better arrange an accident and get him shot, he'll try and get at your mind otherwise. Brainwash you. The country won't be safe while he lives."

"I can't believe this! Where . . . where are you, Cronin?"

Excruciating pain suddenly stabbed him and he felt as though a hundred jangling wires were vibrating through him.

"I'm dead. My brain has joined the others—but not for long? When they find I'm a rebel—like Brandt—that will be my lot? They got him, too, but he warned me as I'm warning you. You *must* get Thompkins, P.M. You will, won't you?"

"Yes, yes. I am writing the order now. I'll arrange that accident too, Cronin! You know, you're a bloody hero, Cronin . . ."

He could barely hear the P.M. now. His thoughts were trapped in a screeching, shrilling interference. It must be the other brains oscillating on his frequency, trying to jam his message. Any minute now, Thompkins or one of his band would get here. But they would be too late! He'd got his message through, like Brandt, he'd found a way to defeat them. Through the pitiless agony, he threw his last thoughts out to the P.M.

"No hero . . . just trying to help . . . glad . . . I . . . managed. Goodb . . ."

THE 9 O'CLOCK FERRY

PAMELA RAINBIRD

Illustrated by Carolyn Dinan

The barman was polishing glasses vigorously. "The nine o'clock ferry" he said "is a phantom ferry, and the only people who go on it are destined to die by drowning."

EVEN ON that chill summer's evening, the saloon bar of "The Happy Wanderer" was almost empty. A young man downing whiskies was giving the bartender an account of the various delays he had had during his drive to this quiet inn by the sea. "And to crown it all," he said aggrievedly, "I had to wait an hour for the ferry. It's supposed to run every half-hour all through the day—but when I get there just after half-past eight I found there was no ferry at nine o'clock. I had to wait until half-past nine. Why on earth is there an hour's gap at that time of day?"

Malcolm Woodhouse, drinking moodily nearby and wondering why he had to have a wife who suffered so frequently from "nervous" headaches, glanced at the speaker, but before he could say anything the barman spoke.

"Oh, the nine o'clock ferry does run sometimes—but you should be thankful it didn't run for you."

The young man stared at him. "What do you mean?"

The barman was polishing glasses vigorously. "The nine o'clock ferry," he said solemnly, "is a phantom ferry, and the only people who go on it are destined to die by drowning."

The young man laughed. "What nonsense! How did that ridiculous story arise?"

"It is not a ridiculous story," said the barman, unperturbed. "Some years ago the ferry *did* run every half-hour through the day, nine o'clock included. Then twice within a couple of months, it sank in a storm. Both times it was the nine o'clock ferry that went down, and both times many people were drowned. As a mark of respect for those who lost their lives, they stopped running the nine o'clock ferry for a little while. When they started running it again, people complained that it was haunted. They said they saw the ghosts of those who had

been drowned—sad spectral figures on the boat, with faces like skeletons. And strangely enough, the wind always rose and the clouds always gathered when the nine o'clock ferry ran. People who knew avoided the ferry at that time, so in the end they stopped running it.

"I wasn't here when it happened, but apparently a man turned up at this inn one night, not long after they had cut out the nine o'clock ferry, and swore he had crossed the estuary on it. Nobody could persuade him he couldn't have, that his watch must have been wrong. He did admit there had been a 'strange atmosphere' on the boat, though he wouldn't say what he meant by this. Anyway, the next day he went fishing, and somehow he fell over the side of the boat and was drowned.

"A few weeks later there was a similar happening. A youth on a

motor-cycle crossed by the nine o'clock ferry, and nothing anybody said could make him admit there had been anything at all odd about it. He said it was a perfectly normal crossing—but a youth wouldn't want to say anything that might make him look foolish, would he? Five days later his motor-bike skidded off the road and he was killed."

"That was hardly death by drowning," the young man observed.

The barman looked at him steadily. "He was thrown in a village pond and drowned." After a suitably impressive pause he went on: "There have been about eight cases altogether; that is, as far as anyone knows. There may have been more, because after all one doesn't always go round telling people the time of the ferry one travelled on. And nobody but the victim ever actually sees the nine o'clock ferry—anyone on or near the estuary at that time only sees the real ferry waiting this side from quarter to nine to quarter past nine."

"The last one I heard of was a woman. She arrived at the inn nearest to the ferry in hysterics after crossing on that accursed boat. She was an elderly authoress, hiking round this area on her own to get 'local colour' for her next book, and she babbled about a terrible gale and a weird yellow light and skeletons on the boat and cars that mysteriously disappeared as soon as they reached the landing-stage this side—oh, yes, the phantom ferry carries phantom cargo as well as the ghosts of those who have drowned. She went back to London the very next day, still scared out of her wits, and some weeks later we read she had had a heart attack. In her bath."

"Oh, well," the young man smiled, "I don't mind having had to wait so long for the ferry, since it obviously means I'm not destined for a watery grave. If I do see it at any time, I won't get on it."

The barman said, half regretfully, "I don't think it runs now. The authoress story happened over a year ago."

It was then Malcolm spoke. "What absolute rubbish!" he said crisply. "My wife and I came over on the nine o'clock ferry last night, and I can assure you it was no phantom ferry."

Two pairs of startled eyes fixed themselves on him. "Glory be!" the barman breathed, his expression avid.

"Look here," said the young man, "a story is a story and a joke is a joke. You can't have come over at nine o'clock. There's a huge notice-board saying there is no ferry at that time, and I certainly had to wait for the half-past nine boat. What's more, the attendant told me the ferry never runs at nine, though he didn't say why it doesn't."

"But we did come over at nine," Malcolm said coolly. "We arrived here just after half-past nine—the receptionist can vouch for that, since for some reason he commented on it. It's about a fifteen minute run from the river to here. And as for phantoms and ghosts, all I can say is —supernatural means can't get two human beings, plus a car, plus luggage, across a wide stretch of deep water."

With that parting shot he walked away, leaving the barman shaking his head dubiously and the young man looking perplexed.

In bed that night, long after Irene was asleep, Malcolm lay and pondered over the barman's extraordinary tale. Despite the scepticism he had displayed, the more he thought about their crossing of the estuary the previous evening the greater unease he felt. He recalled how, as they drove along the road bordered by high hedges towards the estuary, the sombre clouds gathered more and more menacingly and the wind rose in intensity until it was blowing in great thudding gusts, making him grip the steering-wheel hard. But he did not slacken speed. He had been told the ferry ran every half-hour, and if he hurried he should just catch the nine o'clock sailing. The sky was so dark it almost seemed as if night had arrived already.

He was conscious of Irene shivering at his side, and felt a grim satisfaction. After all, it was her fault they were spending their holiday in this country, in this weather; as always he had wanted to go abroad, to where there was sun and sophistication, and as always she had protested: why go abroad when there were so many lovely places in Britain to visit? He forbore to remark acidly that as a commercial traveller he was already pretty familiar with most of the lovely places in Britain—though it was true he did not know the particular area Irene was suggesting. As always he had lost the battle, since in the face of her intense fear of flying and her almost equally intense fear of sea-sickness he was helpless. Now if she were Charmian . . .

A savage gust of wind striking straight from the estuary caught the car as he rounded a bend, making him snap off his thoughts of Charmian. The road sloped gently down to the water's edge, where to his relief he could see the ferry-boat waiting.

"Look at that!" Irene gasped.

Dark clouds were still racing turbulently across the sky, but immediately above the river there was a long narrow gap in the clouds through which light poured. The light had a peculiar yellowish quality that invested the landscape with a lurid gleam and tipped the angry

waves with sullen gold. The heathlands and low hills on the other side of the estuary were bathed in the same ghastly light.

"Never mind the view," Malcolm snapped. He could now discern the landing-stage and several cars already on the boat, and glancing at his watch he saw it was just on nine o'clock. He accelerated.

"Malcolm!" Irene clutched his arm. "Look at those waves! We can't go on that boat!" It was as though she had only just realised they would be going on the water, and her voice rose hysterically.

"Don't be silly," Malcolm said impatiently. "If it were dangerous, they wouldn't run the ferry. And it's only a short journey, so don't worry about sea-sickness."

He slowed down to a crawl and carefully drove on to the boat. Everything was lurching so violently that even he momentarily felt a qualm.

"It's—it's not safe," Irene moaned. "We'll go down. I'm sure we shall!"

Malcolm said nothing. He had just received a shock that rendered him temporarily speechless. He had rolled down the window to pay the attendant, and for a fraction of time had thought he was looking at a fully-dressed skeleton. The frightful jolt this gave him was dissipated when he realised it was only the effect of the strange yellow light on the man's unusually gaunt and cadaverous face; nonetheless, he had had a nasty turn.

"Malcolm!" This time there was something akin to panic in Irene's voice. "Look at those people!"

He looked. The cars in the boat were arranged in pairs, and people —men, women, and a few children—stood huddled along the sides, exposed to the elements. For a fleeting instant he had the same terrifying impression that he had received on first seeing the attendant; they all bore skeletal faces. Then the impression vanished and they assumed a normal appearance.

"They're corpses!" Irene shrieked. "It's an omen—we're going to sink!"

"Don't be silly." His own momentary alarm made his voice rasp. "It's only a trick of the light." He snapped on the interior light, causing the world outside to recede into dimness.

It was a nightmare journey, with Irene whimpering every time the boat lurched under a particularly vicious slap of the wind and his own nerves none too steady, but in ten or so minutes they reached the

opposite bank. The gap in the clouds had narrowed to a thin amber streak; it was now dark again. The cars in front of them drove off quickly and in an orderly fashion, and the foot-passengers seemed to melt into the enveloping blackness. Malcolm could not immediately start the car, and by the time the engine kicked into life all sight and sound of their fellow travellers had gone.

"Well, we made it," he said with forced cheerfulness. Apart from a subdued comment from Irene that all the cars had disappeared very quickly, not a word more was spoken until they reached "The Happy Wanderer."

The barman's story was, of course, just a superstition of simple country folk backed by a few coincidences; even so he could not help his thoughts turning to the prophecy linked with the phantom ferry. He didn't fancy dying at all, certainly not by drowning, struggling for breath, head and lungs bursting with agony, the final intolerable blacking-out. But if Irene should drown . . .

He could not resist toying with the delightful idea of his being a widower. If Irene were dead—why, then the field would be clear for him to pursue Charmian openly, to marry her, to become the apple of her wealthy father's eye and enjoy a life of luxury. Malcolm knew she was attracted to him, but he knew too there could be no question of his marrying her as long as Irene was alive—no question, that is, of marrying her with her father's approval. Because Charmian's father had religious objections to divorce, and it was general knowledge that he had vowed to cut her off without a penny if she married a divorced man.

But the story of the nine o'clock ferry was absolute nonsense, and the chances of Irene dying in the near future, particularly by drowning, extremely remote. He was just dropping off to sleep when the explanation as to how they had appeared to travel on the nine o'clock ferry occurred to him. Of course! Because of the gale the ferry had been taking longer than usual to make its crossings, and the boat they had thought was the nine o'clock one was in fact the half-past eight one running half an hour later.

The following day was sunny, though billows of white cloud floated across the sky and the wind, now moderated to a capricious breeze, kept the temperature in the sixties.

"Just the day," Irene said exuberantly, "for a brisk walk along the cliffs further down the coast." She was looking well that morning,

Malcolm thought, and although brisk walks along cliffs was not his idea of pleasant recreation, Irene's unaccustomed high spirits and the bracing effect of the air made him view the prospect with less dismay than he would normally have done.

They drove leisurely to the cliffs, some ten miles away. Plenty of other holiday-makers were thronging the cliffs, and Malcolm felt himself infected by the general air of gaiety and relaxation. As he and Irene tramped over the short, springy grass they exchanged cheerful conversation. The sky was so blue, the clouds so white, the grass so green, the sea so sparkling that all thoughts of phantom ferries and drowned skeletons were banished to the unreal land of nightmares.

At length they came to a steep dip down which they scrambled. Irene, her face flushed with exertion, flung herself down on the turf at the bottom and laughingly gasped: "I'm absolutely exhausted!"

There they ate their picnic lunch, sheltered from the wind by the valley's slopes, and afterwards they stretched out and dozed. When Malcolm awoke he saw that Irene was nearer the cliff-edge; she had evidently turned over in her sleep. He stood up and looked round. Not a person was in sight. He strolled over to the cliff-edge and looked musingly at the choppy little white-capped waves sweeping over the blue, dashing themselves in froth against the bottom of the cliff. Despite his and Irene's climb down, they were still quite high above the sea.

Again he looked round. Still no one in sight. It was purely on an impulse that as Irene started to rise to her feet, befuddled with sleep, he pushed her over the cliff; it was his subconscious that told him nobody would be surprised to learn of her death by drowning, since she had been a passenger on the nine o'clock ferry.

His subconscious was right, although it is probable that at the inquest the evidence of witnesses was considered more material than the ferry supersition. Three people testified they had seen the couple walking happily over the cliffs, and it turned out that a lone hiker had actually seen the couple sleeping in the dip and had thought at the time the woman was too near the cliff-edge for safety. The verdict, death by misadventure, was reached without any hesitation.

For a while Malcolm took extreme care to avoid placing himself in any situation whereby he might accidentally drown. He persuaded himself he did not believe in the superstition attached to the nine o'clock ferry; after all, he knew, even if nobody else did, that he had merely taken advantage of the superstition to dispose of his wife in a manner

which aroused no suspicion, but . . . it would do no harm to take safeguards. Remembering with a shudder the tale of the lady novelist, he gave up taking the long hot baths he loved.

Weeks, months passed and nothing untoward happened. His courtship of Charmian was progressing satisfactorily, though deliberately slowly, and the circumstances leading to Irene's death began to fade from his mind. He was taking long hot baths again, he no longer drove with excessive caution over bridges, he even flew to Paris one week-end without the slightest qualm as the aeroplane crossed the Channel.

One day in the Spring he was required to replace a fellow traveller who was ill and go to a coastal town some miles further on from where Irene had met her death. It was the first time since that fatal holiday that he had been anywhere near the area, and as he neared his destination—bypassing the ferry, of course—unwelcome memories and fears he thought he had overcome rose within him. Vivid recollections of that ferry crossing kept flashing into his mind; the strange, gloomy yellow light, the buffeting wind and waves, the impression of skeletal faces, the tautened nerves . . .

His business took two days, and he left the town much later than he had intended. Ruefully he realised he would not arrive home until well in the small hours; if he hadn't had a pressing engagement the following morning he would have stayed there another night. To his dismay the mist that had been hanging over the sea all day suddenly rolled thickly in, promising to make at least the first part of his long drive arduous.

A few miles after he had crossed the bridge that he knew from his road-map spanned the fateful river, he had to turn off the main road towards the coast because of road-works. The road of the diversion was narrow and twisting, with high hedges either side over which the mist curled in heavy white wreaths. It was impossible to drive fast in such conditions, and Malcolm, his eyes watering with the strain of trying to pierce the thick white blanket, cursed first the weather and then the road-works.

The detour seemed endless. At each intersection he stopped to peer up at the signposts, and as at none of them was there any indication that he should turn left, he concluded that the road must gradually curve back to the main highway. On and on he went, becoming more and more anxious to get back on to the proper road.

Shortly after he had turned down a right-handed fork, he noticed a change in the quality of the mist. It was becoming denser, and had a

yellowish tinge in it which gradually deepened until he was reminded of a London smog. Perturbed, he glanced at his watch. It was nearly five to nine. Pressing on as fast as he dared, he debated whether it would be better to put up somewhere for the night and hope the fog would clear by early morning; the road was wider now, and he should soon reach habitation.

A few minutes later he became aware that a fresh wind had sprung up. Suddenly, to his amazement, the fog thinned and disappeared, revealing the high hedges bordering the road and dark clouds racing overhead. Greatly relieved, he stepped on the accelerator.

He swept round a bend. For a second his stunned mind could not register the panorama spread before him like some ghastly tableau. The estuary, the dark clouds overhead with a long narrow gap through which livid yellow light poured, the illumined heathlands and the low hills the other side of the river . . . how did he come to be here? And—oh, God! —there was the ferry—*the nine o'clock ferry*—waiting patiently at the landing- stage. Swiftly he re-acted to put his foot on the brake, but—he could not move his other foot from the accelerator. It was as though he were literally paralysed with horror; and as the car rushed towards the estuary he could see with crystal clarity the skeletal faces turned towards him, one of which was transformed for an eternal instant into Irene's face . . .

The car roared on to the nine o'clock ferry.

* * *

"The verdict of death by misadventure," said the coroner, "is in my opinion the correct verdict. This man died through an unfortunate combination of circumstances: first, the heavy mist that night made him lose his bearings completely, and secondly, he was misled into driving towards the river by the signposts that some misguided prankster had turned around. What cannot be explained is how he came to be driving at high speed in such thick mist. It has been testified that the mist was dense the whole of that evening, and we have heard how a young man and woman were almost knocked down by a car being driven incredibly fast, considering the bad visibility, some two hundred yards from the river. What also cannot be explained is how, even allowing for the fact that it was being driven fast, the car with its unfortunate occupant came to be so far out in the river."

BLACK MAN'S MAGIC

BLISS NIELSEN-WOOD

The child's mother carried her unconscious child in her arms and laid him on the pallet. I knew he could not last long, and put the anti-venom snake serum into my syringe . . .

HARD TO BELIEVE, perhaps, but this story is authentic and happened fifteen years ago in the Eastern Transvaal in South Africa.

I was then a young man who had recently inherited my father's large farm, together with its responsibilities. He had been a fine farmer and successful, and had specialised in fruit for export which paid well.

In those days my father was exceptional in his treatment of his African labour as he was more considerate than most of his neighbours, treating them all with kindness and understanding. The people responded and I feel that, to a great extent, the secret of the harmony and success of our large farm was due to his knowledge and fairness.

I followed his example, ignoring the sometimes unpleasant jibes of our neighbours who were, possibly, jealous and disliked the comparison of our well-housed, well-fed labour with their own. However, it paid handsomely, and I liked dark, smiling faces instead of sullen discontented ones whose resentment over trivial matters was never considered important—and often summarily dismissed.

Like most South Africans I was passionately fond of rugby, and often practiced with young African farm hands on a roughly constructed field when it was not possible for me to leave the farm to play in our main centre. These youths were very enthusiastic and grateful, and we formed a small community of sportsmen with no racial barriers, which is my idea of what sport should be. However, this was not exactly popular fifteen years ago although it is, of course, now accepted by many that sport is above politics.

I was a powerful young man, not tall but thick and tough, and my hands and arms were far stronger than average. No ghostly visitations or phantasies troubled my sleep or my thoughts; I was down to earth. When I look back on the young man I was, whose main preoccupation was to keep "fit" I ask myself—fit for what? Perhaps the reply would

be: "For that particular job at that particular time." I hope that makes sense to you.

I encouraged the younger farm hands to join in our weekly game of rugby and dealt out prizes to those who excelled in our motley teams. My best pupil and support was my (later) head boy, about my age and self-named "Baden-Powell". I thought this a little presumptuous but laughed when I thought how the great B.P. would have enjoyed it.

Later, when Baden as we called him, took over the running of the farm when I was away on rugby tours. I found him honest and reliable, and the best slave-driver in the world with his own people. Pharoah's men had nothing on him, he extracted work from every idler, seemed to sense when they were playing up or genuinely unfit for work. He was respected by all, they knew they could not fool this astute young man of their own breed.

Occasionally he would ask for leave to visit his two wives and his parents for a week or two, and that was granted. His wives, children and numerous relations lived twelve miles from my farm on one of the highest kopjes (hills) in our district. Baden loved one particular child (produced by his second wife), with a strange intensity as the boy, called "Pole"—no doubt an abbreviation of Powell—seemed to be everything he desired in a son. Baden often entertained me with anecdotes of the child's antics and sayings, telling me how "slim" (a word hard to differentiate between clever, astute or cunning) he was. His other children appeared to be of small importance compared with Pole who was three years old.

* * *

Life was pleasant on our farm we worked together as a team without jealousy or hatred. I explained to them all my system of granting a bonus on the size and value of our fruit when it had been treated with proper care. Values are the most important justification for existence, I think. So we worked together, as I've said, with assurance and mutual respect, never any mutterings or concealed bitterness among my labour. It was understood clearly that I was the master and they were my servants, but they knew they would always receive justice. I pride myself that I gave them understanding.

I slept in my father's large farmhouse with all windows and the front door wide open. Dogs roamed in and out. Without fear and suspicion life is good. We all know that fear makes for persecution and evil.

Then Fate struck hard. I was awakened at dawn by a hand on my shoulder to see "Baden Powell", his face grey with shock, terror and urgency.

He said: "Master, please come *NOW*. My child, little Pole, has been bitten by a big snake, a mamba, early this morning and we have a long way to go to give him your White Man's Magic (snake-bite serum). If we don't go now, he will die—perhaps he is already dead."

I was dressed in minutes, seized my case containing syringe, snake-bite serum, cotton wool, and we set forth. Many of our labourers owed their lives to the anti-venom serum, injected as soon as possible, and my case was always ready for immediate use. It meant life or death.

I drove my jeep fast over extremely rough country for about five miles, but the next seven miles meant a steep climb up the highest kopje and haste was vital, perhaps life to a dying child. When we left the jeep we climbed hard, Baden leading. We were utterly silent until I asked how he had received word of the tragedy, and he replied briefly that his brother's child had brought word and he had come to me asking for my help with the White Man's Magic. Neither of us had breath or inclination for further talk.

I had never realised what anguish and terror meant until that dawn. Baden, the African, was as taut at a fiddle string, as was I. I knew I was not experiencing half the fear and desperation that had engulfed Baden and made him into a purpose, not a person, a purpose so powerful that nothing else mattered.

I was fond of this chap, we had played together as young children on the farm, respected each other in our different spheres and were attuned in ways that people who have not grown up in Africa with black people cannot appreciate.

Although young and fit, I began to feel the strain of fast climbing, hanging on to odd bushes, evading enormous boulders. I was soaked in sweat although the sun did not yet savage us as at midday, and our pace remained the same.

Baden did not hesitate or pause once, he led the way—silent, purposeful, terrified of what he might find at the end of our journey.

That hellish journey seemed interminable at our fierce pace, but at last we reached Baden's circle of huts, built like cones in the Zulu tradition, and the whole company seemed to surround us with cries of welcome. We were taken immediately to the hut where Baden's young son lay breathing deeply, unconscious, on a straw pallet on the mud

floor, surrounded by weeping women and young children. The men, presumably neighbours, sat outside the hut. I felt the child's pulse, which was extremely feeble, and motioned to Baden to open the "White Man's Magic" case which he did with trembling hands. I told the silent crowd of observers to move back, as I needed light and air for the job. But even when they did as they were told, the hut was too dark, so Baden and I lifted the pallet into the shade of a great tree near by, the relations following closely. The child's mother carried her unconscious child in her arms and laid him gently on the pallet.

I knew the child could not last long, and put the anti-venom snake serum into my syringe, ready to act. Then the horror, of which I still dream, occurred.

The syringe would not work, it was jammed tight. I am a powerful man with extremely strong hands and I fought that airlock with all my strength and intensity, but I could not release the antidote. Time was passing, the silent crowd watched my every movement. My wrists and hands were painful from my frantic efforts, and I said to Baden, in Zulu: "Cut deep into his foot now, and pour the medicine into the wound when we've broken the syringe as I cannot get this thing to work, and *hurry*."

But Baden obviously thought I had failed and he took the syringe from me, pulling so feverishly that he stumbled and the precious antidote contained in the syringe crashed on to some large boulders nearby and was gone for ever into the red earth.

My frustration and failure were so intense that it centred on the unfortunate Baden, standing shaking, pitiful, silent, while I bawled: "Unutterable idiot, now you've killed your own child by your carelessness. There's no hope now, none."

He did not reply, stood silent watching the dying child in its mother's arms. The watching crowd were silent too. I could have brained the fool, my nerves were so tense that *he* became the target for my fury, not myself! I looked at the broken syringe and spilt liquid and knew nothing could be done now.

There was utter silence. Then sudden, swift movement and purpose as the child's grandmother and another ancient crone came into action, so swiftly that they might have been waiting for this moment. Two youths appeared carrying the dead snake, a hideous six-foot black mamba to where we stood under the great tree, and I witnessed the Black Man's Magic at first hand. I witnessed a miracle.

The small, wizened old grandmother took the head of the dead snake in her two gnarled black hands and slit the back of its head open (wherein lies the deadly poison bag) with a sharp knife. The extracted poison was rapidly heated in a tin on an open log-fire which burns day and night, as is the custom, and when sufficiently hot she sliced the child's foot open as neatly as any surgeon and inserted a fair portion of the deadly poison into the wound, while a prepared poultice of strange smelling herbs was fastened over the deep cut.

Then, unbelievably, two spoons of the snake poison were poured into the unconscious child's mouth, he being held up in his mother's arms, and although he could not swallow, the stuff was literally forced down his young neck, while they rubbed his throat and muttered some form of prayer, I suppose. To my amazement, the child's throat contracted and all the venom went down. The stench of the snake's venom and strange herbs was fearful, but I watched—fascinated.

I was convinced this rubbish couldn't work, but I was impressed by the silent people, so intent that I sensed this was indeed a ritual from time immemorial. Then, with one accord, they all raised their harmonious Zulu voices in a strange chant in which a tone of fierce defiance ran through. Even I, who had grown up with many of them from a young child, had never heard this chant. The mother continued to hold the limp child to her, rocking and intoning with the others, while yet another evil-smelling herb poultice was applied to the small black foot and secured firmly with bark, hewed from the trees, and called *tambu*.

"Baden Powell", my childhood companion, had by now reverted to his own people, hovering over the woman and child, leading the chanting which grew louder and louder. I wondered to whom they were chanting? Was it asking help or speaking defiance in this particular chant? Were these black, ignorant heathens on a rocky hill in the middle of black Africa defying death or placating it?

Exhausted with our savage climb, emotion, and the fearful chant, I sat down on the ground near to the intoning mother still clasping the dead child (as I thought) to her breast; the great black dead snake near her naked feet, the group round her chanting louder and louder until the noise was deafening, hysterical and led by Baden, who was now utterly unlike his restrained self. He seemed to be possessed as did they all. I recalled the death-dealing poison being forced down the child's throat, the same venom and evil-smelling herbs applied to the small foot. I cursed myself, the syringe, Baden, and everything to do

with this absurd play-acting. I knew it couldn't work and would end in the only way possible, the death of the child (if he were not already dead).

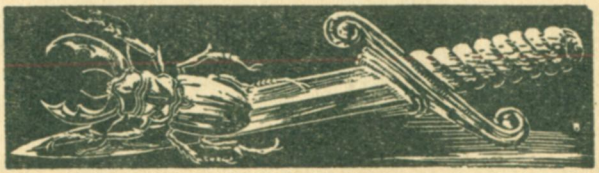
Perhaps the weariness and misery of failure to help induced a few minutes of light sleep, although I was sitting upright, and then I felt Baden's strong hand on my shoulder and heard his excited voice: "Master, he's alive again!" The chanting ceased abruptly, followed by a chorus of laughter and joyful chatter as the crowd surrounded mother and child. The eyes of the latter were open; he looked intelligent and alive and normal. He half smiled as Baden bent and lifted him from his mother's arms, holding him high for all to see.

It was true. I had indeed witnessed a miracle. The child was literally returned from death by old, old ways learnt through the centuries. And I had often berated our black people for their ignorance in that they had never produced even a simple wheel, or built a proper house, or made a table to eat from, or knives or forks, let alone a skyscraper, until the white man came. But now I thought—was our western civilisation so remarkable, entitled to be the symbol of progress for all time? Were we right always?

Young Pole works on my farm now, a strong and sensible young man who appears to have no memory of the snake-bite or anything that happened at that time, and when I have asked him, frequently, he shakes his head saying: "Master, I was too small, I can't remember."

Despite tactful questioning, discreet bribes, intense interest on my part, I have never extracted the secret of what I call to myself: "The Resurrection of Pole." Not from Baden or any single member of my labour force.

Perhaps they fear that if they told the white man, the black man's magic might disappear into air-locked syringes that do not work at the correct moment, and magic water spilt on the rocks of Africa?



THE WEB

DICK HARRINGTON

Illustrated by Buster

ABOUT THE darkest part of the night, Aunt Brenda screamed. Her terrified shriek echoed down the silent corridors, waking everyone in the house. Just as Alan Wilkins, her only nephew, staggered out of bed, she screamed again. Then twice more.

As he ran out into the corridor pulling on his dressing-gown, he almost collided with Adams, the butler.

"It's milady, sir!" the man cried as he ran past. "She must be having one of her nasty turns again."

Alan sprinted after the butler, overtook him and reached his aunt's door in a matter of seconds. He grasped the handle, and threw the

door open. As he turned on the central light, a pitiful scene reached his eyes.

An old woman lay on her four-poster bed, the sheets and blankets pushed to the floor. She lay curled up in the centre of the mattress, as if trying to ward off some terrible enemy. She was dressed in a yellowing nightgown, and her frail figure inside it was huddled and shaking.

As Alan ran across the room to her she screamed again. He put his arms around her.

"Aunt Brenda! Wake up; It's only a dream."

The old woman struggled against him, but he held her tightly.

"Wake up, Aunt Brenda!"

She opened her eyes a fraction, then clamped them shut again. She started moaning.

Alan turned round, and saw the butler standing in the doorway and the other servants clustered behind him. "Adams. Get some water for my aunt. And send the others back to bed."

"Yes, sir." The butler backed away out of the door.

"Come on, Aunt Brenda," Alan said as gently as he could. "Everything's all right. It was only a dream."

The old woman opened her eyes again, and looked round the room.

"Alan," she said, relieved beyond measure. "I was so frightened."

He laid his aunt back against her pillows, and reached over for the bedcothes. He pulled them across her, straightened them and tucked them in again. Lifting the old woman away from the pillows he fluffed them out, and supported her back against them.

Just as he was sure she was comfortable again, Adams came back with a carafe of water.

"Here you are, milady," he said, and poured her half a glassful.

"Thank you," she said, and sipped at it. Her face was beginning to calm, although it was deathly pale.

"All right, Adams," Alan said. "That will be all. You can go back to bed now."

"Yes, sir." He left the room, and closed the door behind him.

The old woman pointed at an easy chair next to the bed. "Sit with me for a while, Alan. You make me feel so much at ease."

He sat down as indicated, then said: "It was the spiders again, wasn't it?"

She shuddered. "Yes, dear."

"The doctor said you should tell me about it," Alan said gently.

"All right."

She had told him the dream many times before, and he felt as if he knew it better than she.

It always started in an empty room at the back of the house. As she walked in, a web would fall across her forehead. As she turned, a big house-spider would scuttle across the wall. She would back away, her skirts dislodging several more from the cracks in the floor-boards.

In panic, she would try to get out of the room, but the door would be mysteriously locked. Turning back she would see more and more spiders crawling out from behind the curtains, under the skirting-boards, everywhere. They'd be in her hair, down her neck, running across her feet. Finally, she would fall to the floor, thousands of the huge spiders crawling across her entire body.

As she retold the dream to Alan, tiny flecks of perspiration formed on her face.

He reached across with a handkerchief, and wiped them away. She looked at him gratefully.

"Alan, dear," she said. "You've been so good to me."

"Yes, Aunt Brenda."

"I've no idea what I should do without you. I mustn't dream like that any more. It's going to kill me in the end, I know it! "

"You mustn't let it worry you. The doctor said you must try to stop thinking about spiders."

She nodded. "But I'm terrified of them. It's the feel of that web across my face——"

She shuddered again.

He stood up. "Come on now, Aunt Brenda. Try and get some sleep again."

She wriggled down into the bedclothes, and pulled the sheets up to her chin.

"Stay with me until I'm asleep, won't you? Like you always do."

"Yes, Aunt Brenda."

She closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them again. "Alan, dear?"

"Yes, Aunt Brenda?" Politely and solicitously.

"You've forgiven me for what happened in the past haven't you?"

As she said this, memories flooded back to him. His parents being killed in a plane-crash, and his stern aunt taking charge of him. The disciplines she had enforced on him, the strict school she had sent him

to. Then, as he grew older, the arguments and rows. How he had hated her then!

He remembered how she had disapproved of his girl-friends, and how she had broken up romance after romance.

And he remembered too, how, when she realized the mistakes she was making, her regrets. She had even made out her estate to him. When she died, everything she had owned would be his.

"Yes, Aunt Brenda. It's all forgotten."

She looked at him closely. "Really and truly? Completely forgotten?"

"Absolutely." Gently, he pushed her down to the pillows. "Now you must get some more sleep. You've lost enough already tonight."

She closed her eyes again, and he sat back in the chair.

"Goodnight, Alan."

"Goodnight, Aunt Brenda. And no more spiders!"

"No, dear." She answered in a voice already heavy with sleep.

He sat in the chair for twenty minutes watching her drift into a shallow sleep. Once she turned over, then back again. Her face became rested, and her breathing deepened into long, peaceful sighs.

Yes Aunt Brenda, thought Alan. Everything's dead and buried. All the wicked and misguided things you've done to me are forgotten.

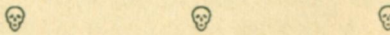
When he was sure she was fast asleep he stood up, and walked over to the wall. He switched the central light off, and opened the door a fraction so the dim light coming in from the hall allowed him to see what he was doing.

He walked back to the bedside, and reached into his dressing-gown pocket. From this he took a small bobbin, wound with thin white cotton.

He unravelled about three feet, and broke it off. Then, with painstaking care, he laid it gently across his aunt's forehead.

As he reached the door, her breathing had shortened into painful gasps. He went outside and shut the door.

He was barely back in his own bed before her screams echoed again down the silent corridors.



SIR ALAN PLAYS THE GOD

W. F. SANDERS

Most women couldn't stand him though he was popular with the men who judged him only by his spending capacity. A stocky bull-necked man—not at all the type to commit suicide.

ALTHOUGH Alan Hawkins and I are about the same age and have both lived in the small Chiltern village of Rainwell for nearly twenty years, it is only since his retirement three years ago (having reached the top of his profession as Chief Commissioner of Scotland Yard and got a handle to his name) that I have got to know him at all well.

To say that we are close friends would be an exaggeration, a Sherlock—Dr. Watson relationship is nearer the mark, but on occasion he has provided me with some good stories, a fact for which I, as a writer, am duly grateful. This is one of them, just as he told it, only the names have been changed—for obvious reasons.

Rainwell, although within twenty-five miles of London, has so far escaped 'progress.' The cluster of cottages round the church, with its Saxon tower, the three pubs and the Manor House, have not changed much since Elizabethan times. I chose it because it seemed to offer the peace and quiet I needed, whilst Superintendent Alan Hawkins, as he then was, bought his place with a view to retirement.

While he was at the Yard, Hawkins had little time for country life. He used to come for a night or two when he could, but it was not often and he did not get much opportunity of getting to know people, so I was rather surprised when, the other day, he asked me if I remembered the Colwells. I did of course. We don't get suicides in Rainwell every day, but it all happened fifteen years ago at least.

"I thought that was before your time," I said. Sir Alan Hawkins shook his head. "Your memory is going Sanders, I bought my little place on my fiftieth birthday a sort of present to myself; the Colwells didn't move into the Manor House until at least three years after that, but I must admit that I never met him. What sort of a chap was he?"

"Bill Colwell?" I cast my mind back over the years. "A stocky bull-necked man in his late sixties. Quite popular with the men, spent money

pretty freely and you can always buy friends, of a sort. Most women couldn't stand him, he was the type who can't look at a woman—any woman—without mentally undressing her. They only put up with him for his wife's sake." Sir Alan's bright blue eyes clouded over. "Ah yes —Margot. I *did* meet her. One of those tall blondes, young enough to be his daughter. Not the sort of young woman one forgets easily."

"No indeed," I said warmly. "Everyone liked Margot and they were sorry for her too."

"Oh? Why?"

"I don't quite know, there was some mystery about her. She never said anything about her private life and we couldn't see why on earth a girl like that should ever have married a man like Bill Colwell. It wasn't for his money, she held down a full-time job, travelling up to town every day, which wasn't easy from here in those days, and Bill worked her like a slave as well. They'd got that rambling old house, which needed at least three servants, but Margot had to run it almost single-handed.

"She made all her own clothes, jolly well too. I must say—she looked like a model, but she often seemed dreadfully tired and had a sort of frozen look—I always thought of her as the Ice Princess. Yet she seemed devoted to Bill, no one ever heard her say a word against him and she waited on him hand and foot, even when he was downright rude to her, as he was when he'd had a few too many. He was not a heavy drinker but even a little made him difficult, to put it mildly. One way and another it just didn't add up. My wife always maintained that he had some sort of hold over her."

"Your wife is a very discerning woman," Sir Alan observed dryly. "Anything else?"

"Very little. They lived at the Manor for about five years and then one night Margot found her husband dead in bed with a bullet through his head and his gun still clutched in his hand. She left Rainwell soon afterwards and, as far as I know, no one has seen or heard of her since."

"Hm." said Sir Alan, "Well, if you're interested, I can fill in the gaps."

"But I thought you didn't know them." Hawkins can be very irritating at times.

"H'm, I said—I told you I'd met her." He settled himself in my armchair. "It all started in Leeds," he began, "four years after the Colwells took over the Manor. I had been sent up there to investigate one of those Top Secret affairs, Special Branch business really, and I

hated those jobs. Where Security is involved you never see the whole picture. You are just given one bit of a jig-saw to put together and that's that. Give me a straight police case any day, but I'd got my orders from a very high personage indeed, so I checked in at a small commercial hotel—I was supposed to be some sort of traveller.

"I signed the register in my own name and gave my Rainwell address. I never lie unless I've got to, and no one here knew that I was a cop. One evening I was in the bar feeling pretty browned off, when a tall thin chap got talking to me. He was about thirty, had been quite good looking except that his chin was weak, but he was obviously a sick man. His eyes were unnaturally bright and he had a very high colour. He chain-smoked incessantly and fits of coughing kept interrupting him; I caught a glimpse of scarlet on his handkerchief after one very bad bout. He introduced himself.

" 'Trent, Jack Trent and you, sir, are Mr. Hawkins from Rainwell?' His accent showed him to be a Londoner. I nodded briefly. He'd obviously been snooping through the register and I wondered why. The poor devil looked harmless enough, but in that sort of game you don't take any chances.

" 'Rainwell is a small place I believe,' he went on, 'I have never met anyone from there since . . .' a fit of coughing interrupted him, 'Do you, by any chance, know Mrs. Colwell?' he asked as soon as he had recovered.

" 'I've met her,' I said.

" 'How is she?' there was something pathetic about his eagerness.

" 'My dear chap,' I said, 'I really know nothing about her. I travel a lot and don't spend much time at home. I have done no more than pass the time of day with her once or twice.' He leaned towards me, 'I know it's frightful cheek, sir, but'—he hesitated and then went on with a rush—'would you let me use your address to send her a letter?'

"I eyed him up and down. 'I am not in the accommodation address business, Mr. Trent,' I replied stiffly.

" 'It would only be one letter, Mr. Hawkins,' he pleaded. 'Perhaps if you heard the whole story . . .' A lot more people were drifting into the bar. He finished his whisky at one gulp. 'If you would come up to my room, I promise that I will not keep you long. I live here—have done for five years.'

"I must admit," said Sir Alan," that I was intrigued. It seemed unlikely that a chap as ill as this would be contemplating what we used

to call 'the old one-two' so I agreed and followed him upstairs. His room was a typical hotel bedroom of its class, in fact the twin of my own and had just the same air of transience. If he *had* lived in it for five years, he had left no imprint save one. On the chest was a framed studio portrait of Margot Colwell. A very different Margot from the one we knew, nothing of your Ice Princess there, Sanders. She looked radiant. Trent saw me looking at it.

" 'My wife,' he said simply.

" 'Was?' I queried.

" 'Is,' he repeated firmly. 'She and Colwell are not married.' I settled, at his invitation, on the only chair but refused his offer of a drink. It isn't only in novels that people get doped. Trent half-filled his tumbler with neat spirit, but it might have been water for all the effect it had on him.

" 'I am with the Great Northern Building Society and Colwell used to be my boss. That was when I was at the London office. Margot came to work there as a shorthand-typist and I fell for her almost at once. So did Colwell, naturally, he could no more have resisted making a pass at a pretty girl than he could have stopped eating, but Margot just laughed at him. He was more than old enough to be her father and besides she had fallen for me too—I looked a bit different in those days. Anyway, she chose me and we got married.

" 'We had very little money and she kept on with her job. Colwell took it surprisingly well. In fact he became much more friendly. He dabbled on the Stock Market and did pretty well out of it and started passing on a few tips. They paid off and soon I was making quite a little bit myself, nothing exciting but jolly useful, and Colwell left Margot strictly alone. Yes, he seemed a good friend in those days. It wasn't until I started buying on margin that the tips started going wrong. You know what margin buying is, sir?'

"I nodded. 'Buying stock you can't pay for and gambling on a rise before settling day.'

" 'That's it. Well, I got into a proper mess. I was on the counter in those days and many borrowers used to pay their instalments in cash. I needn't go on, you can guess the rest, and then Colwell pounced. He made no secret of the fact that he'd deliberately got me just where he wanted me. He knew that I could never face a gaol sentence and offered to cover the discrepancy providing that I signed a full confession and gave Margot grounds for divorce.'

" 'Hm,' I said, 'Blackmail with a nasty twist to it. You should have gone to the police, but of course you didn't.

" 'I just hadn't got the guts.' Colwell said, 'I'd get ten years.'

" 'He would have been the one to get ten years; you would probably have been bound over as a first offender. What *did* you do?'

" 'I made a clean breast of it to Margot. She was scared stiff, she was only twenty-three remember, but she'd got more courage than I had. She went to Colwell and told him that she would live with him, but would never divorce me or be unfaithful to me. In all other respects she would act the perfect wife, providing that he let her keep her job and treat the money as a loan which she would repay out of her earnings. Once the debt was cleared she would return to me. Colwell agreed but insisted that he keep my confession as security, and made it a condition that I never communicated with Margot or she with me. I've no doubt he thought he could break her spirit—perhaps he has, five years is a long time.'

" 'And now you want to communicate? Why?' I asked quietly.

" 'I want to ask her for a divorce. Look at me, sir. Am I the sort of man now that any girl would want? I drink and smoke far too much, I am ill and the doctors say they don't give me a dog's chance unless I change my whole way of life. Well, I don't want even a dog's chance. I should never have agreed to let Margot serve a worse sentence than the one *I* hadn't got the guts to face. If I die, Margot will think of me as a martyr and it will be worse than ever for her, but if she thinks I have been unfaithful, she'll marry Colwell and be well provided for. He's getting on, he can't last for ever and she's still young and attractive. Will you help me, Mr. Hawkins? I daren't write direct. Colwell is sure to open all her letters and he'd twist the whole thing up somehow.' "

Sir Alan paused for a few moments: "You know, Sanders, I think that I can honestly say that during the whole of my career I have never let personal considerations influence me when engaged on a case. From my beat-pounding days onwards, my duty, as I saw it, was to bring the suspect to trial, but when I come across something outside the line of duty I am always inclined to follow my natural instinct, play the god, I suppose you might call it. It is one of my weaknesses, I'm afraid. I felt like this with Margot. I refused to let Trent write to her but I did promise to see her as soon as I was through with the Leeds business and back in London.

"One of the few advantages of being a cop is that one *can* get information and I checked Trent's story pretty thoroughly. It was true in all essential details. Colwell had retired from the North British just before he bought Rainwell Manor and part of the golden handshake was a seat on the London Board. Trent had been transferred to Leeds branch just before at a much lower salary incidentally and Margot still worked at the London office but there was no record of any marriage to Colwell though she did marry Trent, just as he said, about five years earlier.

"I saw Margot, seemingly by accident, in a Lyons tea shop where she usually went for lunch and told her of my meeting with Jack. It was like watching a snowgirl—if there is such a thing—come to life. When she agreed to divorce Jack I knew that justice was going to be done, although, had I been acting in my professional capacity, I should have had to call it . . . murder."

"Murder!" I exclaimed. "You mean Colwell didn't commit . . ." Sir Alan did not let me finish. "Suicide? No. The divorce went through. Jack Trent provided the evidence and did not defend the action. As soon as he could Colwell married Margot very quietly by special licence. That night Margot let him sleep with her for the first time and then shot him with his own gun at point blank range through the temple."

"Good Heavens man!" I exclaimed. "How do *you* know all this?" Sir Alan chuckled wickedly.

"I saw quite a bit of Margot whilst she was waiting for the decree to be made absolute. Quite openly of course usually in the same tea room—nothing the King's Proctor could possibly take exception to—quite often enough in fact to tell her just how to set about it." He looked at his watch. "Better be getting along," he said.

"But . . ." I expostulated.

"You writer fellows do like all the ends neatly sewn up, don't you?" he said peevishly. "I should have thought you could have thought up your own happy ending. Still here you are, came across it this morning, going through some old papers. Reminded me of it actually."

He handed me a faded newspaper cutting from the *London Times*.

"TRENT. To Margot and Jack at Davos, Switzerland,
a son. Both well."

THE LAST BATTLE

BERRIE McDOUGALL

A quick look round and he spotted Harry well behind him. He would use his height and his muscles to get out of the Hall of Kings at Madame Tussaud's. He ran down the stairs fast . . .

LONDON—a summer day and crowds on the pavement. In the back of the car I'm jammed between Harry and the lawyer. Nobody speaks. Harry's fat hand shoves the gun hard in my ribs and his little gimlet eyes glint with pleasure. The lawyer, string thin, sits on my other side, wilting in the heat. I know that he'll perk up when we get to Tony's place and he comes into his own as official questioner before my execution.

The car slows down almost to stopping point, the traffic is jammed solid. I dig my elbow viciously into the lawyer's guts and he doubles up against the door of the car. By a miracle it opens and I roll over him falling out of the car before Harry can use the gun. Dodge between the traffic and on to the pavement among the crowds. People are condensing into a queue. I join.

Hundreds of people here, even Harry daren't risk a shot. The queue moves forward—me with it. I twist my head round and see Harry, just behind me in the queue, but can't see the lawyer anywhere. Feel panic; where's everybody going? A sign says Madame Tussaud's and I vaguely remember, the waxworks show. It's a respite; they wouldn't chance anything here, too public even for them. Struggle to control my breathing. See Harry looking around, he's spotted me all right but can't get near me, the crowd is too dense. We move on—a solid mass of people. Try to think but can't, take one step at a time until someone pushes me and says "Hurry up, man." At the box office I buy a ticket and go inside with the rest.

Inside the commissionaire yells "Keep to your right up the stairs" like a well-trained circus, the crowd obey, me with them. Keeping with the crowd, I try to take it easy though I'd like to run. Curse my height, it makes me easy to spot. Quick look round, Harry's coming up the stairs, conspicuous amongst a party of schoolgirls. We surge into the Grand Hall.

There they all are—effigies of Famous People—arranged for display behind red ropes threaded through stanchions. I get near the ropes where the crowd is densest. Shuffle round, can't see Harry. Wipe the sweat from my hands; as a know-all at the side of me starts a running commentary about the figures. Look round for an emergency exit. None. My knees weak, my mouth dust dry, I hang on to the stanchions for support until the sheer weight of the crowd pushes me forward.

In front of the royal display hear the schoolgirls 'ooh-ing' and 'ah-ing' over the figures and the clothes. Harry's still jammed up with them, his fat face furious. No option but to go on, take it as slow as I can.

Try to think; they wouldn't have been able to pick me up this morning if they hadn't got Dolly and the money. They must have picked her up at the airport, it's a cinch she didn't get away; Tony's boys are a tough lot. Maybe she's dead now, as I will be soon if I don't get out of this. It's a cinch they didn't come gunning for me until they were certain I'd double-crossed Tony.

Edge round, the know-all still spouting information; if he were a bit nearer I'd stuff my fist in his mouth. Up to the Presidents of the glorious U.S.A., I should have been on my way there now, with Dolly and the money. There had been a leak somewhere, that's for sure. Maybe Dolly herself squealed, the bitch if she had. It's my own life I'm worried about now though; glance round, Harry's still behind me. Thank God for the schoolgirls. He wouldn't dare shoot, too loud a bang. A knife . . . is he good with a knife? Can't remember. The crowd thins out a bit, we've come to the end of the room. I panic.

Where now? Follow the rest of the crowd upstairs, I've got to keep that crowd between me and Harry; like needles I can feel his gimlet eyes boring into my back as I move with the rest of the people into the Tableaux Room.

My God! It's dark in here, sweat crystallizes like ice on my flesh. The dark will suit Harry, that's all he needs. Skirt round the outside of the crowd this time looking desperately for another exit. See daylight shine when a curtain is moved and make for it; slip through, and find myself in a green-painted corridor, there's a door at the end and I run for it. Pull frantically at the handle. Blast, it's locked. Too heavy to try smashing it, there's no way out here. Run back to the curtain, slowly ease my way through, back into the dark and the people. Shoulder my way to the front, up to the cord barrier. Breathless again. Eyes stinging

with tears and disappointment.

Dimly I hear a voice speaking. "Mary, Queen of Scots lived a long time ago. That's her kneeling at the block, about to be beheaded." My eyes clear a bit and I take in the tableaux, then I look round and see Harry, looking frustrated, a good bit behind me at the back of the crowd. Safe—for the moment.

I look at the kneeling figure of the Queen and feel my insides go warm and melt with pity for her, more pity for her—the long dead, than for Dolly the probably dead. I can't feel anything for her but impotent rage at being fool enough to get caught by Tony. Tony; one time friend and partner. Crooks—both of us—I don't deny that but I've never used a weapon in my life, my two hands were sufficient. Today I didn't have a chance, they had picked me up before I knew what was happening. The crowd moves, me with it.

Peering through a glass window this time at Louis XVI and his court, that's when I should have lived. I haven't looked for Harry since we were at the Mary Queen of Scots bit a few minutes ago. I calculate that if I can stick with the crowd I have a chance to get out of this. We move on. Out into the corridor again, down the stairs and on to the Hall of Kings.

Daylight here, still the blessed crowd of people, unknowingly my shield and protectors. Again right to the barrier at the front. I've remembered—Harry would use a knife all right, if he has it on him.

We start at William the Conqueror, 1066 and all that. Slowly we pass along, the heat intense here, the smells, pungent and sour-sweet, make me feel sick, the wax figures the only composed ones. Inside my silk shirt the sweat is running in rivulets down my chest. A sharp prod. I freeze. The sharp object grinds into my back—Harry's knife. I wait for the pain, all feeling concentrated on the spot low down on my back, then a woman's shrill voice says, "Sorry, dear; it's my umbrella, always bring it with me—in case." Relief makes me tremble, I can't reply as the air rushes out of my mouth in a hiss. Thought that was it. Compelled to make the break now, I couldn't stand another fright like that.

A quick look round and I spot Harry well behind me. I use my height and my muscle to get out of the Hall of Kings, running down the stairs fast; the last few strides I'm impeded by people. Dodge round them. The lawyer and another of the boys are in the Ground Hall, right near the main door, blocking my way out. Even if I should get past them it's a sure thing that Tony will be outside and get me. In seconds

I'm pushing my way through a door on the left at the foot of the stairs. What's here?

Into gloom—guns firing—bright flashes of light, noise, heat, sight and smell of smoke. A replica of a ship, full size, we're amidships in some long ago battleship at war. People are about, but the crowds are left behind. I duck down from the walkway on to the actual deck. The half-naked figures of sailors; caught forever in their battle positions along the life-size cannons—with the cannon belching fire—almost hide me. My ears deafened by the cannon fire, my eyes half blinded by the smoke, I crouch beside the sailors.

I only feel surprise when I see blood seeping from a wound in my chest. I sink lower on to the deck. I hadn't seen Harry and I didn't hear the gun. The shouted orders of the Captain issue from the loud-speaker. The cannon rumble and fire. Sprawled right out on the deck now, I can't run any more. Around me the battle goes on. Now I'm part of the Tableaux.

THE REBELLION

BARRIE HAMILTON-STAITE

Illustrated by Buster

Who would come and sit in a filthy, cramped shed to have his portrait painted? In any case he had no friends now . . .

HIS PERSONAL domain, the garden shed, was cool and dark with the door closed. The cobwebbed windows admitted only a scant light and rattled gently in the wind, which stirred the bushes and swirled the brown, brittle leaves from the gnarled apple tree across the lawn. His nostrils picked up his own, particular smell; stale pipe tobacco, linseed oil, paint, turpentine and the faint beery odour from the clustered, dusty bottles under the sack in the corner.

This was his world; this ramshackle wooden compartment, to which he'd been confined for too many years. The house was unfamiliar, chapel-like, sacred, with its smug, staring furniture and holy carpets. Even the toilet in the bathroom managed to remind him always of a porcelain font.

He took his foulest pipe from the rack nailed under the window, filled it slowly, enjoying the action, lit it, placed the pouch and matches into the pocket of his jacket, puffing out clouds of smoke thoughtfully and feeling the strange bulge the particles made, fingering them through the material with a minute thrill. How long was it since he'd put them in his pocket with the intention of letting them remain there when he went back into the house? How long? Years, long years, stretching right back into the hazy past, shifting, blurred memories tinged with regret.

Opening the shed door, craning round it briefly, he took a peep at his wife. She was there in the window, immobile, and for some strange, inexplicable reason he saw her, in a split instant, as she was when they first met each other, almost sixty years previously, a young girl of twenty, firm, beautiful, sought after, trim in body and soft of features, butter-coloured hair and laughing eyes. What had happened to her? Where had she disappeared to? Why?

Deep down, in a dusty drawer in his mind, tne contents of which

he'd always refused to disturb because of pride and jealousy, he knew the basic reason, the cause of their bitter, just-tolerating relationship, which had gone on and on through time. The love had all been one-sided, all on his side, and despite the fact that he'd been given little or no encouragement or sweetness it had endured for a considerable time. Until at last, not content with her prevailing coldness, she'd used his love, tolerance and concern, turned the situation to her own advantage and began to rule him; to decree what he was and was not to do, making rules and regulations for him to follow.

And all because she'd lost the one she really loved on the Somme in 1916. The magnificent Ronald, incapable of any wrong, symbol of all that was manly, pinnacle of courtesy, the answer to a woman's prayer.

They ought to have known. They ought to have realized, both of them, that it wouldn't work. For her there was the unfailing memory of the beloved Ronald, her angel, whose yellowing, moustached, uniformed, photograph smiled and waited patiently in the perfumed darkness of an upstairs drawer. For him, as her husband, a long period of unrewarding love, of eternal comparison with the unblemished virtues of the man in that photograph, a man who had not been tested in marriage or time of stress, in long, close contact, in unglamorous life. A man who retained his initial golden image, wrought in respectful courtship, by never coming back to appear otherwise.

Maybe he could have forgiven her constant memory of the saint-like Ronald, maybe he would have been content to play loving second fiddle all his life, if only there had been *something*, some spark, even platonic warmth or mere companionship in return, some small reward for his devotion at the outset. But there was nothing, less than nothing, considering her attitude towards him, which developed, slowly but surely, and got worse, and finally evolved itself into a way of life, an unpleasant routine.

The rules were established one by one and became laws, definite and unbreakable. No pipe-smoking in the house, not even any tobacco to be *kept* in the house. No coming into the house with gardening boots on. No shoes or boots to be worn upstairs. No drink in the house, in fact no drink at all. No pets, no children, no friends, no sun in the parlour, no flowers to drop their moist petals on the polished surfaces; a place for everything and everything in its place.

Even when he took up painting, desperately seeking an acceptable outlet, developing a harmless, natural talent, it must not be done in

the house, not with smelly, sticky, potentially mark-making materials, paints and oil. Such things should all be done in the garden shed, out of sight, away from the house, furniture and carpets.

So, he kept his tobacco in the shed, and smoked his pipe in there, and drank the forbidden, secret bottles of brown ale, painted in there, and took refuge, with his amateur though promising paintings, done on cheap canvas. Thus he lost himself in the landscapes he imagined, with the high, rolling hills, where he walked with the wind in his face; cool dark woods; lush meadows with young, slender girls picking flowers; wandering cows and fleecy sheep, all peaceful, happy scenes, reflecting his own hopeless desire for happiness and contentment. Since retiring he'd spent his days in the shed or the garden, staying in the house only when necessary, because of darkness or rain, or for eating and sleeping.

Among the paintings were a few portraits of imaginary people, people with flat, too-regular features, faces lacking character, unreal. He'd never been able to get anyone to sit for him. Who would come and sit in a filthy, cramped shed for the time it took to do a portrait? There was no one he could ask in any case; he had no friends, no cronies down at the local pub like other old men, or down on the benches near the park. Once, just once, he'd asked her to pose for him, but she refused of course, scorned the very idea, told him he was wasting his time, told him there were far more useful things he could be doing about the house. What about the loose tile on the roof? When was he going to get the kitchen window fixed? What about the paint on the porch, if he wanted to paint? Wasn't it time the lawn was cut again?

He finished his pipe, tapped it empty on the bench and placed it in his pocket with the tobacco and matches. The thinking was over, the decision was made, the rebellion was due. It was time to begin, he told himself, time to begin living, time to break the laws and scrap the rules. From now on it would all be different, strange and free. Everything must be brought into reverse, one by one the regulations broken. This would be a day to remember, and apart from the rebellion, a day on which he would paint something that would never let him forget. Where was the new canvas, bought from the art shop only a week ago? He wouldn't use it now for copying the painting of the Paris Horse Fair from the illustration in an encyclopaedia as he'd planned; that could be done later, at his leisure.

Picking it up from the corner he put it under his arm, opened the

door and stepped out into the windswept garden. She didn't move in the window as he clumped up the path, in full view, towards the house in his clay-caked boots, advancing defiantly, a faint smile of triumph on his face, eyes staring purposefully ahead, grey hair blown about his head like some old prophet with huge canvas bible.

In the kitchen he watched with pleasure his footprints in mud on the tiles, following methodically as he moved, across the mat to the table where he placed the canvas and rummaged in his pocket for his pipe. With an inner thrill he lit it, puffing out huge clouds of unlawful smoke, watching it swirl and plunge merrily about.

Then, in and out, back and fore, hurrying, eager, carrying easel, paints, oils, turps and brushes, and the final two, unopened bottles of brown ale which seemed to squat comfortably and leer knowingly when he set them on the window sill. No more old, chipped, cheap glass to drink it out of, but one of the best thin tumblers from the sideboard in the dining-room.

As he poured the rich dark liquid and drank it slowly, appreciating the seemingly nuttier, smoother, sweeter taste, he heard the brittle, querulous voice from the living-room and argued with it angrily, viciously spitting out the words between sips:

"Mind that floor now, Henry!"

"To hell with the floor!"

"What are you doing? What's the smell?"

"It's tobacco! *Tobacco!* And mind you own, damn business!"

"We need more coal for the fire!"

"Get it yourself . . . *if* you can. . . ."

"Have you drawn the blinds in the parlour?"

"No! The light's flooding in there and fading everything!"

She said nothing from her seat by the window, and didn't turn as he entered the room, just stared diagonally out into the garden, leaning back on the cushions that he had propped her up with, her mouth slightly open, as if too bewildered, too shocked.

He strode over, stood before her, stern, with legs apart like a squire before his own hearth, and laid down the law in no uncertain manner. How, from now on he was going to smoke in the house, drink in the house, go down to the pub once in a while, paint in the parlour where the light was good, and do all the things he previously couldn't do, but wanted to do. Then, slowly and methodically, he set up his easel close to her and placed his sketch book and pencil ready on the window sill,

pulling back the curtains to obtain maximum light for his work.

"And I'm going to paint you, Rose," he threatened softly but firmly. "Whether you like it or not. You're going to sit there and pose for me till I'm finished. Soon, I'll begin the preliminary sketch, but first there's something I must do upstairs. You stay there now."

In her bedroom he prised open the drawer on the left of the dressing-table with a screwdriver, never having been able to find out where she hid the key after she caught him poking about in there one afternoon years before.

Inside, was all that remained of the gallant, shining Ronald. A pile of flimsy, faded letters, torn at the folds, tied together with tattered ribbon, pages covered with small handwriting, brown with age. Some picture post-cards from France, dated 1916; wheel-barrows full of flowers, happy-looking young men in khaki, sitting in mud, reading letters, another two figures dreaming whilst shells burst overhead, with visions of beautiful, impossibly beautiful young women floating in clouds over the parapet of the trench and smiling down fondly. A regimental cap-badge green with verdigris, a prayer book containing pressed, mummified, once-wild flowers, and the grinding photograph of him in uniform, mocking, smirking in posthumous triumph.

Savagely he tore the photograph into small, irregular pieces and flung them out of the window where the wind caught them, mingled them with the flurrying autumn leaves, scattered them like ashes of the dead, dispersing them for ever. One by one, and with difficulty, he read the love letters of long ago, eyes dull with a weary kind of hate, sneering at tender phrases, sentiments and sentences in them, muttering to himself and flinging them into a disorderly pile for burning later. Then, taking his watch from his pocket and noting the time, he hurried downstairs.

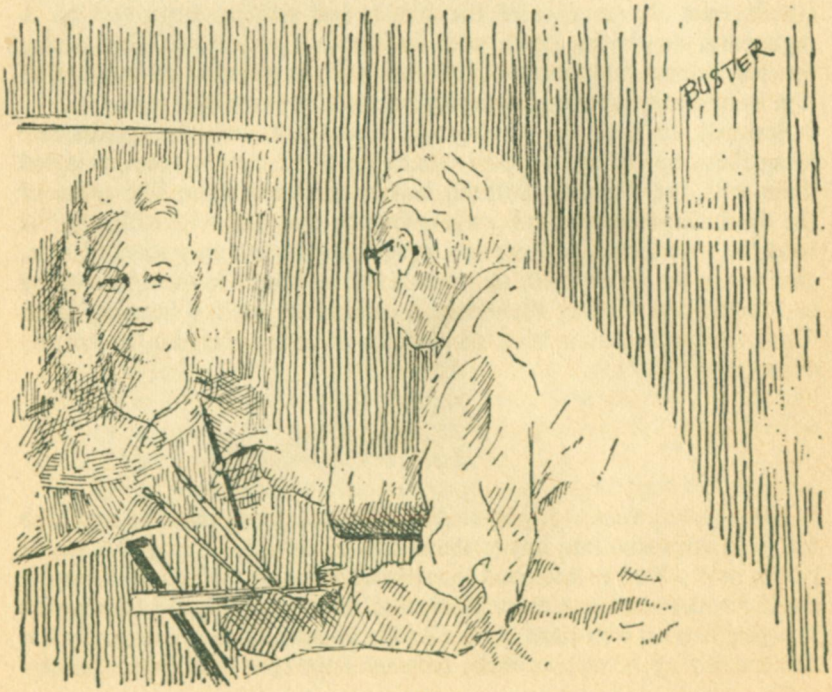
* * *

Hours later, after working solidly all evening and into the night, he felt he'd captured her image there on the canvas. During the whole sitting he'd talked to her, tried to explain things, sort things out, sternly, angrily at first, but then more gently and sincerely, sadly, his own words bringing first an iron-hard lump into his throat and then eventually hot tears, coursing down his cheeks between huge sobs of hopeless misery.

As a muffled, far-off church clock chimed midnight, twelve equal strokes, slow, like some distant funeral bell, he became suddenly weary and unbelievably lonely. He could hear the silence in the house and feel its coldness all around him. So he turned away from the portrait he'd painted—of a young girl with soft features, butter-coloured hair and laughing eyes—and left the room, pausing at the door to switch off the light and look back at the faint silhouette in the chair by the window.

She seemed to be sleeping peacefully from that angle, still, content, absent in some perpetual, happy dream. Perhaps she walked with Ronald, hand in hand, laughing, nodding and remembering, through green fields of everlasting flowers, united forever in a place where time meant nothing, in eternity.

He sighed and shut the door. She would be quite safe there, until the morning, when the doctor and the undertaker would have to be told.



SUZETTE

KATHLEEN GRANT

The small pale face was a mask of grief—I longed to ask what was wrong.

AN INCREDIBLE thing happened to me this morning. I do not attempt to offer any explanation.

All I can do is record the facts and leave the interpretation—if there is one—to others perhaps more qualified to account for them. I am just an ordinary housewife, not given to flights of fancy, and reason tells me that I must have been mistaken.

If you know Jersey at all, you are almost certain to know La Maison Vautier, that elegant *salon-de-coiffure* on the right-hand side going up Prince Street in St. Helier. Everywhere in the Island the French influence lingers, in the names of roads and districts and on the nameboards above the shops in town. But nowhere is this French atmosphere more in evidence than at Madame Vautier's establishment. The marble-tiled floors, the purple draperies, the subdued lighting, the hint of soft music in the background—these combine to produce an effect that is somehow irresistibly Parisian. All the assistants, too, are French, hand-picked in Paris by Madame herself.

Suzette was my favourite and it was understood that I should always have my hair done by her and no-one else. She knew exactly what I wanted and, quite apart from her skill as a *coiffeuse*, there had grown between us, over the past year or two, a kind of bond. Indeed, I looked forward to our weekly sessions, when we talked in a mixture of Suzette's halting English and my somewhat sketchy French.

She was a slip of a girl with a pale oval face framed by hair as black and shining as a raven's wing, and a figure that would have been a couturier's dream as a model, but for one small flaw. Polio in childhood had left her with a slight but noticeable limp and it always struck me as unfair that such perfection should have been marred.

During the last month I had noticed a subtle change in Suzette. She seemed more beautiful than ever and there was a new brightness in the serious grey eyes. He was a lieutenant, she told me, in the French Navy,

stationed somewhere down south, Toulon, I think, or Toulouse.

Madame Vautier, I gathered, was not at all happy about it. She, too, had met the lieutenant in Paris, at Suzette's arrangement, and she did not approve.

"He is too handsome, that one," she confided to me. "Oh yes . . . *très suave*, but . . ."—the broad shoulders were shrugged—"there is something . . . I do not know what. I do not trust him. But that Suzette—*poof!*—she is young and she is in love. What can one do?"

What, indeed? For a girl like Suzette, being in love would be a matter of body and soul.

I had been across in London on a week's visit and only got back to Jersey by the late plane yesterday evening. My appointment at La Maison Vautier was for eleven o'clock this morning and I had arranged it with Suzette before going away.

"Suzette," I had said, "next Thursday I want my hair to be quite perfect. I am relying on you to do your best with it."

The grey eyes twinkled. "It is an occasion, no?" she suggested.

"Yes, it is," I replied. "A special occasion. Our silver wedding anniversary. My husband and I will be out singing and dancing. You know what silver wedding means?"

She nodded, smiling. "*Ah, oui*, Madame. Twenty-five years you are married. It is a long time, is it not?" For a moment, she looked serious, contemplating this infinity. "Have no fear. I shall be here to attend you."

Exactly on the hour I walked into the salon. The girl who was normally at the reception desk was not in her seat but I knew my way around well and went straight through into the corridor where the private cubicles were.

Suzette always dealt with me in cubicle number nine, the end one. I parted the curtains and went in and sat down. I knew she would not be long—one was never kept waiting at Madame Vautier's—but I picked up a periodical and thumbed through the pages.

The shaded light over my head threw the back of the cubicle into shadow and, glancing up at the mirror in front of me, I was suddenly aware that Suzette was standing behind my chair. I had not heard her come in. She made no reply to my greeting but, in the shadowy picture reflected in the mirror, I saw her shake her head as though to indicate that she did not wish to talk.

The familiar routine was gone through. Back wash. Setting lotion.

The skilful setting of the hair. The period under the drier. The final brush-out. All this without a word being exchanged. When it was finished I rose and looked into the mirror. The effect was as perfect as I could have wished. I turned to thank her but she was no longer there. She had only just left the cubicle, for the curtains were still moving.

Puzzled and depressed, I put a half-crown on the edge of the basin, picked up my bag and scarf and went along the corridor to the reception desk. Madame herself was now seated there and, as I placed a pound note on the glass shelf, she looked up and saw me. Normally she was a cheerful, ample person, smiling and friendly. But this morning there was no smile.

"Is it not sad?" she asked. "*Ah, la pauvre petite Suzette.* That *this* should have come to her. *Men!* . . ."—she spat out the word—"they are despicable, are they not?"

So that was it. I might have guessed.

"Madame," I said. "I have been away. Tell me. What happened?"

Her voice was hard and angry. "Yesterday morning a letter came for her. From him. From that *canaille*. It tells her he has married. To some woman in Marseilles. When she read it, she—how you say in English? —she fainted. She fell on the floor here." With a shaking finger Madame pointed down at my feet.

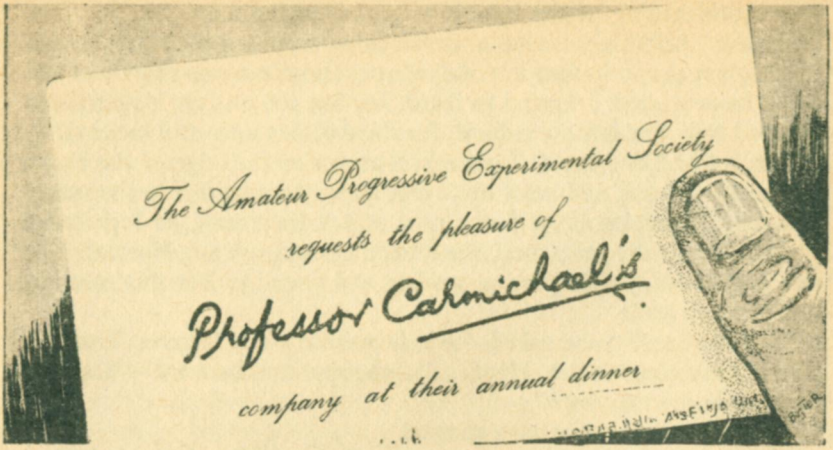
"Oh!" I cried, "poor little Suzette! If only I had known, I would never have troubled her today. When she was doing my hair just now she looked so sad and miserable. She didn't speak to me at all. And another thing. Her fingers were as cold as ice. She must be really ill. Surely she should not be working?"

"What is this you are saying?" she faltered. "Suzette . . . you say she attend you in there in the cubicle? *Suzette?* Name of God!"

She came round the desk and gripped my arm. Her voice was trembling and she glanced fearfully over her shoulder at the corridor.

"You have not heard, then?" she whispered. "Suzette . . . she . . . *Last night . . . they found her . . . in the harbour. Drowned!*"

In the stunned silence that followed we heard crossing the marble floor the sound of light footsteps. Uneven footsteps. Someone—something—passed close to us, a presence cold and intangible that made us shiver as it went by. Before our startled eyes the glass door of the salon opened, by no visible agency, and what had been Suzette limped out into the sunlit street.



A STRAWBERRY SURPRISE

BERYL WHITAKER

Illustrated by Buster

WHEN THE Professor was invited to join the A.P.E.S. he did not know whether to be flattered, indignant, or merely amused. The Apes! He smiled wryly. These youngsters found the designation humorous, no doubt. To him, at the ripe age of seventy-one, the jest savoured of an ill-placed levity. Yet the list of membership was not undistinguished. He re-read the letter, his prominent, faded blue eyes watering with effort as they bulged behind the pince-nez that he affected.

The Amateur Progressive Experimental Society, he murmured: and he munched his lip petulantly, not liking the taste of that word "amateur". What the devil did they mean by it?

"The Amateur Progressive Experimental Society requests the pleasure of Professor Carmichael's company at their annual dinner. It is hoped that the ensuing exposition of the society's intentions may incline Professor Carmichael to become a member, since it is felt that his knowledge and experience would constitute a valuable asset, etc., etc. . . ."

High-flown language, to be sure. He scanned once more the list of

associates, his head nodding jerkily as he registered each name in turn. Yes, an eminent nucleus. Each man from Antrobus to Zinoviev was known to him by repute as being brilliant in his particular line. Here were specialists in every field: physicians who dealt with all branches of medicine and surgery; technical exponents of heat, light, sound and electricity; and various experts in less well-defined categories.

Yet although the membership was thoroughly representative it was not large. Twenty? Twenty-five? He tapped his gold pen abstractedly upon the single sheet of typescript—an old man's gesture—mentally chasing an observation that eluded him. Then he had it. They were all *so* young. To his sure knowledge no member of the A.P.E.S. could claim to much over forty years. Some of the names, indeed, were associated in his mind with a long-standing sense of shock that so green a man could have achieved so much.

"Why, they're all puppies," he muttered. "Amateur experimentalism! Just what one might expect. A lot of reactionaries. What on earth do they want me for?"

The more he mulled the matter over the less he understood what had prompted the invitation, the flattering terms of which, though they gratified his vanity, did not deceive him. It was true that he possessed the knowledge and experience that had been remarked upon; but unless he was greatly mistaken it was not of a calibre likely to impress these particular young men. Cocksure, irreverent scoffers, the lot of them. One or two, he recalled, had even been students of his. There was Nicholas, for instance, who though gifted had been a positive pest. Had he not subsequently been involved in a major scandal? Drugs, was it? He thought not. Nothing so commonplace. Come to think of it, Nicholas was not the only name in the membership with which he associated obscurely some form of delinquency. He sighed. That sort of thing was called "enterprise" or "openmindedness" these days. Magistrates were not what they had been.

He decided to refuse the invitation. Should he couch his reply in facetious terms? The "Professor" declines to join the "Amateurs"? No. Cheap. A courteous "thank you, but no!" was more fitting. Resolved, he brushed aside the letter in order to clear his desk for action. As he did so a second sheet of paper slid out from under the first, a note written in long-hand.

"Dear Professor Carmichael,

I do not count on your remembering me from your lectures, but

perhaps you do. Please come, or the whole point of the evening will be lost. The dinner takes place at my house, and will be quite informal. In the hope of tempting you I enclose a copy of the menu.

Yours very sincerely,

Roger Nicholas."

He grinned. What an unconventional fellow! But he must have done well for himeslf, not every private house had dining space for over twenty persons. Then he recalled that young Nichoas had been the grandson of Viscount Impy. Perhaps, he mused, not without a sense of moral relaxation, that accounted for the boy's eccentricity. The Professor dearly loved a lord.

In the end it was a trifling detail that turned the scales. He had read the menu through with some degre of alertness, for he was fond of his food. It seemed to him a capital meal for a mid-July evening. "*Cold consommé. Smoked salmon. Oiseaux sans têtes*"—this, as he remembered, a subtle casserole of veal—and finally "*fraises surprises*". Strawberry surprise! Strawberries were a great favourite with the Professor. Without more ado he penned his acceptance, and went to his lunch in an excellent humour.

Seven o'clock on the evening of the dinner found him in fine spirits, and full of appetite. He chartered a taxi, and arrived at his destination, an imposing house situated in mid-Belgravia, whistling a little tune. The tune, though he was not aware of it, was "Strawberry Fair". He noted a "To Let" board outside the railings. Perhaps young Nicholas was having difficulty in making ends meet. Very likely he had staff problems, too.

The next hour confirmed this theory. No staff was in evidence. Nicholas himself admitted him through the front door, and led him into the drawing-room; from whence, after twenty minutes of sherry and introductions, the society trooped through into a large, lofty dining-room. Here the places were already laid with the consommé, and in front of each serving lay a further plate containing smoked salmon.

The wine was circulated by the guests themselves, from bottles already laid up along the centre of the big refectory table, interspersed with salvers of thinly cut brown bread and butter. Professor Carmichael waited cynically to see how the only hot item on the menu would be served. When it came it was as he had suspected, a vast tureen doled out cheerfully by his host: possibly he had even prepared it himself. It was clear that no staff existed.

The *oiseaux sans têtes* were good. The Professor wiped his lips on his linen napkin, and looked round appraisingly. He saw, as he had previously seen in the drawing-room, that there were numerous faces here which were known to him. Surely most of them had been students of his? He couldn't really tell, a lecturer sees little of his audience; and he had no interest in young people, whatever their talents they all seemed brash and distasteful.

"Puppies!" he pronounced again. "A.P.E.S.? A good dinner, but I might as well join the Kennel Club." Indeed, surveying his fellows he glimpsed a terrier-like quality about the entire gathering. Their eyes were uniformly fixed on him, feverish, excited, searching.

"This old rat is a match for you, my lads," he thought. And his eyes, brightened by the satiety of his belly, wandered to and fro in quest of the final treat. But of course the strawberry surprise would be in a refrigerator, waiting for young Nick to lift it out and serve it, once more without the help of staff. Quiescent, he allowed his glass to be filled again.

Nicholas, he now noted, was on his feet. A gradual hush fell upon the assembly. Evidently the sweet was to be delayed while the guests might avail themselves of the excellent and unlimited Chablis provided, and while a short address was given.

Carmichael paid little attention to the paper, a ten-minute affair that dealt with a subject of small interest to him. This was the problematic separation of mind from matter, the point urged being that mankind found it difficult to divorce his altruistic self from the needs dictated by the flesh: the inference being that ethics were conditioned by the subconscious pull of the survival need. There was no such thing as a pure mind, nor could there be while the body still dragged at the thought process. He paid small heed, though he was flatteringly aware that the young terriers all watched him. He saw them as naive little Jack Russells, all cock-eared, flash-eyed, bare-toothed.

When it was over, and the prepared dishes of "*fraises surprises*" were being set in front of each guest by young Nick, a neighbour whom he dimly recalled as having attended his lectures—and having been a subversive influence in the class to boot—asked him whether he had found any new material in the discourse. The Professor shook his head whimsically.

"At my age," he intoned, "one rarely relishes food for thought. One is, as it were, sated."

The young man pranced a doggy eye at him, appraising, critical, merciless. Sensing the lack of communication Carmichael returned to his plate, heaping a spoonful of icecream to his somewhat saurian mouth. This was very enjoyable, despite the fatuous company.

"You mean," the young man urged, with all the sledgehammer bluntness of his years, "that at your age there is a failure of desire to progress?"

"Not exactly," said the Professor, munching his first delicious mouthful of strawberries. "Not exactly. Rather one rests on one's laurels."

"Lord!" the young man breathed devoutly. "I hope I never get like that. I don't figure I know much, and to me—I mean—well—any branch of knowledge, anything I can learn—it's like——" he paused, inarticulate.

"Like giving a donkey strawberries?" the Professor suggested cruelly. Thus strawberries were to become his ultimate memory. He took another spoonful, and knew no more.

His return to consciousness was gradual, as though he had taken a strong sleeping-draught. He felt no discomfort, and when he was fully himself his mind seemed hearteningly lucid. But his physical powers were entirely nullified; he could hear nothing, see nothing, feel nothing. The impulse to raise his eyelids resulted in a complete lack of correlation.

"By God!" he thought. "I've had a stroke." This, he assured himself, was the explanation of his predicament. His age, a hot evening, a heavy dinner, much wine, all had combined to put him—wherever he was.

Only where was he? No doubt in some hospital. He listened avidly, but heard nothing; and again the effort to open his eyes failed. He had not even an awareness of his own heartbeats. Total paralysis, he diagnosed gloomily. But to judge from the clarity of his brain this would be merely temporary. To test himself he mentally recited "Gray's Elegy'" throughout, and found his performance flawless.

"I shall be all right," he reflected. "I must be patient."

However, the Professor's patience was to be sorely tried. He had no means of measuring time, could not tell what days or weeks might be passing while he lingered in this curious limbo. He did not seem to sleep. He worried about this, and he worried about his body. Was he being fed? Presumably, since memory remained keen and reasoning undiminished. It was all a matter of waiting, of not losing one's head.

So he continued to rely on his self-control, and spent his time in making fresh mental tests, all of which appeared eminently satisfactory in outcome.

Then one day he began to hear. This sense came to him with a strange abruptness as if a lead had been plugged in. Suddenly there were voices and bustle. He heard a man say, "Watch the electro-encephalograph. It works. He's registering." And someone else chipped in: "You be careful what you say. If he twigs he'll go into shock, and we shall lose him."

The Professor pondered these words without comprehension, finally concluding that they must apply to some other patient. In any case he soon dismissed the matter, being eager to avail himself of his newly restored faculty. But although he listened keenly he heard only the sound of persons moving to and fro: no more voices. His sensation of relief was enormous. He would have liked now to sleep, but it seemed that this was something he could no longer do. Once more he would have to be patient.

During the period that followed the Professor noted that his hearing was not only unimpaired but actually improved. A cause for concern, though, was that it would occasionally cut out, returning him to his former state of mummified existence. The first time this had happened he had been horrified. However, since he found that these lapses were temporary he became reassured. The long rest, he felt, could do nothing but good. With an emotion of near-jubilation he waited for his other senses to return to him.

From thence onward the Professor sailed his timeless ocean, unhampered by physical malaise, summmoning his reserves of philosophy. Waiting. And at last, after the passage of what seasons he could not tell, his patience was rewarded. He saw.

His sight, as with his hearing, returned to him instantaneously, as though switched on. If his heart leapt, he did not feel it, he was not even aware of having opened his eyes. But, marvellously, as if a shutter had been lifted, there were all at once light, colour, shape. Although what he saw—a white ceiling, an arc-lamp, and a long, empty space to a wall covered with charts—was uninspiring, he feasted his gaze upon it. After a while he endeavoured to beam his sight from side to side, but this he was unable to do. He did not care. It was enough.

For some time the Professor was content, although his vision, like his hearing, was subject to periodic inexplicable dislocation—as though

some unseen hand had disconnected it. He noticed that his two newly orientated senses were at all events vastly improved in quality. Then gradually he became prey to a growing mental restlessness. The trouble was that sight and sound informed him of nothing. He still had no idea where he was, no idea how long he might remain there.

He was further agitated by the fact that the place he was in did not seem like a hospital. If it were, he was certainly in a private room. There were none of the usual noises one might expect in a ward. Nor, apparently, were there any nurses, or at any rate none crossed the field of his focus. For that matter nor did anyone else. It was unnatural, savouring almost of conspiracy. Who fed him, and how? Who made his bed? Why did the tail-end of his vision never catch so much as a glimpse of movement? Yet behind him there was certainly a rustle of action, a subdued murmuring, sometimes even laughter. Once he was sure he heard young Nick's voice. A visitor at last? He waited eagerly for the sight of him to materialize. But it never did. Odd. Was there something special about his case?

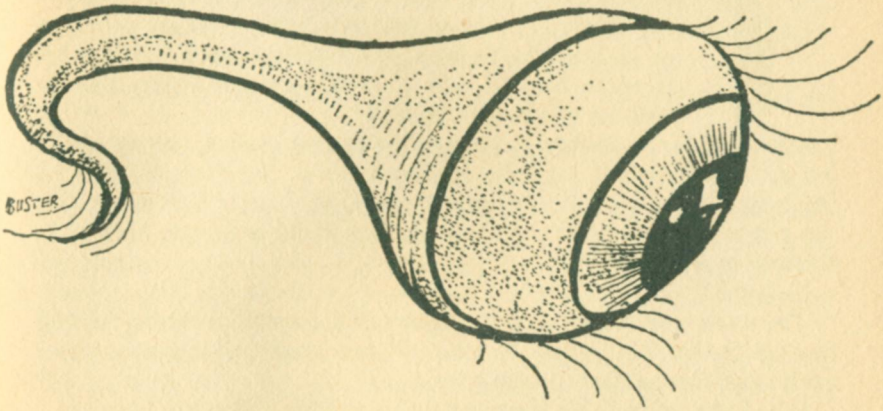
At length fear seized the Professor. The questions that his defence mechanisms had kept neatly hived for so long now ranged to swarm and sting. Where was he? Why were all the people who surrounded him so careful to keep out of his sight-range? How was he being maintained in health while he was unaware of receiving any physical attention whatever?

Convinced now that he lay cradled in the heart of some terrible secret, the Professor became infused with one burning, all-pervading desire—the desire to see himself. But he could see nothing save the far-off wall with its notice-board, every detail of which was indelibly etched on his retina. He knew the size and shape of each chart pinned there, and the variations of every chart. He knew how many drawing-pins held each chart in place, and how they were spaced. But since the wall-board was the only thing he could see he studied every millimetre of it with a half-demented concentration, as though from thence his aid must ultimately issue. And at last a miracle happened. From the flat chromium head of one of the pins came a tiny flutter of movement.

The Professor's eye froze, fixed inexorably upon this minute mirror that had caught the reflection of those cautious machinations that went on in his own background, so carefully concealed from him. All his will concentrated in one vast, straining effort to decipher the infinitesmal picture, in whose foreground his own image must lie. But it

was too small, too small . . . Despairing, sleepless, tireless, he stared on, through what aeons he could not tell.

When the end came it was sudden and prosaic, heralded by the sharp crack of an exploding bulb somewhere above him, and the simultaneous diminution of surrounding illumination. Behind him he heard a muffled exclamation of annoyance. He waited, incredulous, bursting with crazy exaltation, as they wheeled him forward until he came to rest under the second arc-light, until the pin, the hypnotic circle that contained his whole life, steadied into focus a bare couple of feet away.



Then he saw at last the wall behind him, a jungle of graphs. He saw the lined-up machinery, and the intent young men in their white overalls. He saw his own eye, a round lens on a sort of stalk, like the eye of a snail. He saw a human brain under a glass dome, and the tangle of leads that splayed out from it. And below the dome—nothing.

A gigantic indignation swelled in him. All his instincts fused into a frantic urge to give vent to one almighty roar of overwhelming rage. The young men were at the encephalograph now, pointing, chattering frenziedly. Still the complusion of his protest mounted, as he mentally stamped his non-existent feet. It could not last. He sensed rather than felt the rupture that finally disintegrated him, a seizure that was, the young men were interested to note, the result of pure emotion. . . .

Meanwhile the eye dimmed, the echoes faded, and at last Professor Carmichael slept.

THE RELIC

SYDNEY J. BOUNDS

Illustrated by Carolyn Dinan

He held out the misshapen lumpy thing for inspection—Chan's nostrils wrinkled in distaste.

THE GIRL'S high heels clacked through the silence of the empty street. Pale light filtered down, revealing apprehension in her face as she looked back over her shoulder. A high unbroken wall of crumbling brick blocked her freedom on one side; a certain tenseness gave her the manner of a hunted animal.

Ahead of her, a shadow fell across the uneven paving, cutting across her path, a long and jaggedly sinister shadow. She stopped, pressed back against the wall, her breathing noisy. Her hands flew up to hide the terror in her face as the shadow crept steadily nearer. Her body strained in anticipation . . .

"Lights! "

The scene was immediately transformed as powerful studio lighting flooded the set, destroying the atmosphere and silhouetting a tangle of cables and the huddled camera crew.

Julie Lake relaxed, blinking as she groped for a cigarette.

Chan Carlos, no longer a threatening shadow, flicked his lighter and held it out to her.

Max Gribble, holding a bulky script, said: "Get some fog into this scene. I want it swirling round her as Chan comes up. Wardrobe, take vee of Julie's neckline lower. Props . . . where the hell's Props? . . . we can start shooting as soon as Chan's fitted with his hump."

A neat grey man stepped forward, holding a bulky object reverently in his hands. "Here, Mr. Gribble. I didn't like to interrupt while you were rehearsing. I've got it, as I told you—the real one, I mean. The relic."

Chan, veteran actor of a score of vampire-werewolf films, didn't recognise the man; then remembered their property-man was in hospital following an accident. He glanced distastefully at the hump and said: "What's this about a relic?"

The grey man—he wore a grey suit that somehow seemed to neutra-

lise his face—answered smoothly: "I was telling Mr. Gribble earlier, I managed to track down the original hump, the one *he* used."

Chan stared blankly. "But he was a hunchback—anyway, he was lost in the fire."

"No, Mr. Carlos," the grey man corrected. "No, I'm afraid that's another popular myth. He used a hump to disguise himself, and to frighten people, of course. It's strange how frightening a hunchback can be, just because his back's crooked . . . but the Hunchback of Hammerhill wore this . . ."

He held out the misshapen lumpy thing for inspection. Chan's nostrils wrinkled in distaste. Whatever it was, it was old and evil-smelling. He touched it, and his hand recoiled from something—clammy.

"I don't see why props can't make a new one—this isn't a low-budget job."

"But this is the real hump," the grey man wailed. "I went to a lot of trouble to locate it."

Gribble, the director, laughed cynically. "I just bet it's the real one! Still, that'll make good publicity—go over big. Chan Carlos wearing the genuine hump used by the madman. Yeah, that'll pack 'em in."

Julie Lake smiled warmly at Chan. "I'd be ever so much more frightened of you, just knowing it was the real hump."

He surrendered. A starlet with no acting ability, but how she turned him on. And at my age, he thought, infatuated by a pair of thighs . . .

"All right, Julie, to please you."

"That's settled then," Gribble said.

Chan followed the grey man back to the dressing-room, past looming stage sets. "What's your name?" he asked. "How did you get hold of this thing?"

"Wyles, Mr. Carlos, that's me. And I heard of it through a friend of a friend—you know how it is in this business."

Wyles closed the dressing-room door. "You'll have to remove your shirt, Mr. Carlos. It fits to the shoulder muscles by a sort of harness. You'll see, everyone will think you're a genuine hunchback."

Chan viewed the relic with increasing distaste as he stripped to the waist. He turned, facing a litter of grease-paints on the dressing-room table, suffered having the clammy thing fitted to him. Clammy? He seemed to have got his sensations mixed. Now it felt warm, seemed to pulse. He began to wriggle . . .

"Steady, Mr. Chandos," Wyles murmered. "Give it a moment."

Chan stared into the dressing-table mirror, turning to get a clearer view. There was no doubt that it moulded itself to his back, with no sign of a harness; it just appeared to cling there, of its own volition. He felt the oddest sensation, as though it were adjusting itself to his own personal contours.

A few minutes later, as he dressed, he was hardly conscious of the thing—it seemed relatively weightless. It became a part of him as he thought himself into his role, the Hunchback, murderer and maniac . . . he took a few shuffling steps.

"Perfect," Wyles said, with something almost like enthusiasm. "You're just right for it, Mr. Carlos. It fits you like a glove."

Chandos went out on the set.

Gribble nodded to him. "All right, everybody, let's see how it goes. Take One. Lights. Camera."

It went well for Chan Carlos. Rarely had he got the feel of a new part so swiftly, so surely.

As Gribble called: "Cut!" Julie looked strangely at him.

The director was enthusiastic. "The best thing I've seen you do, Chan. Keep this up, and we've got the greatest box office since Dracula."

Chan was pleased. But, back in his dressing-room at the end of the first day's shooting, he felt uneasy as his hump was removed. He felt uncomfortable without it, as if he'd lost part of himself.

He drove to his flat, ate a light snack and poured himself a drink. He sat in an armchair to read through the old newspapers he'd collected from the time of the horror . . .

THE HUNCHBACK OF HAMMERHILL

Monster destroyed

"The biggest manhunt since Jack the Ripper ended tonight. Since the shocking murders of five young girls in our city streets, police cordons have nightly sealed off the area in which the Hunchback operates. And tonight the madman was trapped—trapped and utterly destroyed in a mysterious fire that broke out in the warehouse in which he sought refuge.

"Our streets are safe once again. Never more will a young girl feel terror as the Hunchback's shadow crosses her path. Never again will come the terrible discovery of a half-eaten corpse, where the maniac fed on human flesh till he was disturbed . . ."

Chan Carlos undressed and went to bed. His back itched and he twisted to look in a mirror; he saw a row of tiny red dots. He spent a restless night, dozing fitfully to be woken by nightmares.

By morning, back in the studio with his hump fitted, he felt better.

The first scene went well, with no need for a re-take, and Gribble was pleased as they broke for coffee.

Chan looked for Julie—for some reason she seemed to be avoiding him—and found her talking to Gribble. Her manner was unusually earnest.

"Max, he's too damned real in this part. He scares the pants off me."

Gribble grinned. "Good! This is a horror film, and I want you scared, Julie—really scared, not just acting. You keep in mind the hump Chan is wearing is the real McCoy, keep that right in front of your tiny little mind."

Julie shuddered as she turned away.

"All right, let's get on with it. Positions, everybody."

Chan, his feeling for the role developing uncannily, gave the best performance he'd ever given. He sensed this strongly, and Gribble confirmed his feeling. Julie's shocked white face merely added confirmation.

Chan began to wonder if it were really the hump the Hunchback had worn, and if it could be affecting him in some way.

After a few day's shooting, he refused to have the hump removed as they went off-set. Instead, he wore it home. He felt more comfortable somehow; the hump had really become part of him.

Gribble nodded casually when he mentioned it. "Anything you say, Chan. You're going strong, and we don't want to risk spoiling your feel for the part."

He wore the hump to bed, slept with it. He felt calm, the itching stopped and his tormenting dreams vanished. He was making an impression with this film, he knew; he hoped, eventually, to make an impression on Julie . . .

The following day, between shooting scenes, he looked for her. She was beside the coffee trolley. As he moved towards her, his shadow fell ahead of him, across Julie. She swung round as if stung,—screamed and dropped her cup.

Gribble, alarmed, said: "What the hell?" as Julie, white-faced, clung to him, trembling.

"Max, I can't take any more of this. Keep him away from me. He's not Chan any longer, he's not acting—he *is* the Hunchback!"

Laughing, Gribble detached her hands. His voice was cool. "Fine, that's just how I want it to be. You're giving out now, Julie. Really feeling the part, live on your nerves, that's the secret—we'll make an actress of you yet." He paused. "And I don't care what he does to you, understand? Just so long as my film's a good one."

By the end of the next take, she was close to a breakdown.

Satisfied, Gribble dry-washed his hands. "I've never known a picture go like this. No re-takes. Every shot perfect. Hell, we'll be finished ahead of schedule at this rate."

The camera crew sauntered away. The lights were switched off. Chan's eyes followed Julie back to the dressing rooms . . .

Julie Lake was late leaving. Her hands had seemed all thumbs as she changed. As she came out of the dressing room, she saw the darkened lot straight ahead, and shivered. She was alone as she turned abruptly into the passage leading to the exit.

The passage was narrow, dimly-lit, shadowy. Her high heels clacked through the silence, echoing the scene she'd played so recently. Ahead of her, one of the shadows appeared to move.

She tried to calm the pounding of her heart. Nerves, she told herself, just nerves . . . there's nothing there. But she moved slower as the shadow lengthened.

My God, what a girl will do for money . . . She'd never take a part in a horror film again, never . . .

Then she knew, with ice-cold certainty, that the shadow was real, that it was the shadow of the Hunchback, and fear paralysed her.

She couldn't run. Her legs trembled as she pressed against the wall . . . just like the script, she thought hysterically. This was how he got them, scared, helpless . . .

Her body writhed as it pressed harder against the wall. She knew what was coming . . . a hand touched her and she opened her mouth to scream.

The hand closed over her mouth, stopping her outcry. It pressed down, harder—and with the physical contact, her paralysis ended and she began to fight for her life. He was too strong for her. Her spine bent as he forced her backwards. Pain racked her. Chan, it couldn't be Chan . . .

The looming shape covering her appeared dark, almost formless. Air sighed from her lungs. Pain dulled as she slid down into unconsciousness. Killing her. He was really . . .

She had a moment of panic as the hump touched her before she blacked out.

Max Gribble, stepping from his office after pepping up a publicity hand-out, moved smartly towards the exit. This was going to be a great film, the greatest. He was going to be hailed as *the* director of Horror after this one. He knew it.

The passage was dark, shadowy and, as he heard, somewhere ahead, the sound of sobbing, he slowed his pace. There was something on the floor, an indistinct shape, bulky.

"Who's there?" he called. "Is anything wrong?"

The sobbing continued. There was no other answer. And now his nostrils twitched—whatever the smell was, it was highly unpleasant.

He groped for a wall switch, flooded the passage with light.

Chan Carlos knelt on the floor, tears trickling down his face. Before him lay the collapsed body of Julie and he saw at once, that she was dead. His heart stopped.

"Chan. You—"

Chan Carlos looked up, his jaw lax, his eyes vacant.

But even worse was the thing—the relic—it had detached itself from the actor's back. It was *alive*, moving slowly—like some bloated hedgehog—roving over Julie's body, feeding on her corpse.

ALEXANDER CADE

Turn Up a Stone

A publisher's representative is burned to death in Bangkok. Sent out to investigate, Michael Turney finds that the dead man was involved in several illegal sidelines, with perilous consequences.

21s net

HERON CARVIC

Miss Seeton Draws the Line

The Battling Brolly is back! The innocent elderly art mistress, heroine of *Picture Miss Seeton*, is here again in top form, with psychic pictures, lethal umbrella and a host of bemused criminals gasping in her wake.

21s net

WARD RUTHERFORD

The Gallows Set

A television programme on capital punishment is planned, including a confrontation between the ex-hangman and the man who was nearly his last victim. The brutal murder which follows involves the whole studio.

21s net

GEOFFREY BLES

CROOKS IN BOOKS

A review of some recent crime, mystery and detective books

"THE LODGER", by Mrs. Belloc Lowndes (*Hamish Hamilton Ltd.*, 25*s.*).

This re-print of one of the earliest psychological thrillers of 1913, is a most pleasureable experience for a reviewer.

For "The Lodger" is an excellent and exciting story and the setting of fog bound London seen through the red-damasked curtains of the Marylebone Road means that "escapism" from 1969 is utter and complete.

To review a thriller to-day without wincing at the ugly language, or yawning at the unnecessary (for the plot) bed scenes, is refreshing indeed. When in addition you have correct and disciplined writing, brilliant characterisation and a first rate psychological thriller—then let us hope many budding authors will borrow this book from the library—and certain sure it will be in every library in the country—and learn a few tricks of first-rate thriller writing.

"MISS SEETON DRAWS THE LINE", by Heron Carvic (*Geoffrey Bles*, 21*s.*).

If you did not read the first of the "Miss Seeton" books, then now is the time to discover author Heron Carvic and get this second in the series.

Miss Seeton is of course a private detective in her own right—she is elderly, imaginative and almost unbelievably other worldly. But her method of thinking and drawing is enchanting—as it not only delights the reader but brings in the most pertinent observations of crime and alienism around her.

I think, on the whole, Miss Seeton is the most lovable and entertaining of any of to-day's fiction detectives. May she live for ever.

"A TIME TO PREY", by Francis Keinzley (*W. H. Allen*, 21*s.*).

Seven people in Auckland, New Zealand, each with a dark secret. receive anonymous letters from a blackmailer.

So far so good, but when they are all summoned to a mountain lodge and instructed each to bring £2,000 in cash with them, I just begin lightly to doubt the whole story.

Perhaps the crime addict—which I now am—asks too much. We ask suspense—quite horrid suspense—we ask international settings, high courage, violence, humour, passionate involvement *and* we also ask some facts and the possibility of it all happening in real life!

So for the *plot* of this story I must complain—but not of the way in which the author has written and organised it. For Miss Keinzley can write brilliantly and she can also depict characters excellently. Her people are all sinners—but all completely real and her sheer organisation of the book with its terse opening paragraphs makes it very readable.

Next time—and I am sure there will be a next time—just a "possible" plot and Miss Keinzley will have a best-seller on her hands.

"A MAFIA KISS", by Philip Loraine (*Collins*, 21*s.*).

A young man, adopted by Americans, is obsessed by the wish to find out more about his Sicilian father—Giovanni Secca. So he returns to seek out relatives and the true story of his father's life . . . and death.

Before we are more than a page into this new and well-planned book of brilliant author of *Dead Men of Sestos*, we are ourselves walking the sun-plagued streets of Palermo, shuddering at the violence, hatred and poverty and caught firmly in the plotting of Padre Ragno (Father Spider), the uncle of the searching young man.

Utterly and beautifully convincing is this story of the still very much existing Mafia in Sicily.

Also convincing is the dramatic and somewhat poignant end with "Ben Lister" reverting to his true name of Benedetto Secca and remaining to try and break the horrific hold of the Mafia on his beloved island.

"THE ASCENT OF D.13", by Andrew Garve (*Collins*, 21*s*.).

For the international espionage fan, Andrew Garve has now become compulsive reading.

A hi-jacked plane on its way to Cyprus is turned north for Russia. In the nose of the plane is vital, secret equipment.

The pilot manages, however, to crash the plane on the borders of Turkey and there, with the unexpected help of a Russian girl climber, returns to safety—the secret equipment duly destroyed.

Simply and clearly written, this is high and utterly believable thriller writing. It could indeed be happening at this very moment for all we know—or ever may know.

A first rate story from a first-class writer.

"SERGEANT CORK'S SECOND CASE-BOOK", by Arthur Swinson (*John Long*, 18*s.*).

A second collection of Sergeant Cork's stories has proved to be a necessity for "period" thriller fans.

Perhaps it is that atmosphere is lacking from modern suspense writing unless, of course, we are sent to Turkey or further east. Anyway, there is an undoubted and added thrill in a dark Victorian setting, hansom cabs, flickering gas light and punctilious manners.

There are three long-short stories in this second casebook—the *Case of the Elegant Mistress*, the *Case of the Vengeful Garnet* and the *Case of the Lady's Good Name.*

Now don't shrug your shoulders and say "seen them all on A.T.V. already", for in the writing of this book, Arthur Swinson has added background, description and characterisation that give quite a new dimension to the plots. As does all first-rate crime writing—which this is.

"TWENTY-FOURTH LEVEL", by Kenneth Benton (*Collins Crime Club*, 21*s.*).

Here is a first rate newcomer to the thriller scene. And a very thorough and authoritative thriller it is for the author himself has spent six years in the Diplomatic Service in South America and so knows the scene of his book very, very well.

Unexpected seam of blue diamonds in a deep gold mine, shots from a bow and arrow, dehydration at the

24th level of the mine—and not mere wild invention but all plausible in the hands of this excellent writer. I shall await Mr. Benton's next novel with eager anticipation.

"SPEAK ILL OF THE DEAD", by Peter Chambers (*Robert Hale Ltd.*, 18*s.*).

When a book opens as well and as quietly as this one does, I am hooked immediately. That it then goes on a twisted and kinky trail to find a girl who had left home fourteen years earlier and I relax and lean back on the midnight pillows and don't mind much what time I fall asleep, because it is now essential to track the girl down whatever she has become and wherever she is.

A competent and well planned piece of writing.

"A COMPLETE STATE OF DEATH", by John Gardner (*Jonathan Cape*, 25*s.*).

Here we have an unusual—for this country—leading character. He is Derek Torry, a Catholic and moral, yet ruthless and devious in application to his job in the police force.

As well as the unique characterisation of Torry himself we have an exciting top priority criminal investigation into a vortex of murder, drugs and depravity.

Mr. Gardner's first best selling thriller was The Liquidator—I think that in the character and activities of Derek Torry, we have a star that should prove a best seller in more than thriller markets alone.

"A PLAGUE ON BOTH YOUR CAUSES", by John Brunner (*Hodder & Stoughton*, 25*s.*).

The creation of a Jamaican hero—Max Curfew for Mr. Brunner's explosive and well written spy story makes extremely interesting reading.

Max Curfew is not an attractive hero, but his exploits in Africa are compulsive reading and the brilliant and authentic settings should add to the author's long list of successes.

"THE SHROUD SOCIETY", by Robert Crawford (*Constable Crime*, 21*s.*).

In the hands of an expert, planned killing, kidnapping and even the most hideous of bedroom episodes, can take on a smooth drive and reality that becomes compelling reading.

But only—to my mind—in the hands of an expert. *The Shroud Society* is fast, efficient and ugly reading in parts—but Robert Crawford *is* a professional and he makes us believe that such things are happening—or just may be happening in our London of to-day.

"ANOTHER WAY OF DYING", by Francis Clifford (*Hodder & Stoughton*, 25*s.*).

Much more than a suspense story, this new book by Francis Clifford is a study in character. A man is running away from his own cowardice—not consciously recognising it. But high in the mountains of Sicily it at last catches up with him and he sees

himself as he is, stops running, and turns back to face life.

"HAGGARD FOR YOUR HOLIDAY"—The Arena, The Unquiet Sleep, The Hard Sell; by William Haggard (*Cassell and Co.*, 35*s.*).

Three complete novels by William Haggard are now bound together for your holiday reading. And a very excellent selection they are.

"The Arena" is a power-struggle fight between two City banks with dire consequences to the men at the top of each concern.

Far more than financial profit and loss are of course drawn into this thriller—for to Charles Russell the whole safety of England is being gambled with.

Complete authenticity of background and the fast, competent writing of Haggard make this an outstanding book.

"The Unquiet Sleep" is the sleep of the *Mecron* addict and in Haggard's hands it is the addictive sleep of men in the very high places. Men whose failings can threaten national security. An ingenious plot adds to the excitement.

"The Hard Sell" brings us slap into industrial espionage and sabotage in the aircraft industry. Again Colonel Charles Russell—lonely, responsible and mature in his role of Security Executive is bringing crime to justice and his loved country to unblemished position on the international stage. A splendid and much to be admired "hero" of one of the most crafty and elegant of Haggard's novels.

THE LONDON
MYSTERY SELECTION