PAST MASTERS 194

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John Galsworthy
M. R. James
Edgar Allan Poe
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and more

PAST MASTERS 194

Produced and Edited by Terry Walker from short stories in magazines, newspapers and other sources, and all in the Life + 70 years public domain.

5 Jan 2025

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1: A Mysterious Portrait

Mark Rutherford

(William Hale White 1831-1913)
From: *The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford*, 1881

I REMEMBER some years ago that I went to spend a Christmas with an old friend who was a bachelor. He might, perhaps, have been verging on sixty at the time of my visit. On his study wall hung the portrait— merely the face-of a singularly lovely woman. I did not like to ask any questions about it. There was no family likeness to him, and we always thought that early in life he had been disappointed. But one day, seeing that I could hardly keep my eyes off it, he said to me, "I have had that picture for many years, although you have never seen it before. If you like, I will tell you its history." He then told me the following story.

"In the year 1817, I was beginning life, and struggling to get a living. I had just started in business. I was alone, without much capital, and my whole energies were utterly absorbed in my adventure. In those days the master, instead of employing a commercial traveller, often used to travel himself, and one evening I had to start for the North to see some customers. I chose to go by night in order to save time, and as it was bitterly cold and I was weak in the chest, I determined to take a place inside the coach. We left St. Martin's-le-Grand at about half-past eight, and I was the sole passenger. I could not sleep, but fell into a kind of doze, which was not sufficiently deep to prevent my rousing myself at every inn where we changed horses. Nobody intruded upon me, and I continued in the same drowsy, half-waking, half-slumbering condition till we came to the last stage before reaching Eaton Socon. I was then thoroughly awake, and continued awake until after the coach started. But presently I fell sound asleep for, perhaps, half an hour, and woke suddenly. To my great surprise I found a lady with me. How she came there I could not conjecture. I was positive that she did not get in when the coach last stopped. She sat at the opposite corner, so that I could see her well, and a more exquisite face I thought I had never beheld. It was not quite English— rather pale, earnest and abstracted, and with a certain intentness about the eyes which denoted a mind accustomed to dwell upon ideal objects. I was not particularly shy with women, and perhaps if she had been any ordinary, pretty girl I might have struck up a conversation with her. But I was dumb, for I hardly dared to intrude. It would have been necessary to begin by some commonplaces, and somehow my lips refused the utterance of commonplaces. Nor was this strange. If I had happened to find myself opposite the great Lord Byron in a coach I certainly should not have thrust myself upon him, and how should I dare to thrust myself upon a person who seemed as great and grand

as she, although I did not know her name? So I remained perfectly still, only venturing by the light of the moon to watch her through my half-shut eyes. Just before we got to Eaton, although I was never more thoroughly or even excitedly awake in my life, I must have lost consciousness for a minute. I came to myself when the coach was pulling up at an inn. I looked round instantly, and my companion was gone. I jumped out on pretence of getting something to eat and drink, and hastily asked the guard where the lady who had just got out was put into the coach. He said they had never stopped since they had last changed horses, and that I must have been dreaming. He knew nothing about the lady, and he looked at me suspiciously, as if he thought I was drunk. I for my part was perfectly confident that I had not been deluded by an apparition of my own brain. I had never suffered from ghost-like visitations of any kind, and my thoughts, owing to my preoccupation with business, had not run upon women in any way whatever. More convincing still, I had noticed that the lady wore a light blue neckerchief; and when I went back into the coach I found that she had left it behind her. I took it up, and I have it to this day. You may imagine how my mind dwelt upon that night.

I got to Newcastle, did what I had to do, came back again, and made a point this time of sleeping at Eaton Socon in order to make inquiries. Everybody recollected the arrival of the down coach by which I travelled, and everybody was perfectly sure that no lady was in it. I produced the scarf, and asked whether anybody who lived near had been observed to wear it.

Eaton is a little village, and all the people in it were as well known as if they belonged to one family, but nobody recognised it. It was certainly not English. I thought about the affair for months, partly because I was smitten with my visitor, and partly because I was half afraid my brain had been a little upset by worry. However, in time, the impression faded.

Meanwhile I began to get on in the world, and after some three or four years my intense application was rewarded by riches. In seven or eight years I had become wealthy, and I began to think about settling myself in life. I had made the acquaintance of influential people in London, and more particularly of a certain baronet whom I had met in France while taking a holiday.

Although I was in business I came of good family, and our acquaintance grew into something more. He had two or three daughters, to each of whom he was able to give a good marriage portion, and I became engaged to one of them. I don't know that there was much enthusiasm about our courtship. She was a very pleasant, good-looking girl, and although I can acquit myself of all mercenary motives in proposing to her, I cannot say that the highest motives were operative. I was as thousands of others are. I had got weary of loneliness; I wanted a home. I cast about me to see who amongst all the women I knew

would best make me a wife. I selected this one, and perhaps the thought of her money may have been a trifle determinatory. I was not overmastered by a passion which I could not resist, nor was I coldly indifferent. If I had married her we should probably have lived a life of customary married comfort, and even of happiness; the same level, and perhaps slightly grey life which is lived by the ordinary English husband and wife. Things had gone so far that it was settled we were to be married in the spring of 1826, and I had begun to look out for a house, and make purchases in anticipation of house-keeping.

In 1825 I had to go to Bristol. I shall never forget to the day of my death one morning in that city. I had had my breakfast, and was going out to see the head of one of the largest firms in the city, with whom I had an appointment. I met him in the street, and I noted before he spoke that there was something the matter. I soon found out what it was. The panic of 1825 had begun; three great houses in London had failed, and brought him down. He was a ruined man, and so was I. I managed to stagger back to the hotel, and found letters there confirming all he had said.

For some two or three days I was utterly prostrate, and could not summon sufficient strength to leave Bristol. One of the first things I did when I came to myself was to write to the baronet, telling him what had happened, that I was altogether penniless, and that in honour! felt bound to release his daughter from her engagement. I had a sympathising letter from him in return, saying that he was greatly afflicted at my misfortune, that his daughter was nearly broken-hearted, but that she had come to the conclusion that perhaps it would be best to accept my very kind offer.

Much as she loved me, she felt that her health was far from strong, and although he had always meant to endow her generously on her marriage, her fortune alone would not enable her to procure those luxuries which, for her delicate constitution, alas! were necessaries. But the main reason with her was that she was sure that, with my independence, I should be unhappy if I felt that my wife's property was my support. His letter was long, but although much wrapped up, this was the gist of it. I went back to London, sold every stick I had, and tried to get a situation as clerk in some house, doing the business in which I had been engaged. I failed, for the distress was great, and I was reduced nearly to my last sovereign when I determined to go down to Newcastle, and try the friend there whom I had not seen since 1817.

It was once more winter, and, although I was so poor, I was obliged to ride inside the coach again, for I was much troubled with my ancient enemy— the weakness in the chest. The incidents of my former visit I had nearly forgotten till we came near to Eaton Socon, and then they returned to me. But now it was a dull January day, with a bitter thaw, and my fellow passengers were a

Lincolnshire squire, with his red-faced wife, who never spoke a syllable to me, and by reason of their isolation seemed to make the thaw all the more bitter, the fen levels all the more dismally flat, and the sky all the more leaden. At last we came to Newcastle. During the latter part of the journey I was alone, my Lincolnshire squire and his lady having left me on the road. It was about seven o'clock in the evening when we arrived; a miserable night, with the snow just melting under foot, and the town was wrapped in smoke and fog.

I was so depressed that I hardly cared what became of me, and when I stepped out of the coach wished that I had been content to lie down and die in London. I could not put up at the coaching hotel, as it was too expensive, but walked on to one which was cheaper. I almost lost my way, and had wandered down a narrow street, which at every step became more and more squalid, and at last ended opposite a factory gate. Hard by was a wretched marine store shop, in the window of which were old iron, old teapots, a few old Bibles, and other miscellaneous effects. I stepped in to ask for directions to the Cross Key. Coming out, whom should I see crossing the road, as if to meet me, but the very lady who rode with me in the coach to Eaton some nine years ago.

There was no mistaking her. She seemed scarcely a day older. The face was as lovely and as inspired as ever. I was almost beside myself. I leaned against the railing of the shop, and the light from the window shone full on her. She came straight towards me on to the pavement; looked at me, and turned up the street. I followed her till we got to the end, determined not to lose sight of her; and we reached an open, broad thoroughfare. She stopped at a bookseller's, and went in. I was not more than two minutes after her; but when I entered she was not there. A shopman was at the counter, and I asked him whether a lady, my sister, had not just left the shop. No lady, he said, had been there for half-an-hour. I went back to the marine store shop. The footsteps were still there which I saw her make as she crossed. I knelt down, tracing them with my fingers to make sure I was not deceived by my eyes, and was more than ever confounded. At last I got to my inn, and went to bed a prey to the strangest thoughts.

In the morning I was a little better. The stagnant blood had been stirred by the encounter of the night before, and though I was much agitated, and uncertain whether my brain was actually sound or not, I was sufficiently self-possessed and sensible to call upon my friend and explain my errand. He did what he could to help me, and I became his clerk in Newcastle. For a time I was completely broken, but gradually I began to recover my health and spirits a little. I had little or no responsibility, and nothing to absorb me after office hours. As a relief and an occupation, I tried to take up with a science, and chose geology; On Sundays I used to make long rambling excursions, and for a

while I was pleased with my new toy. But by degrees it became less and less interesting. I suppose I had no real love for it. Furthermore, I had no opportunities for expression. My sorrow had secluded me. I demanded more from those around me than I had any right to expect. As a rule, we all of us demand from the world more than we are justified in demanding, especially if we suffer; and because the world is not so constituted that it can respond to us as eagerly and as sympathetically as we respond to ourselves, we become morose.

So it was with me. People were sorry for me; but I knew that my trouble did not disturb them deeply, that when they left me, their faces, which were forcibly contracted while in my presence, instantly expanded into their ordinary self-satisfaction, and that if I were to die I should be forgotten a week after the funeral. I therefore recoiled from men, and frequently, with criminal carelessness and prodigality, rejected many an offer of kindness, not because I did not need it, but because I wanted too much of it.

My science, as I have said, was a failure. I cannot tell how it may be with some exceptionally heroic natures, but with me expression in some form or other, if the thing which should be expressed is to live, is an absolute necessity. I cannot read unless I have somebody to whom I can speak about my reading, and I lose almost all power of thinking if thought after thought remains with me. Expression is as indispensable to me as expiration of breath. Inspiration of the air is a necessity, but continued inspiration of air without expiration of the same is an impossibility. The geology was neglected, and at first I thought it was because it was geology, and I tried something else. For some months I fancied I had found a solace in chemistry. With my savings I purchased some apparatus, and began to be proficient. But the charm faded from this also; the apparatus was put aside, and the sight of it lying disused only made my dissatisfaction and melancholy the more profound. Amidst all my loneliness, I had never felt the least inclination to any baser pleasures, nor had I ever seen a woman for whom I felt even the most transient passion. My spectral friend— if spectre she was— dominated my existence, and seemed to prevent not only all licentiousness, but all pleasure, except of the most superficial kind, in other types of beauty. This need be no surprise to anybody. I have known cases in which the face of a singularly lovely woman, seen only for a few moments in the street, has haunted a man all through his life, and deeply affected it. In time I was advanced in my position as clerk, and would have married, but I had not the least inclination thereto. I did not believe in the actual reality of my vision, and had no hope of ever meeting in the flesh the apparition of the coach and the dingy street; I felt sure that there was some mistake, something wrong with me— the probabilities were all in favour of my being deceived; but

still the dream possessed me, and every woman who for a moment appealed to me was tried by that standard and found wanting.

After some years had passed, during which I had scarcely been out of Newcastle, I took a holiday, and went up to London. It was about July. I was now a man on the wrong side of fifty, shy, reserved, with a reputation for constitutional melancholy, a shadowy creature, of whom nobody took much notice and who was noticed by nobody. While in London I went to see the pictures at the Academy. The place was thronged, and I was tired; I just looked about me, and was on the point of coming out wearied, when in a side room where there were crayon drawings, I caught sight of one of a face. I was amazed beyond measure. It was the face which had been my companion for so many years. There could be no mistake about it; even the neckerchief was tied as I remembered it so well, the very counterpart of the treasure I still preserved so sacredly at home. I was almost overcome with a faintness, with a creeping sensation all over the head, as if something were giving way, and with a shock of giddiness. I went and got a catalogue, found out the name of the artist, and saw that the picture had merely the name of "Stella" affixed to it. It might be a portrait, or it might not. After gazing myself almost blind at it, I went instantly to the artist's house. He was at home. He seemed a poor man, and was evidently surprised at any inquiry after his picture so late in the season. I asked him who sat for it. "Nobody," he said; "it was a mere fancy sketch. There might be a reminiscence in it of a girl I knew in France years ago; but she is long since dead, and I don't think that anybody who knew her would recognise a likeness in it. In fact, I am sure they would not." The price of the drawing was not much, although it was a good deal for me. I said instantly I would have it, and managed to get the money together by scraping up all my savings out of the savings bank. That is the very picture which you now see before you. I do not pretend to explain everything which I have told you. I have long since given up the attempt, and I suppose it must be said that I have suffered from some passing disorder of the brain, although that theory is not sound at all points, and there are circumstances inconsistent with it."

The next morning my friend went to his office, after an early breakfast. His hours were long, and I was obliged to leave Newcastle before his return. So I bade him good-bye before he left home.

I never saw him again. Two years afterwards I was shocked to see an announcement in the Times of his death. Knowing his lonely way of life, I went down to Newcastle to gather what I could about his illness and last moments. He had caught cold, and died of congestion of the lungs. His landlady said that he had made a will, and that what little property had remained after paying his

funeral expenses had been made over to a hospital. I was anxious to know where the picture was.

She could not tell me. It had disappeared just before his death, and nobody knew what had become of it.

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2: The Residence at Whitminster

M. R. James

1862-1936

In: *A Thin Ghost*, 1919

DR. ASHTON— Thomas Ashton, Doctor of Divinity— sat in his study, habited in a dressing-gown, and with a silk cap on his shaven head— his wig being for the time taken off and placed on its block on a side table. He was a man of some fifty-five years, strongly made, of a sanguine complexion, an angry eye, and a long upper lip. Face and eye were lighted up at the moment when I picture him by the level ray of an afternoon sun that shone in upon him through a tall sash window, giving on the west. The room into which it shone was also tall, lined with book-cases, and, where the wall showed between them, panelled. On the table near the doctor's elbow was a green cloth, and upon it what he would have called a silver standish— a tray with inkstands— quill pens, a calf-bound book or two, some papers, a church-warden pipe and brass tobacco-box, a flask cased in plaited straw, and a liqueur glass. The year was 1730, the month December, the hour somewhat past three in the afternoon.

I have described in these lines pretty much all that a superficial observer would have noted when he looked into the room. What met Dr. Ashton's eye when he looked out of it, sitting in his leather armchair? Little more than the tops of the shrubs and fruit-trees of his garden could be seen from that point, but the red-brick wall of it was visible in almost all the length of its western side. In the middle of that was a gate— a double gate of rather elaborate iron scroll-work, which allowed something of a view beyond. Through it he could see that the ground sloped away almost at once to a bottom, along which a stream must run, and rose steeply from it on the other side, up to a field that was park-like in character, and thickly studded with oaks, now, of course, leafless. They did not stand so thick together but that some glimpse of sky and horizon could be seen between their stems. The sky was now golden and the horizon, a horizon of distant woods, it seemed, was purple.

But all that Dr. Ashton could find to say, after contemplating this prospect for many minutes, was: "Abominable!"

A listener would have been aware, immediately upon this, of the sound of footsteps coming somewhat hurriedly in the direction of the study: by the resonance he could have told that they were traversing a much larger room. Dr. Ashton turned round in his chair as the door opened, and looked expectant. The incomer was a lady— a stout lady in the dress of the time: though I have made some attempt at indicating the doctor's costume, I will not enterprise that of his wife— for it was Mrs. Ashton who now entered. She had an anxious, even a sorely distracted, look, and it was in a very disturbed voice

that she almost whispered to Dr. Ashton, putting her head close to his, "He's in a very sad way, love, worse, I'm afraid." "Tt— tt, is he really?" and he leaned back and looked in her face. She nodded. Two solemn bells, high up, and not far away, rang out the half-hour at this moment. Mrs. Ashton started. "Oh, do you think you can give order that the minster clock be stopped chiming to-night? 'Tis just over his chamber, and will keep him from sleeping, and to sleep is the only chance for him, that's certain." "Why, to be sure, if there were need, real need, it could be done, but not upon any light occasion. This Frank, now, do you assure me that his recovery stands upon it?" said Dr. Ashton: his voice was loud and rather hard. "I do verily believe it," said his wife. "Then, if it must be, bid Molly run across to Simpkins and say on my authority that he is to stop the clock chimes at sunset: and— yes— she is after that to say to my lord Saul that I wish to see him presently in this room." Mrs. Ashton hurried off.

Before any other visitor enters, it will be well to explain the situation.

Dr. Ashton was the holder, among other preferments, of a prebend in the rich collegiate church of Whitminster, one of the foundations which, though not a cathedral, survived Dissolution and Reformation, and retained its constitution and endowments for a hundred years after the time of which I write. The great church, the residences of the dean and the two prebendaries, the choir and its appurtenances, were all intact and in working order. A dean who flourished soon after 1500 had been a great builder, and had erected a spacious quadrangle of red brick adjoining the church for the residence of the officials. Some of these persons were no longer required: their offices had dwindled down to mere titles, borne by clergy or lawyers in the town and neighbourhood; and so the houses that had been meant to accommodate eight or ten people were now shared among three— the dean and the two prebendaries. Dr. Ashton's included what had been the common parlour and the dining-hall of the whole body. It occupied a whole side of the court, and at one end had a private door into the minster. The other end, as we have seen, looked out over the country.

So much for the house. As for the inmates, Dr. Ashton was a wealthy man and childless, and he had adopted, or rather undertaken to bring up, the orphan son of his wife's sister. Frank Sydall was the lad's name: he had been a good many months in the house. Then one day came a letter from an Irish peer, the Earl of Kildonan (who had known Dr. Ashton at college), putting it to the doctor whether he would consider taking into his family the Viscount Saul, the Earl's heir, and acting in some sort as his tutor. Lord Kildonan was shortly to take up a post in the Lisbon Embassy, and the boy was unfit to make the voyage: "not that he is sickly," the Earl wrote "though you'll find him whimsical, or of late I've thought him so, and to confirm this, 'twas only to-day

his old nurse came expressly to tell me he was possess'd: but let that pass; I'll warrant you can find a spell to make all straight. Your arm was stout enough in old days, and I give you plenary authority to use it as you see fit. The truth is, he has here no boys of his age or quality to consort with, and is given to moping about in our raths and graveyards: and he brings home romances that fright my servants out of their wits. So there are you and your lady fore-warned." It was perhaps with half an eye open to the possibility of an Irish bishopric (at which another sentence in the Earl's letter seemed to hint) that Dr. Ashton accepted the charge of my Lord Viscount Saul and of the 200 guineas a year that were to come with him.

So he came, one night in September. When he got out of the chaise that brought him, he went first and spoke to the postboy and gave him some money, and patted the neck of his horse. Whether he made some movement that scared it or not, there was very nearly a nasty accident, for the beast started violently, and the postilion being unready was thrown and lost his fee, as he found afterwards, and the chaise lost some paint on the gateposts, and the wheel went over the man's foot who was taking out the baggage. When Lord Saul came up the steps into the light of the lamp in the porch to be greeted by Dr. Ashton, he was seen to be a thin youth of, say, sixteen years old, with straight black hair and the pale colouring that is common to such a figure. He took the accident and commotion calmly enough, and expressed a proper anxiety for the people who had been, or might have been, hurt: his voice was smooth and pleasant, and without any trace, curiously, of an Irish brogue.

Frank Sydall was a younger boy, perhaps of eleven or twelve, but Lord Saul did not for that reject his company. Frank was able to teach him various games he had not known in Ireland, and he was apt at learning them; apt, too, at his books, though he had had little or no regular teaching at home. It was not long before he was making a shift to puzzle out the inscriptions on the tombs in the minster, and he would often put a question to the doctor about the old books in the library that required some thought to answer. It is to be supposed that he made himself very agreeable to the servants, for within ten days of his coming they were almost falling over each other in their efforts to oblige him. At the same time, Mrs. Ashton was rather put to it to find new maidservants; for there were several changes, and some of the families in the town from which she had been accustomed to draw seemed to have no one available. She was forced to go farther afield than was usual.

These generalities I gather from the doctor's notes in his diary and from letters. They are generalities, and we should like, in view of what has to be told, something sharper and more detailed. We get it in entries which begin

late in the year, and, I think, were posted up all together after the final incident; but they cover so few days in all that there is no need to doubt that the writer could remember the course of things accurately.

On a Friday morning it was that a fox, or perhaps a cat, made away with Mrs. Ashton's most prized black cockerel, a bird without a single white feather on its body. Her husband had told her often enough that it would make a suitable sacrifice to Æsculapius; that had discomfited her much, and now she would hardly be consoled. The boys looked everywhere for traces of it: Lord Saul brought in a few feathers, which seemed to have been partially burnt on the garden rubbish-heap. It was on the same day that Dr. Ashton, looking out of an upper window, saw the two boys playing in the corner of the garden at a game he did not understand. Frank was looking earnestly at something in the palm of his hand. Saul stood behind him and seemed to be listening. After some minutes he very gently laid his hand on Frank's head, and almost instantly thereupon, Frank suddenly dropped whatever it was that he was holding, clapped his hands to his eyes, and sank down on the grass. Saul, whose face expressed great anger, hastily picked the object up, of which it could only be seen that it was glittering, put it in his pocket, and turned away, leaving Frank huddled up on the grass. Dr. Ashton rapped on the window to attract their attention, and Saul looked up as if in alarm, and then springing to Frank, pulled him up by the arm and led him away. When they came in to dinner, Saul explained that they had been acting a part of the tragedy of Radamistus, in which the heroine reads the future fate of her father's kingdom by means of a glass ball held in her hand, and is overcome by the terrible events she has seen. During this explanation Frank said nothing, only looked rather bewilderedly at Saul. He must, Mrs. Ashton thought, have contracted a chill from the wet of the grass, for that evening he was certainly feverish and disordered; and the disorder was of the mind as well as the body, for he seemed to have something he wished to say to Mrs. Ashton, only a press of household affairs prevented her from paying attention to him; and when she went, according to her habit, to see that the light in the boys' chamber had been taken away, and to bid them good night, he seemed to be sleeping, though his face was unnaturally flushed, to her thinking: Lord Saul, however, was pale and quiet, and smiling in his slumber.

Next morning it happened that Dr. Ashton was occupied in church and other business, and unable to take the boys' lessons. He therefore set them tasks to be written and brought to him. Three times, if not oftener, Frank knocked at the study door, and each time the doctor chanced to be engaged with some visitor, and sent the boy off rather roughly, which he later regretted. Two clergymen were at dinner this day, and both remarked— being

fathers of families— that the lad seemed sickening for a fever, in which they were too near the truth, and it had been better if he had been put to bed forthwith: for a couple of hours later in the afternoon he came running into the house, crying out in a way that was really terrifying, and rushing to Mrs. Ashton, clung about her, begging her to protect him, and saying, "Keep them off! keep them off!" without intermission. And it was now evident that some sickness had taken strong hold of him. He was therefore got to bed in another chamber from that in which he commonly lay, and the physician brought to him: who pronounced the disorder to be grave and affecting the lad's brain, and prognosticated a fatal end to it if strict quiet were not observed, and those sedative remedies used which he should prescribe.

We are now come by another way to the point we had reached before. The minster clock has been stopped from striking, and Lord Saul is on the threshold of the study.

"What account can you give of this poor lad's state?" was Dr. Ashton's first question.

"Why, sir, little more than you know already, I fancy. I must blame myself, though, for giving him a fright yesterday when we were acting that silly play you saw. I fear I made him take it more to heart than I meant."

"How so?"

"Well, by telling him foolish tales I had picked up in Ireland of what we call the second sight."

"*Second* sight! What kind of sight might that be?"

"Why, you know our ignorant people pretend that some are able to foresee what is to come— sometimes in a glass, or in the air, maybe, and at Kildonan we had an old woman that pretended to such a power. And I dare say I coloured the matter more highly than I should: but I never dreamed Frank would take it so near as he did."

"You were wrong, my lord, very wrong, in meddling with such superstitious matters at all, and you should have considered whose house you were in, and how little becoming such actions are to my character and person or to your own: but pray how came it that you, acting, as you say, a play, should fall upon anything that could so alarm Frank?"

"That is what I can hardly tell, sir: he passed all in a moment from rant about battles and lovers and Cleodora and Antigenes to something I could not follow at all, and then dropped down as you saw."

"Yes: was that at the moment when you laid your hand on the top of his head?"

Lord Saul gave a quick look at his questioner— quick and spiteful— and for the first time seemed unready with an answer.

"About that time it may have been," he said. "I have tried to recollect myself, but I am not sure. There was, at any rate, no significance in what I did then."

"Ah!" said Dr. Ashton, "well, my lord, I should do wrong were I not to tell you that this fright of my poor nephew may have very ill consequences to him. The doctor speaks very despondingly of his state."

Lord Saul pressed his hands together and looked earnestly upon Dr. Ashton.

"I am willing to believe you had no bad intention, as assuredly you could have no reason to bear the poor boy malice: but I cannot wholly free you from blame in the affair."

As he spoke, the hurrying steps were heard again, and Mrs. Ashton came quickly into the room, carrying a candle, for the evening had by this time closed in. She was greatly agitated.

"O come!" she cried, "come directly. I'm sure he is going."

"Going? Frank? Is it possible? Already?"

With some such incoherent words the doctor caught up a book of prayers from the table and ran out after his wife. Lord Saul stopped for a moment where he was. Molly, the maid, saw him bend over and put both hands to his face. If it were the last words she had to speak, she said afterwards, he was striving to keep back a fit of laughing. Then he went out softly, following the others.

Mrs. Ashton was sadly right in her forecast. I have no inclination to imagine the last scene in detail. What Dr. Ashton records is, or may be taken to be, important to the story. They asked Frank if he would like to see his companion, Lord Saul, once again. The boy was quite collected, it appears, in these moments.

"No," he said, "I do not want to see him; but you should tell him I am afraid he will be very cold."

"What do you mean, my dear?" said Mrs. Ashton.

"Only that," said Frank; "but say to him besides that I am free of them now, but he should take care. And I am sorry about your black cockerel, Aunt Ashton; but he said we must use it so, if we were to see all that could be seen."

Not many minutes after, he was gone. Both the Ashtons were grieved, she naturally most; but the doctor, though not an emotional man, felt the pathos of the early death: and, besides, there was the growing suspicion that all had not been told him by Saul, and that there was something here which was out of his beaten track. When he left the chamber of death, it was to walk across the quadrangle of the residence to the sexton's house. A passing bell, the greatest of the minster bells, must be rung, a grave must be dug in the minster

yard, and there was now no need to silence the chiming of the minster clock. As he came slowly back in the dark, he thought he must see Lord Saul again. That matter of the black cockerel— trifling as it might seem— would have to be cleared up. It might be merely a fancy of the sick boy, but if not, was there not a witch-trial he had read, in which some grim little rite of sacrifice had played a part? Yes, he must see Saul.

I rather guess these thoughts of his than find written authority for them. That there was another interview is certain: certain also that Saul would (or, as he said, could) throw no light on Frank's words: though the message, or some part of it, appeared to affect him horribly. But there is no record of the talk in detail. It is only said that Saul sat all that evening in the study, and when he bid good night, which he did most reluctantly, asked for the doctor's prayers.

THE MONTH of January was near its end when Lord Kildonan, in the Embassy at Lisbon, received a letter that for once gravely disturbed that vain man and neglectful father. Saul was dead. The scene at Frank's burial had been very distressing. The day was awful in blackness and wind: the bearers, staggering blindly along under the flapping black pall, found it a hard job, when they emerged from the porch of the minster, to make their way to the grave. Mrs. Ashton was in her room— women did not then go to their kinsfolk's funerals— but Saul was there, draped in the mourning cloak of the time, and his face was white and fixed as that of one dead, except when, as was noticed three or four times, he suddenly turned his head to the left and looked over his shoulder. It was then alive with a terrible expression of listening fear. No one saw him go away: and no one could find him that evening. All night the gale buffeted the high windows of the church, and howled over the upland and roared through the woodland. It was useless to search in the open: no voice of shouting or cry for help could possibly be heard. All that Dr. Ashton could do was to warn the people about the college, and the town constables, and to sit up, on the alert for any news, and this he did. News came early next morning, brought by the sexton, whose business it was to open the church for early prayers at seven, and who sent the maid rushing upstairs with wild eyes and flying hair to summon her master. The two men dashed across to the south door of the minster, there to find Lord Saul clinging desperately to the great ring of the door, his head sunk between his shoulders, his stockings in rags, his shoes gone, his legs torn and bloody.

This was what had to be told to Lord Kildonan, and this really ends the first part of the story. The tomb of Frank Sydall and of the Lord Viscount Saul, only child and heir to William Earl of Kildonan, is one: a stone altar tomb in Whitminster churchyard.

Dr. Ashton lived on for over thirty years in his prebendal house, I do not know how quietly, but without visible disturbance. His successor preferred a house he already owned in the town, and left that of the senior prebendary vacant. Between them these two men saw the eighteenth century out and the nineteenth in; for Mr. Hindes, the successor of Ashton, became prebendary at nine-and-twenty and died at nine-and-eighty. So that it was not till 1823 or 1824 that anyone succeeded to the post who intended to make the house his home. The man who did so was Dr. Henry Oldys, whose name may be known to some of my readers as that of the author of a row of volumes labelled *Oldys's Works*, which occupy a place that must be honoured, since it is so rarely touched, upon the shelves of many a substantial library.

Dr. Oldys, his niece, and his servants took some months to transfer furniture and books from his Dorsetshire parsonage to the quadrangle of Whitminster, and to get everything into place. But eventually the work was done, and the house (which, though untenanted, had always been kept sound and weather-tight) woke up, and like Monte Cristo's mansion at Auteuil, lived, sang, and bloomed once more. On a certain morning in June it looked especially fair, as Dr. Oldys strolled in his garden before breakfast and gazed over the red roof at the minster tower with its four gold vanes, backed by a very blue sky, and very white little clouds.

"Mary," he said, as he seated himself at the breakfast-table and laid down something hard and shiny on the cloth, "here's a find which the boy made just now. You'll be sharper than I if you can guess what it's meant for."

It was a round and perfectly smooth tablet— as much as an inch thick— of what seemed clear glass.

"It is rather attractive, at all events," said Mary: she was a fair woman, with light hair and large eyes, rather a devotee of literature.

"Yes," said her uncle, "I thought you'd be pleased with it. I presume it came from the house: it turned up in the rubbish-heap in the corner."

"I'm not sure that I do like it, after all," said Mary, some minutes later.

"Why in the world not, my dear?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. Perhaps it's only fancy."

"Yes, only fancy and romance, of course. What's that book, now— the name of that book, I mean, that you had your head in all yesterday?"

"*The Talisman*, Uncle. Oh, if this should turn out to be a talisman, how enchanting it would be!"

"Yes, *The Talisman*: ah, well, you're welcome to it, whatever it is: I must be off about my business. Is all well in the house? Does it suit you? Any complaints from the servants' hall?" "No, indeed, nothing could be more charming. The only *soupçon* of a complaint besides the lock of the linen closet,

which I told you of, is that Mrs. Maple says she cannot get rid of the sawflies out of that room you pass through at the other end of the hall. By the way, are you sure you like your bedroom? It is a long way off from anyone else, you know."

"Like it? To be sure I do; the farther off from you, my dear, the better. There, don't think it necessary to beat me; accept my apologies. But what are sawflies? Will they eat my coats? If not, they may have the room to themselves for what I care. We are not likely to be using it."

"No, of course not. Well, what she calls sawflies are those reddish things like a daddy-long-legs, but smaller,* and there are a great many of them perching about that room, certainly. I don't like them, but I don't fancy they are mischievous."

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* Apparently the ichneumon fly (*Ophion obscurum*), and not the true sawfly, is meant.

"There seem to be several things you don't like this fine morning," said her uncle, as he closed the door. Miss Oldys remained in her chair looking at the tablet, which she was holding in the palm of her hand. The smile that had been on her face faded slowly from it and gave place to an expression of curiosity and almost strained attention.

Her reverie was broken by the entrance of Mrs. Maple,and her invariable opening, "Oh, Miss, could I speak to you a minute?"

A LETTER from Miss Oldys to a friend in Lichfield, begun a day or two before, is the next source for this story. It is not devoid of traces of the influence of that leader of female thought in her day, Miss Anna Seward, known to some as the Swan of Lichfield.

"My sweetest Emily will be rejoiced to hear that we are at length— my beloved uncle and myself— settled in the house that now calls us master— nay, master and mistress— as in past ages it has called so many others. Here we taste a mingling of modern elegance and hoary antiquity, such as has never ere now graced life for either of us. The town, small as it is, affords us some reflection, pale indeed, but veritable, of the sweets of polite intercourse: the adjacent country numbers amid the occupants of its scattered mansions some whose polish is annually refreshed by contact with metropolitan splendour, and others whose robust and homely geniality is, at times, and by way of contrast, not less cheering and acceptable. Tired of the parlours and drawing-rooms of our friends, we have ready to hand a refuge from the clash of wits or the small talk of the day amid the solemn beauties of our venerable minster, whose silver chimes daily 'knoll us to prayer,' and in the shady walks of whose tranquil graveyard we muse with softened heart, and ever and anon with

moistened eye, upon the memorials of the young, the beautiful, the aged, the wise, and the good."

Here there is an abrupt break both in the writing and the style.

"But my dearest Emily, I can no longer write with the care which you deserve, and in which we both take pleasure. What I have to tell you is wholly foreign to what has gone before. This morning my uncle brought in to breakfast an object which had been found in the garden; it was a glass or crystal tablet of this shape (a little sketch is given), which he handed to me, and which, after he left the room, remained on the table by me. I gazed at it, I know not why, for some minutes, till called away by the day's duties; and you will smile incredulously when I say that I seemed to myself to begin to descry reflected in it objects and scenes which were not in the room where I was. You will not, however, think it strange that after such an experience I took the first opportunity to seclude myself in my room with what I now half believed to be a talisman of mickle might. I was not disappointed. I assure you, Emily, by that memory which is dearest to both of us, that what I went through this afternoon transcends the limits of what I had before deemed credible. In brief, what I saw, seated in my bedroom, in the broad daylight of summer, and looking into the crystal depth of that small round tablet, was this. First, a prospect, strange to me, of an enclosure of rough and hillocky grass, with a grey stone ruin in the midst, and a wall of rough stones about it. In this stood an old, and very ugly, woman in a red cloak and ragged skirt, talking to a boy dressed in the fashion of maybe a hundred years ago. She put something which glittered into his hand, and he something into hers, which I saw to be money, for a single coin fell from her trembling hand into the grass. The scene passed: I should have remarked, by the way, that on the rough walls of the enclosure I could distinguish bones, and even a skull, lying in a disorderly fashion. Next, I was looking upon two boys; one the figure of the former vision, the other younger. They were in a plot of garden, walled round, and this garden, in spite of the difference in arrangement, and the small size of the trees, I could clearly recognize as being that upon which I now look from my window. The boys were engaged in some curious play, it seemed. Something was smouldering on the ground. The elder placed his hands upon it, and then raised them in what I took to be an attitude of prayer: and I saw, and started at seeing, that on them were deep stains of blood. The sky above was overcast. The same boy now turned his face towards the wall of the garden, and beckoned with both his raised hands, and as he did so I was conscious that some moving objects were becoming visible over the top of the wall— whether heads or other parts of some animal or human forms I could not tell. Upon the instant the elder boy turned sharply, seized the arm of the younger (who all this time had been

poring over what lay on the ground), and both hurried off. I then saw blood upon the grass, a little pile of bricks, and what I thought were black feathers scattered about. That scene closed, and the next was so dark that perhaps the full meaning of it escaped me. But what I seemed to see was a form, at first crouching low among trees or bushes that were being threshed by a violent wind, then running very swiftly, and constantly turning a pale face to look behind him, as if he feared a pursuer: and, indeed, pursuers were following hard after him. Their shapes were but dimly seen, their number— three or four, perhaps— only guessed. I suppose they were on the whole more like dogs than anything else, but dogs such as we have seen they assuredly were not. Could I have closed my eyes to this horror, I would have done so at once, but I was helpless. The last I saw was the victim darting beneath an arch and clutching at some object to which he clung: and those that were pursuing him overtook him, and I seemed to hear the echo of a cry of despair. It may be that I became unconscious: certainly I had the sensation of awaking to the light of day after an interval of darkness. Such, in literal truth, Emily, was my vision— I can call it by no other name— of this afternoon. Tell me, have I not been the unwilling witness of some episode of a tragedy connected with this very house?"

The letter is continued next day. "The tale of yesterday was not completed when I laid down my pen. I said nothing of my experiences to my uncle— you know, yourself, how little his robust common sense would be prepared to allow of them, and how in his eyes the specific remedy would be a black draught or a glass of port. After a silent evening, then— silent, not sullen— I retired to rest. Judge of my terror, when, not yet in bed, I heard what I can only describe as a distant bellow, and knew it for my uncle's voice, though never in my hearing so exerted before. His sleeping-room is at the farther extremity of this large house, and to gain access to it one must traverse an antique hall some eighty feet long, a lofty panelled chamber, and two unoccupied bedrooms. In the second of these— a room almost devoid of furniture— I found him, in the dark, his candle lying smashed on the floor. As I ran in, bearing a light, he clasped me in arms that trembled for the first time since I have known him, thanked God, and hurried me out of the room. He would say nothing of what had alarmed him. 'To-morrow, to-morrow,' was all I could get from him. A bed was hastily improvised for him in the room next to my own. I doubt if his night was more restful than mine. I could only get to sleep in the small hours, when daylight was already strong, and then my dreams were of the grimmest— particularly one which stamped itself on my brain, and which I must set down on the chance of dispersing the impression it has made. It was that I came up to my room with a heavy foreboding of evil oppressing me, and

went with a hesitation and reluctance I could not explain to my chest of drawers. I opened the top drawer, in which was nothing but ribbons and handkerchiefs, and then the second, where was as little to alarm, and then, O heavens, the third and last: and there was a mass of linen neatly folded: upon which, as I looked with a curiosity that began to be tinged with horror, I perceived a movement in it, and a pink hand was thrust out of the folds and began to grope feebly in the air. I could bear it no more, and rushed from the room, clapping the door after me, and strove with all my force to lock it. But the key would not turn in the wards, and from within the room came a sound of rustling and bumping, drawing nearer and nearer to the door. Why I did not flee down the stairs I know not. I continued grasping the handle, and mercifully, as the door was plucked from my hand with an irresistible force, I awoke. You may not think this very alarming, but I assure you it was so to me.

"At breakfast to-day my uncle was very uncommunicative, and I think ashamed of the fright he had given us; but afterwards he inquired of me whether Mr. Spearman was still in town, adding that he thought that was a young man who had some sense left in his head. I think you know, my dear Emily, that I am not inclined to disagree with him there, and also that I was not unlikely to be able to answer his question. To Mr. Spearman he accordingly went, and I have not seen him since. I must send this strange budget of news to you now, or it may have to wait over more than one post."

The reader will not be far out if he guesses that Miss Mary and Mr. Spearman made a match of it not very long after this month of June. Mr. Spearman was a young spark, who had a good property in the neighbourhood of Whitminster, and not unfrequently about this time spent a few days at the "King's Head," ostensibly on business. But he must have had some leisure, for his diary is copious, especially for the days of which I am telling the story. It is probable to me that he wrote this episode as fully as he could at the bidding of Miss Mary.

"Uncle Oldys (how I hope I may have the right to call him so before long!) called this morning. After throwing out a good many short remarks on indifferent topics, he said, 'I wish, Spearman, you'd listen to an odd story and keep a close tongue about it just for a bit, till I get more light on it.' 'To be sure,' said I, 'you may count on me.' 'I don't know what to make of it,' he said. 'You know my bedroom. It is well away from everyone else's, and I pass through the great hall and two or three other rooms to get to it.' 'Is it at the end next the minster, then?' I asked. 'Yes, it is: well, now, yesterday morning my Mary told me that the room next before it was infested with some sort of fly that the house-keeper couldn't get rid of. That may be the explanation, or it may not. What do you think?' 'Why,' said I, 'you've not yet told me what has to

be explained.' 'True enough, I don't believe I have; but by the by, what are these saw flies? What's the size of them?' I began to wonder if he was touched in the head. 'What I call a sawfly,' I said very patiently, 'is a red animal, like a daddy-long-legs, but not so big, perhaps an inch long, perhaps less. It is very hard in the body, and to me'— I was going to say 'particularly offensive,' but he broke in, 'Come, come; an inch or less. That won't do.' 'I can only tell you,' I said, 'what I know. Would it not be better if you told me from first to last what it is that has puzzled you, and then I may be able to give you some kind of an opinion.' He gazed at me meditatively. 'Perhaps it would,' he said. 'I told Mary only to-day that I thought you had some vestiges of sense in your head.' (I bowed my acknowledgments.) 'The thing is, I've an odd kind of shyness about talking of it. Nothing of the sort has happened to me before. Well, about eleven o'clock last night, or after, I took my candle and set out for my room. I had a book in my other hand— I always read something for a few minutes before I drop off to sleep. A dangerous habit: I don't recommend it: but *I* know how to manage my light and my bed curtains. Now then, first, as I stepped out of my study into the great hall that's next to it, and shut the door, my candle went out. I supposed I had clapped the door behind me too quick, and made a draught, and I was annoyed, for I'd no tinder-box nearer than my bedroom. But I knew my way well enough, and went on. The next thing was that my book was struck out of my hand in the dark: if I said twitched out of my hand it would better express the sensation. It fell on the floor. I picked it up, and went on, more annoyed than before, and a little startled. But as you know, that hall has many windows without curtains, and in summer nights like these it's easy to see not only where the furniture is, but whether there's anyone or anything moving: and there was no one— nothing of the kind. So on I went through the hall and through the audit chamber next to it, which also has big windows, and then into the bedrooms which lead to my own, where the curtains were drawn, and I had to go slower because of steps here and there. It was in the second of those rooms that I nearly got my *quietus*. The moment I opened the door of it I felt there was something wrong. I thought twice, I confess, whether I shouldn't turn back and find another way there is to my room rather than go through that one. Then I was ashamed of myself, and thought what people call better of it, though I don't know about "better" in this case. If I was to describe my experience exactly, I should say this: there was a dry, light, rustling sound all over the room as I went in, and then (you remember it was perfectly dark) something seemed to rush at me, and there was— I don't know how to put it— a sensation of long thin arms, or legs, or feelers, all about my face, and neck, and body. Very little strength in them, there seemed to be, but, Spearman, I don't think I was ever more horrified or disgusted in all my life, that I

remember: and it does take something to put me out. I roared out as loud as I could, and flung away my candle at random, and, knowing I was near the window, I tore at the curtain and somehow let in enough light to be able to see something waving which I knew was an insect's leg, by the shape of it: but, Lord, what a size! Why, the beast must have been as tall as I am. And now you tell me sawflies are an inch long or less. What do you make of it, Spearman?'

" 'For goodness' sake finish your story first,' I said. 'I never heard anything like it.' 'Oh,' said he, 'there's no more to tell. Mary ran in with a light, and there was nothing there. I didn't tell her what was the matter. I changed my room for last night, and I expect for good.' 'Have you searched this odd room of yours?' I said. 'What do you keep in it?' 'We don't use it,' he answered. 'There's an old press there, and some little other furniture.' 'And in the press?' said I. 'I don't know; I never saw it opened, but I do know that it's locked.' 'Well, I should have it looked into, and, if you had time, I own to having some curiosity to see the place myself.' 'I didn't exactly like to ask you, but that's rather what I hoped you'd say. Name your time and I'll take you there.' 'No time like the present,' I said at once, for I saw he would never settle down to anything while this affair was in suspense. He got up with great alacrity, and looked at me, I am tempted to think, with marked approval. 'Come along,' was all he said, however; and was pretty silent all the way to his house. My Mary (as he calls her in public, and I in private) was summoned, and we proceeded to the room. The Doctor had gone so far as to tell her that he had had something of a fright there last night, of what nature he had not yet divulged; but now he pointed out and described, very briefly, the incidents of his progress. When we were near the important spot, he pulled up, and allowed me to pass on. 'There's the room,' he said. 'Go in, Spearman, and tell us what you find.' Whatever I might have felt at midnight, noonday I was sure would keep back anything sinister, and I flung the door open with an air and stepped in. It was a well-lighted room, with its large window on the right, though not, I thought, a very airy one. The principal piece of furniture was the gaunt old press of dark wood. There was, too, a four-post bedstead, a mere skeleton which could hide nothing, and there was a chest of drawers. On the window-sill and the floor near it were the dead bodies of many hundred sawflies, and one torpid one which I had some satisfaction in killing. I tried the door of the press, but could not open it: the drawers, too, were locked. Somewhere, I was conscious, there was a faint rustling sound, but I could not locate it, and when I made my report to those outside, I said nothing of it. But, I said, clearly the next thing was to see what was in those locked receptacles. Uncle Oldys turned to Mary. 'Mrs. Maple,' he said, and Mary ran off— no one, I am sure, steps like her— and soon came back at a soberer pace, with an elderly lady of discreet aspect.

" 'Have you the keys of these things, Mrs. Maple?' said Uncle Oldys. His simple words let loose a torrent (not violent, but copious) of speech: had she been a shade or two higher in the social scale, Mrs. Maple might have stood as the model for Miss Bates.

" 'Oh, Doctor, and Miss, and you too, sir,' she said, acknowledging my presence with a bend, 'them keys! who was that again that come when first we took over things in this house— a gentleman in business it was, and I gave him his luncheon in the small parlour on account of us not having everything as we should like to see it in the large one— chicken, and apple-pie, and a glass of madeira— dear, dear, you'll say I'm running on, Miss Mary; but I only mention it to bring back my recollection; and there it comes— Gardner, just the same as it did last week with the artichokes and the text of the sermon. Now that Mr. Gardner, every key I got from him were labelled to itself, and each and every one was a key of some door or another in this house, and sometimes two; and when I say door, my meaning is door of a room, not like such a press as this is. Yes, Miss Mary, I know full well, and I'm just making it clear to your uncle and you too, sir. But now there *was* a box which this same gentleman he give over into my charge, and thinking no harm after he was gone I took the liberty, knowing it was your uncle's property, to rattle it: and unless I'm most surprisingly deceived, in that box there was keys, but what keys, that, Doctor, is known Elsewhere, for open the box, no that I would not do.'

"I wondered that Uncle Oldys remained as quiet as he did under this address. Mary, I knew, was amused by it, and he probably had been taught by experience that it was useless to break in upon it. At any rate he did not, but merely said at the end, 'Have you that box handy, Mrs. Maple? If so, you might bring it here.' Mrs. Maple pointed her finger at him, either in accusation or in gloomy triumph. 'There,' she said, 'was I to choose out the very words out of your mouth, Doctor, them would be the ones. And if I've took it to my own rebuke one half a dozen times, it's been nearer fifty. Laid awake I have in my bed, sat down in my chair I have, the same you and Miss Mary gave me the day I was twenty year in your service, and no person could desire a better— yes, Miss Mary, but it *is* the truth, and well we know who it is would have it different if he could.

"All very well," says I to myself, "but pray, when the Doctor calls you to account for that box, what are you going to say?" No, Doctor, if you was some masters I've heard of and I was some servants I could name, I should have an easy task before me, but things being, humanly speaking, what they are, the one course open to me is just to say to you that without Miss Mary comes to my room and helps me to my recollection, which her wits *may* manage what's

slipped beyond mine, no such box as that, small though it be, will cross your eyes this many a day to come.'

" 'Why, dear Mrs. Maple, why didn't you tell me before that you wanted me to help you to find it?' said my Mary. 'No, never mind telling me why it was: let us come at once and look for it.' They hastened off together. I could hear Mrs. Maple beginning an explanation which, I doubt not, lasted into the farthest recesses of the housekeeper's department. Uncle Oldys and I were left alone. 'A valuable servant,' he said, nodding towards the door. 'Nothing goes wrong under her: the speeches are seldom over three minutes.' 'How will Miss Oldys manage to make her remember about the box?' I asked.

" 'Mary? Oh, she'll make her sit down and ask her about her aunt's last illness, or who gave her the china dog on the mantelpiece— something quite off the point. Then, as Maple says, one thing brings up another, and the right one will come round sooner than you could suppose. There! I believe I hear them coming back already.'

"It was indeed so, and Mrs. Maple was hurrying on ahead of Mary with the box in her outstretched hand, and a beaming face. 'What was it,' she cried as she drew near, 'what was it as I said, before ever I come out of Dorsetshire to this place? Not that I'm a Dorset woman myself, nor had need to be. "Safe bind, safe find," and there it was in the place where I'd put it— what?— two months back, I dare say.' She handed it to Uncle Oldys, and he and I examined it with some interest, so that I ceased to pay attention to Mrs. Ann Maple for the moment, though I know that she went on to expound exactly where the box had been, and in what way Mary had helped to refresh her memory on the subject.

"It was an oldish box, tied with pink tape and sealed, and on the lid was pasted a label inscribed in old ink, 'The Senior Prebendary's House, Whitminster.' On being opened it was found to contain two keys of moderate size, and a paper, on which, in the same hand as the label, was 'Keys of the Press and Box of Drawers standing in the disused Chamber.' Also this: 'The Effects in this Press and Box are held by me, and to be held by my successors in the Residence, in trust for the noble Family of Kildonan, if claim be made by any survivor of it. I having made all the Enquiry possible to myself am of the opinion that that noble House is wholly extinct: the last Earl having been, as is notorious, cast away at sea, and his only Child and Heire deceas'd in my House (the Papers as to which melancholy Casualty were by me repos'd in the same Press in this year of our Lord 1753, 21 March). I am further of opinion that unless grave discomfort arise, such persons, not being of the Family of Kildonan, as shall become possess'd of these keys, will be well advised to leave matters as they are: which opinion I do not express without weighty and

sufficient reason; and am Happy to have my Judgment confirm'd by the other Members of this College and Church who are conversant with the Events referr'd to in this Paper. Tho. Ashton, *S.T.P.*, *Præb. senr.* Will. Blake, *S.T.P.*, *Decanus*. Hen. Goodman, *S.T.B.*, *Præb. junr.*'

"'Ah!' said Uncle Oldys, 'grave discomfort! So he thought there might be something. I suspect it was that young man,' he went on, pointing with the key to the line about the 'only Child and Heire.' 'Eh, Mary? The viscounty of Kildonan was Saul.' 'How *do* you know that, Uncle?' said Mary. 'Oh, why not? it's all in Debrett— two little fat books. But I meant the tomb by the lime walk. He's there. What's the story, I wonder? Do you know it, Mrs. Maple? and, by the way, look at your sawflies by the window there.'

"Mrs. Maple, thus confronted with two subjects at once, was a little put to it to do justice to both. It was no doubt rash in Uncle Oldys to give her the opportunity. I could only guess that he had some slight hesitation about using the key he held in his hand.

"'Oh them flies, how bad they was, Doctor and Miss, this three or four days: and you, too, sir, you wouldn't guess, none of you! And how they come, too! First we took the room in hand, the shutters was up, and had been, I dare say, years upon years, and not a fly to be seen. Then we got the shutter bars down with a deal of trouble and left it so for the day, and next day I sent Susan in with the broom to sweep about, and not two minutes hadn't passed when out she come into the hall like a blind thing, and we had regular to beat them off her. Why, her cap and her hair, you couldn't see the colour of it, I do assure you, and all clustering round her eyes, too. Fortunate enough she's not a girl with fancies, else if it had been me, why only the tickling of the nasty things would have drove me out of my wits. And now there they lay like so many dead things. Well, they was lively enough on the Monday, and now here's Thursday, is it, or no, Friday. Only to come near the door and you'd hear them pattering up against it, and once you opened it, dash at you, they would, as if they'd eat you. I couldn't help thinking to myself, "If you was bats, where should we be this night?" Nor you can't cresh 'em, not like a usual kind of a fly. Well, there's something to be thankful for, if we could but learn by it. And then this tomb, too,' she said, hastening on to her second point to elude any chance of interruption, 'of them two poor young lads. I say poor, and yet when I recollect myself, I was at tea with Mrs. Simpkins, the sexton's wife, before you come, Doctor and Miss Mary, and that's a family has been in the place, what? I dare say a hundred years in that very house, and could put their hand on any tomb or yet grave in all the yard and give you name and age. And his account of that young man, Mr. Simpkins's I mean to say— *well!*" She compressed her lips and nodded several times. 'Tell us, Mrs. Maple,' said Mary. 'Go on,' said

Uncle Oldys. 'What about him?' said I. 'Never was such a thing seen in this place, not since Queen Mary's times and the Pope and all,' said Mrs. Maple. 'Why, do you know he lived in this very house, him and them that was with him, and for all I can tell in this identical room' (she shifted her feet uneasily on the floor). 'Who was with him? Do you mean the people of the house?' said Uncle Oldys suspiciously. 'Not to call people, Doctor, dear no,' was the answer; 'more what he brought with him from Ireland, I believe it was. No, the people in the house was the last to hear anything of his goings-on. But in the town not a family but knew how he stopped out at night: and them that was with him, why, they were such as would strip the skin from the child in its grave; and a withered heart makes an ugly thin ghost, says Mr. Simpkins. But they turned on him at the last, he says, and there's the mark still to be seen on the minster door where they run him down. And that's no more than the truth, for I got him to show it to myself, and that's what he said. A lord he was, with a Bible name of a wicked king, whatever his god-fathers could have been thinking of.' 'Saul was the name,' said Uncle Oldys. 'To be sure it was Saul, Doctor, and thank you; and now isn't it King Saul that we read of raising up the dead ghost that was slumbering in its tomb till he disturbed it, and isn't that a strange thing, this young lord to have such a name, and Mr. Simpkins's grandfather to see him out of his window of a dark night going about from one grave to another in the yard with a candle, and them that was with him following through the grass at his heels: and one night him to come right up to old Mr. Simpkins's window that gives on the yard and press his face up against it to find out if there was anyone in the room that could see him: and only just time there was for old Mr. Simpkins to drop down like, quiet, just under the window and hold his breath, and not stir till he heard him stepping away again, and this rustling-like in the grass after him as he went, and then when he looked out of his window in the morning there was treadings in the grass and a dead man's bone. Oh, he was a cruel child for certain, but he had to pay in the end, and after.' 'After?' said Uncle Oldys, with a frown. 'Oh yes, Doctor, night after night in old Mr. Simpkins's time, and his son, that's our Mr. Simpkins's father, yes, and our own Mr. Simpkins too. Up against that same window, particular when they've had a fire of a chilly evening, with his face right on the panes, and his hands fluttering out, and his mouth open and shut, open and shut, for a minute or more, and then gone off in the dark yard. But open the window at such times, no, that they dare not do, though they could find it in their heart to pity the poor thing, that pinched up with the cold, and seemingly fading away to a nothink as the years passed on. Well, indeed, I believe it is no more than the truth what our Mr. Simpkins says on his own grandfather's word, "A withered heart makes an ugly thin ghost."' 'I dare say,' said Uncle Oldys

suddenly: so suddenly that Mrs. Maple stopped short. 'Thank you. Come away, all of you.' 'Why, *Uncle*,' said Mary, 'are you not going to open the press after all?' Uncle Oldys blushed, actually blushed. 'My dear,' he said, 'you are at liberty to call me a coward, or applaud me as a prudent man, whichever you please. But I am neither going to open that press nor that chest of drawers myself, nor am I going to hand over the keys to you or to any other person. Mrs. Maple, will you kindly see about getting a man or two to move those pieces of furniture into the garret?' 'And when they do it, Mrs. Maple,' said Mary, who seemed to me— I did not then know why— more relieved than disappointed by her uncle's decision, 'I have something that I want put with the rest; only quite a small packet.'

"We left that curious room not unwillingly, I think. Uncle Oldys's orders were carried out that same day. And so," concludes Mr. Spearman, "Whitminster has a Bluebeard's chamber, and, I am rather inclined to suspect, a Jack-in-the-box, awaiting some future occupant of the residence of the senior prebendary."

3: Poison can be Puzzling

Max Afford

1906-1954

The Australian Women's Weekly, 12 Feb 1944

THE HERO gathered the heroine hungrily into his arms— and in the warm darkness of Odeon cinema a thousand women leaned forward in their padded seats, a thousand pairs of lips parted expectantly, and Elizabeth Blackburn gave a little sigh and said to her husband:

"Isn't he marvellous!"

Mr. Blackburn had been dragged away from his fireside to witness "The Laughing Lover," and, unmoved by the epic being unfolded before him on the screen, was dozing peacefully. He awoke as his wife's hand tightened about his own. At that moment a bilious yellow slide blotted out the screen.

On it, scrawled hurriedly in ink, were the curt words, "Mr. Blackburn— Manager's Office— Please!"

"Oh, bother!" exclaimed Elizabeth. She dragged her hand away, and began fumbling for her gloves and bag. "What's the idea?"

Jeffery was already on his feet. With a firm hand on her arm, he piloted her stumblingly down the row of annoyed patrons, beaming apologies right and left.

A uniformed usherette held aside heavy curtains, a page-boy swung open gilded doors, and as they stood blinking in the lighted foyer, a plump young man hastened up to them.

"Would you be Mr. Blackburn?" And as Jeffery nodded, he explained: "My name is Mason— I'm the assistant manager here. Inspector Read is waiting for you in my office."

Elizabeth's eyes glinted like the crystal chandelier above their heads. "So!" she snapped. "It's that man again!"

In the manager's office, Chief Inspector William Read was waiting impatiently.

"What in Noah's name are you doin' in a place like this, son?" he said Jeffery.

"What's the trouble, Chief?"

Read waited only until the manager had left the room. "Ever heard of a chap named Ferdinand Cass?" he barked.

Jeffery nodded. "Financier of sorts— and almost obscenely rich?"

"That's the pigeon!" The Inspector puffed at his cigar. "And so crooked he could hide behind a circular staircase! That's why he's got more enemies than a monkey has fleas. Know what?" He cocked an eyebrow at the younger man. "Someone's threatened to rub him out to-night."

"Need we worry?"

Read grunted. "The Government pays me a salary to look after people— even rats like Cass. You see, Ferdie's got a hunch that he'll be dead before morning."

"Can't this Cass man protect himself?" Elizabeth broke in rather impatiently.

"Sure! That's why he's built himself that stronghold half-way up Carnarvon Towers." The Inspector chewed on his cigar. "Lives in a flat eight floors from the ground and six from the roof. Air conditioned because the windows are fixtures. Reinforced steel floors and ceiling, and only one entrance— from the main corridor."

Jeffery said: "And in spite of all this, Mr. Cass still has the breeze up about to-night?"

"Rang through to the Assistant Commissioner himself and demanded protection. I'm going round there now." Read's glance at the younger man was quizzical. "Thought you might like to be on any fun that's offering, son."

Mr. Blackburn rose. "Anything," he announced, "is preferable to 'The Laughing Lover'! I'm ready, Chief."

Jeffery asked: "If, as you say, Cass has been threatened before, why the sudden trepidation about this particular night?"

They were purring along in a hastily summoned taxi. The city was going home from its night's pleasure. "You know Cass' record, son— blackmailer, receiver, big-scale confidence man. He's looked upon earthly sin and suffering without batting an eyelid. But this time it looks as though he's come up against something quite different."

"Something unearthly?"

Read's tone was soft, cautious. "It's all so outlandish that it's got me to thinking that maybe Cass going the same way as his wife. She was a neurotic piece of goods who got mixed up in some black magic hocus-pocus and finished by throwing herself out of a window six months after they were married."

Elizabeth sat up sharply. "So Cass is a sorrowing widower?"

"Don't you know the story?" grunted the Inspector. He leaned forward.

"A year ago Cass married the sister of Arthur Harkness, an explorer chap who carries out expeditions for some geographic society here. Eleanor Harkness— I think that was her name— was filthy with money and a mighty queer petticoat to boot! She got about with a rummy set that went in for all sorts of fancy religions and that jiggery-pokery. She owned a very big house in the country— and what went on there late at night scared fits out of the neighborhood.

"It was said they used to hold some ceremony during which they'd attempt to change their form into that of animals— wolves, horses and snakes." Read's voice expressed contempt. "Lot of eyewash, naturally, but it was after one of these affairs that Mrs. Cass cracked up and threw herself from a window in the house.

"Naturally there was a fuss," the Inspector went on, "but before we could get down to facts, Harkness whisked Cass away on some expedition with him. Although we didn't know it at the time, it now appears that this expedition finished up at some place in Venezuela." Read paused, and added slowly:

"And there something happened that put the unholy breeze up Ferdinand Cass!"

Jeffery glanced up quickly.

"How do you know?"

"Because when Cass returned he was a changed man. A few weeks ago we dragged him down to headquarters for a quiet little probe on some of his shady transactions— and I've never seen a man more altered!

"That's the whole story, son," the Inspector continued. "Cass threw out some dark hints about his life being in danger— and that this mysterious avenger had timed to strike on the first night of the full moon, but about an hour ago the A.C. phoned me. Cass had been on to him in a terrific slew. He demanded police protection until after midnight."

"Why?" inquired Mr. Blackburn.

The taxi had slackened speed some minutes before. Now it drew into a side-street off the main artery of traffic. As it stopped, the Inspector reached out and swung open the door.

"Here we are," he announced. "You can ask Cass for yourself."

Although by no means new, Carnarvon Towers is still pointed out as one of the show places of the city. It is a man-made cliff, with not even a balcony to relieve the monotony of cream brick and stucco. Jeffery, Elizabeth, and Read stepped into the brightly lit foyer as distant clocks were striking eleven. A page ushered them in the direction of the lift.

The steel cage purred downward, the sliding doors were thrust apart, and the Inspector, in front, retreated a step to allow an emerging passenger to pass. This was a podgy, middle-aged man who measured them for an instant with shrewd eyes, then, turning, walked quickly out of the foyer.

As the lift slid upwards Jeffery murmured: "I wonder where he came from?"

"Cass' floor," Elizabeth said briskly.

"How do you know?"

The girl gestured to the floor indicator on the wall of the lift. "Use your head, my boy. Two floors are illuminated on this board— the ground which lit up when we rung the bell— and the eighth. Only one man got out of this lift— ergo, he rang the hell on the eighth floor!"

"Astounding!" murmured Mr. Blackburn. Then the lift stopped and they filed out into the corridor.

Read knocked with unconscious authority at the door of Cass' flat. There was an immediate and significant response— a key turned and there came the metallic clink of a chain. Jeffery turned to the older man with raised brows, but before he had time to comment the door opened an inch. A voice cried sharply: "Who's that?"

It was scarcely a friendly greeting, but Read answered civilly: "The Inspector. Sorry I'm late."

The door swung wide and Cass stood revealed, a massive shape dark against the brightly lit room beyond. He beckoned them inside and closed the door with a bang, pausing to fiddle with a short length of chain. As he turned, Jeffery had his first close look at the man.

Ferdinand Cass was middle-aged, with the build of a wrestler gone to seed. Yet there was more than a suggestion of strength in those massive shoulders, and deep in their puffy pits the black eyes were hard and challenging. There was something wrong with his mouth, too; it seemed shrunken, unformed. When he spoke, Jeffery noticed, it was with a slight lisp.

"Where on earth have you been, man?" He addressed Read, and without waiting for a reply, jerked his head in the direction of the others. "And who are these people?"

The inspector explained. At the mention of Blackburn's name, Cass started ever so slightly and raked the couple with a quick, suspicious glance. A moment later it vanished; the big man lumbered over and shook Jeffery's hand, nodding to Elizabeth. "Nice of you to come," he muttered. "Better have something to keep the cold out..." Without waiting for assent, he crossed to the cabinet at one side of the room.

Jeffery was taking stock of the apartment. It was large, almost square, devoid of hangings and broken on the outside wall by the long, fixed window Reid had spoken about. A single half-open door gave a glimpse into what appeared to be the bedroom, and in here, as in the living-room, lights blazed.

"I can't see anything happening to you in here," Read said dryly.

Cass was crossing to Elizabeth, glass in hand. Now he halted, his eyes wary as though listening.

"You'd say that this room was screwed tighter than a coffin eh, Inspector? But it'd take more than an oaken casket to keep Eleanor under the earth..."

"Eleanor?"

"My wife." The glass in Cass' hand trembled so that the liquid rocked dangerously. "She's escaped. She's been here. That filthy scent she used— nuit noire— the place reeked of it the other night!"

"What's this foolery, Cass? Your wife is dead!" Read said sharply.

Cass shook his head slowly. "I thought that black-magic stuff Eleanor studied was just so much piffle. Then out there in the clearing of the rain forest, I saw her— plain as I can see you. She was coming to-night, she said— "

"Nonsense," said a crisp voice from the bedroom.

As if tugged by a string, the three newcomers swung round. Advancing into the room was a small dry stick of a man, with wrinkled good-natured face tanned by foreign sun.

"How do you do? My name is Harkness," he said, nodding to the visitors. Deftly he intercepted Cass and took the glass from him.

"I'll look after our guests, Ferd. You slip inside and make yourself presentable."

They saw Cass blink. Then, for the first time, he seemed to become conscious of his tousled hair, his unshaven cheek, and the crumpled dressing-gown tied loosely about his big frame. He hesitated only a moment, then, with a muttered apology, moved into the bedroom, closing the door behind him.

Jeffery said quietly, "So you think it was nonsense Mr. Cass was talking just now?"

Harkness came forward, his dark eyes twinkling. "Of course it's nonsense," he said briskly. "Why, if I'd known Ferd was going to take it so seriously, I'd never have allowed that confounded pi-ai man to try his tricks. But it was probably the setting. Out there in that forest you get the feeling almost anything might happen— even the conjuring up of a dead woman from her grave on the other side of the world."

Harkness paused, obviously expecting comment. But as his eyes met only blank-bewilderment in each face, he shrugged.

"Sorry. I keep forgetting you people know only half the story." He sat down with a stiff little movement and reached for a cigarette. "You see, it happened when I took Ferd on that last expedition. I had to do some mapping and photography in a little-known part of Brazil— the great plateau land lying beyond the Towashing Pinnacle in Venezuela. We picked up thirty Indian porters, and with these in tow we started out for the great rain forest directly under the pinnacle.

"We were deep into the rain forest two days later, and camped waiting for the fog to lift before we could approach the pinnacle itself. I've never encountered a stranger, weirder place.

"Imagine a forest so thick that the matted growth shuts out all sunlight. The only light that filters down is a dim greenish yellow radiance. It is always damp, and this moisture contributes to the death-mould that lies thickly over everything.

"Day after day we lived in a world surrounded by the eternal forest. More experienced men than Ferd have cracked under such a strain, and it was only to relieve the monotony that I suggested he might like to see some of the tricks that Jan-Eri, our pi-ai man, could perform."

Harkness paused to blow a wreath of smoke. "I should have explained that every village we passed through had its pi-ai man— or witch doctor. No native could be persuaded to set foot in the forest unless the pi-ai man came along to protect them from evil.

"That night the native porters gathered in a ring. Ferd and I were inside, and the pi-ai man sat cross-legged on a boulder about ten feet away. He had lit a small fire in front of him. Then he began to rock backwards and forwards contorting his face and gibbering. I wasn't very impressed— I'd seen such showmanship many times before. But Ferd was drinking it in like a child at a circus. The pi-ai man delved unto his loincloth and threw something in the fire.

"There was a burst of flame that almost blinded us. The natives set up a loud wailing. Then there arose a great cloud of smoke that sent us all coughing and choking...and when it began to clear away..."

For the first time those pleasant even tones faltered.

Harkness added slowly: "When I looked at the rock the smoke had coalesced into something that might have been a human figure. Ferd, on the other hand, swears it was my sister, feature for feature, line for line. It is true that I heard a voice speak, but those confounded niggers were wailing so shrilly that I couldn't catch a syllable. But Ferd believes my sister warned him that she could see him lying dead. But after the smoke had cleared away and the porters had quietened down, there occurred one curious and inexplicable incident for which I can personally vouch."

It was Jeffery who spoke. "What was that?"

Harkness rose. "In the ashes left by the pi-ai man's fire, as though traced by a finger, was a date and a month." His keen eyes lingered for a moment on the bedroom door. "This month...and to-day's date."

It was at that moment they heard the sound of a glass dropped in the next room. Then, like a long, thin sigh that troubled the stillness, they heard Cass' horrified whisper.

"Eleanor...you...!"

Inspector Read clenched his fists. "What's all this?" he snapped. But Harkness had leapt past him.

"Ferd!" Harkness flung open the door. On the threshold he halted abruptly. The others crowded behind him, pushing over his low shoulder for a glimpse of the room beyond. From an overhead globe light flooded the comfortable apartment and glinted among the fragments of a cut-glass tumbler which lay shattered on the floor.

A small pool of water had formed on the polished boards and a fluffy Persian kitten lapped inquiringly at the oozing liquid...

"WHAT the deuce?" snarled Read, and strode into the room, almost shouldering Harkness aside in his impatience. Those people waiting by the door saw his big frame suddenly stiffen as he halted, staring down beyond the low bed.

"Come here, son," he said softly. Then: "No, not you, Lisbeth!" But it was too late. Four pairs of eyes were riveted to the floor.

The body of Ferdinand Cass lay with his head propped against the bed. They knew in a moment that Cass was dead.

Jeffery spoke the word almost before he was conscious of it. "Poison!"

"Not this time, son!" Read's eyes were on the kitten. It had lapped the last of the spilt water and was now marching perkily across the floor, licking its lips with evident enjoyment. "Whatever killed Cass did the job in two minutes. If it were poison in that glass, the cat would be stiff as mutton by now!"

"Then," said Jeffery, stooping suddenly, "where does this fit in?" From the bed coverlet he picked up a square of crumpled cambric initialled F.C. and spotted with scarlet stains. "A pretty problem, Chief! If Cass wasn't poisoned, this may be valuable evidence." A soft exclamation from his wife made him turn. The girl stood sniffing the air; eyes wide in a pale face.

"Jeff," she whispered. "That perfume— nuit noire— the room reeks with it. I noticed it when we first came in, but here by the bed— it's stronger..."

Inspector Read's eyes moved past Jeffery's lean face to the kitten rubbing contentedly against Harkness' leg. "I want a telephone," he snapped, and strode for the living room, the explorer at his heels.

THE MORNING FOLLOWING the extraordinary death of Ferdinand Cass found the Blackburn ménage in anything but a happy mood.

The shock had affected Elizabeth's nerves, and, after a troubled sleep, she awoke with a nagging tooth-ache. Her husband had scarcely slept at all.

Now they sat late over a barely tasted breakfast.

"It's crazy!" Jeffery said savagely. "Now, let us sum up! There was no poison in that glass, since the cat was not affected— yet obviously Cass died of poisoning. Evidence of the handkerchief shows that it is possible that the

poison was injected through the skin— yet Doctor Conroy examined his skin closely and found no wound. Then how in the name of Satan did Cass die?"

"Suicide!" returned Elizabeth.

"Not only irrelevant, but quite wrong," snapped Jeffery. "If Cass had committed suicide, he would have chosen a simple, straightforward manner. Why should he confuse the issue like this?"

"No reason at all."

"You see where this brings us?" Jeffery was toying with the crumbs on the tablecloth. "It means that someone engineered Cass' death to look like magic. And an engineered death is merely a polite euphemism for murder! That's what kept me awake last night, Beth. Cass was murdered— murdered while dressing alone in a hermetically-sealed room, with four witnesses standing not a dozen yards away!"

Elizabeth was about to speak when a buzz on the doorbell interrupted her. They waited in silence until the maid opened the breakfast-room door to announce:

"Inspector Read is outside, Mr. Blackburn. Shall I ask him to come in?"

Read's opening remark was deeply disgruntled.

"Why is it that rats like Cass make more trouble over dying than twenty law-abiding citizens? If it wasn't for two things, I'd be inclined to save the taxpayers' money by writing the whole thing off as heart failure through sheer funk!"

"Two things?" the younger man sat forward, "What are they, Chief?"

Read twisted, felt in his pocket and produced an envelope. Tipping it, he emptied the contents into the palm of his hand. Rising, he crossed and thrust under Jeffery's nose a number of tiny glass fragments. "Sniff that!" he demanded.

"Perfume!" exclaimed Blackburn instantly. "Nuit noire!"

"Sure thing!" The Inspector returned the glass to the envelope and lumbered back to his chair. "When we searched the flat last night we discovered those fragments between the counterpane and the sheet. Someone had shoved a phial of the perfume there. When Cass sat on the bed, his weight broke the glass and released the odor..."

"Ho-ha!" said Mr. Blackburn triumphantly "And it wasn't Eleanor's ghost! Nice work, Chief! And what's the second thing?"

"The contents of that glass Cass dropped. Diluted with the water was a virulent Indian arrow poison— stuff called cassava. Kills within two minutes— "

"But that kitten," interrupted Elizabeth.

Read grunted. "Here's the snag. Cassava must enter the bloodstream to cause death. You could drink a gallon of the stuff every day— and never even have a headache That's how pussy got away with it."

"Then even if Cass had drunk that water— "

"Which he didn't," snapped the Inspector. "Examination of the contents of the stomach reveals no trace of poison. Yet there's no doubt that he died of cassava poison introduced through the blood-stream. The headache is— how was it introduced?"

"Wait a moment." Blackburn rose to his feet and began to pace the floor. "There's something missing, Chief— a break in the continuity. Whoever arranged this death must have known, that the poison was harmless if taken internally— therefore, why put it in the water at all?"

"I've got it!" It was Elizabeth, her bright eyes flashing from face to face. "Cass must have had some injury to his stomach. Some kind of ulcer, perhaps. When he drank the water the poison entered his bloodstream through this weakness in the stomach wall!"

The Inspector sighed heavily. "I've just told you, Elizabeth. Cass didn't swallow as much as a drop of that water. Stomach examination proves it."

"Then," said Jeffery, "what was he doing with the glass in his hand when he died?"

Silence. The heavy silence of frustration and bewilderment. It was broken by Elizabeth who made a little grimace of pain, and rose to her feet. "My tooth's playing up again," she explained. "I'm going to ring the dentist." As the door closed behind her, Jeffery remarked:

"You've seen Harkness, Chief?"

"About the poison?" Read nodded. "First thing I did— he told me that Cass brought back several Indian arrow-poisons from that expedition. Oh, yes, he was telling the truth. A cabinet in the bedroom had a mighty queer collection of the stuff."

"You've checked upon Cass' movements yesterday?" Jeffery asked.

"Sure thing! The desk clerks gave us all we wanted to know. Cass was alone all the morning. After lunch Harkness arrived. There was only one other visitor." The Inspector paused, eyeing the younger man quizzically. "Remember that foxy-faced little squirt who got out of the lift?"

Jeffery nodded.

"He arrived about ten minutes before. Harkness was there, but he says he knows nothing. Man was a complete stranger to him."

"What did Cass want with the man?"

Read shrugged. "Harkness says Cass admitted the stranger, and the couple went into the bedroom, Cass closing the door. Harkness could hear only the

murmur of voices. When they came out, the little man looked pretty fierce, according to Harkness. As they crossed to the door, Harkness heard him say, 'You'll do exactly as I say, or I won't be responsible for what happens to you. And don't say you haven't been warned."

"H'm— sounds bad. Any idea who this stranger might be?"

"He's clean as far as our records are concerned. No trace of his mug in our files. But we've circulated his description. We'll lay our hands on him pretty soon, don't you fear!" The big man rose and stretched. "Looks like our man, don't you think, son?"

But Jeffery's thoughts were elsewhere. "There's that confounded handkerchief. Those blood spots must have come from somewhere!"

"Not from Cass' carcase," returned the Inspector. "Conroy went over the body again this morning."

But the other was barely listening. "That's the snag, Chief. Find out where those bloodstains came from and I've a feeling that the whole puzzle will slot together perfectly!"

AFTER LUNCH when Elizabeth departed for the appointment she had made with her dentist, Jeffery flung himself down in a chair and attempted to read. But the vision of a blood-stained handkerchief kept obtruding between the printed lines. Desperately he tried to concentrate, only to find his mind growing woolly. Gradually, his taut body relaxed, and at length, the book slipping from his fingers, Jeffery slept...

He awoke with a start as the door opened and Elizabeth came in.

Jeffery grunted and struggled to his feet. "How are you?"

She tossed her bag on the couch and she took off her hat. "All right now. But it was pretty sticky while it lasted. There was an abscess on the side of the wretched tooth. Dr. Morris had to lance it."

"Painful?"

Elizabeth nodded. "The anaesthetic's beginning to wear off. I feel a cigarette might help now. They're in my bag. Jeff— dig them out for me, would you?"

Jeffery walked across and, picking up the handbag, fumbled inside. Elizabeth, examining her sorely tried mouth in the mirror, heard him give a sudden ejaculation. Wheeling, she saw her husband waving aloft a tiny slip of embroidered cambric.

"Beth!" His tone almost trembled with eagerness. "Where did this come from?"

She stared at him. "That's my handkerchief."

"But the blood-spots— ?"

"Darling, you can't have an abscess lanced without bleeding— "

But Jeffery, his face alight, had turned away, handkerchief crumpled in a determined fist. "So that's it, at last! The missing piece of the jig-saw puzzle!" He was pacing the floor again, muttering to himself. "It slots into place perfectly— the whole picture's complete! The picture of the man— the only man who could have planned and carried out such a crime!" He swung around on his wife.

"Beth— when we met Cass last night at the door of his flat, did you notice anything wrong with him?"

"He looked awfully untidy— "

"No, no, no!" Impatience quickened her husband's voice. "I mean— anything wrong with his mouth?"

"Of course. He'd forgotten to put his false teeth in— "

"Good heavens! You knew!"

Elizabeth Blackburn said calmly: "Darling, there's no need to bawl like a mad bull. I should have thought it was obvious to everyone. Anyhow, what does it matter?"

"You'll find out!" snapped Jeffery. He almost sprang for the telephone and dialled a number. "Blackburn here— put me through to the Chief!" He drummed impatient fingers as the wire crackled and hummed in his ear. Then Read's familiar bark sounded at the other end. "What's on your mind now, son?"

"Listen, Chief! Don't ask any questions, but get through to Conroy at once. Tell him to look under Cass' false teeth for a tiny incision in the gum made by a dentist's lancet— "

"But, Jeff— "

"And now I'll give you a tip! Contact every dentist to this city. Find out the one who lanced an abscess in Cass' mouth the day before yesterday When it didn't heal, Cass called him in again last night. Find this dentist and you'll find the man we met coming out of the lift. Better than that— you'll find the real murderer of Ferdinand Cass! And ring me back, Chief— I'll be waiting!"

ARTHUR HARKNESS laid down his magazine, yawned slightly, and glanced at his wrist-watch. The tiny hands pointed to eleven-fifteen. He rose, and, walking across to the clock on the mantel, was about to wind it, when a knock sounded through the flat. Harkness frowned, hesitated a moment as though to ignore the summons, then changing his mind crossed and opened the door. Blackburn and the Chief Inspector stood on the threshold.

"Good night, gentlemen." The explorer's tone mirrored his surprise. "Won't you come in?"

"Thanks," grunted Read, as the door closed behind them. "Won't keep you up long, Mr. Harkness. Thought you might be interested to know we'd caught the Cass murderer."

"Murderer?" The man's black eyes moved quickly from face to face. "But I had no idea...won't you sit down?" He gestured to a comfortable lounge. Jeffery nodded and stretched himself out on the cushions.

"You had no idea that it was murder, Mr. Harkness?"

"Indeed no." He hesitated a moment, then: "Brilliantly executed, I should say?"

"Undoubtedly!" Jeffery was lighting a cigarette. "With the exception of the inevitable mistake. Extraordinary how criminals will never learn!" Abruptly he produced a spotted handkerchief. "You see, our murderer counted on getting into that bedroom first, and removing this."

From his position against the door the Inspector said abruptly: "You're confusing Mr. Harkness, son. Start at the beginning."

"Quite right, too." Jeffery leaned back. "You see, Harkness, when our murderer planned Cass' death, he wanted to make it look as inexplicable as possible. Frankly, he wanted to make it appear almost like black magic. Because there he was, sitting talking with three witnesses while Cass was done to death in the next room. Because he had set a brilliant trap for Cass, and that gentleman walked straight into it."

Harkness, his lithe body taut, sat watching Blackburn as a show dog watches its master. He ran a pink tongue swiftly over his lips. "I— I don't understand..."

"About the trap?" inquired Jeffery. "Well, that was based on the fact that the previous day Cass had an abscess on his gum lanced. When the incision refused to heal, Cass sent for his dentist. More important to the murderer, it meant that Cass could not wear his dentures without considerable pain. Therefore, he kept the plates in a glass of water on a table by his bed— "

"Sit down!" barked Read sharply. Harkness had half-risen, and was glancing to and fro like a trapped animal. As he relaxed in his chair, Blackburn continued.

"So our murderer dilutes the water with cassava poison, knowing full well that the moment Cass removed the plates and put them in his mouth the poison would enter the bloodstream through the lanced portion of the gum!"

Jeffery smiled, a cold, grim smile.

Something glistened wetly on the explorer's forehead. He raised an unsteady hand and wiped it away. "You've no proof," he said huskily.

"Proof enough, Harkness. You were the only person besides Cass who had knowledge of that poison. You spun us that eyewash about black magic. You

lied when you said you had no knowledge of Cass' visitor's business. We've found the dentist, and he says you were present in that bedroom while he treated Cass' abscess. His parting remark was anger because Cass refused to obey his instructions regarding the treatment of the abscess. You lied about that— and you lied about this handkerchief!"

Harkness gave a thin sigh. "Yes, gentlemen— I lied. I murdered Cass. I could have done it weeks before out in Venezuela, but I wanted him to suffer something of the tortures which he inflicted on my sister."

He glanced at both men in turn. When neither spoke, he went on in a voice weary with resignation.

"Cass married Eleanor for her money. If she got into a queer crowd, it was through her husband's introduction. He forced her to act as hostess to those decadents, his friends. He inflicted upon her other mental and physical degradations I care not to speak of now. In the end he reduced my sister to such a pitiable state of mind that she took her own life. Thus he was left to enjoy the fortune her marriage brought him.

"Eleanor's death was always on that man's conscience. That was why a judicious sprinkling of her favourite perfume in his bedroom was sufficient to start him sweating with fear. I think— and hope— that Cass suffered acute mental agony before he died. You heard the naked panic in his voice as he whispered her name in those last few moments." Harkness' voice, animated by his recital, slowed again. "That's all, gentleman."

Read gave a short official cough. "You'll have to come with us, Harkness, and make an official statement at headquarters."

"I am ready." The sun-wrinkled face was pale, but there was no unsteadiness in his movements as the explorer rose. "I should like to get my hat and coat from the bedroom." Without waiting for permission, he walked inside and closed the door.

Two minutes ticked away. Suddenly the inspector sprang towards the door. "What's keeping him?" he barked.

He had some difficulty in opening the bedroom door, for the body lay sprawled across the entrance. Down one side of the face a deep wavering scratch showed plainly. Clenched so tightly in the chilling hand that he had to force the fingers apart to retrieve it, Read found a small wooden arrowhead.

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4: The Devil Stone

Beatrice Heron-Maxwell

1859-1927

The Pall Mall Magazine, Jan 1895

IT WAS IN THE DUSKY, tepid twilight of a particularly hot, vaporous, drowsy day at Aix-les-bains, in Savoy, that I passed through the hotel garden, and prepared to take a languid stroll through the streets of the little town. I was tired of having nothing to do and no one to talk to; the other people staying at the Hotel de l'Europe were mostly foreigners, and, apart from that, entirely uninteresting; and as to my father, he was almost a nonentity to me at present, till his "course" was completed. From early morn to dewy eve he was immersed in the waters, either outwardly or inwardly, or both; and beyond occasional glimpses of him, arrayed in a costume resembling that of an Arab sheikh, being conveyed in pomp and a sedan chair to or from the baths, I was, figuratively speaking, an orphan until *table d' hôte*.

As I crossed the verandah some one rose from a long chair, and, throwing his book down, said, "Where are you going, Miss Durant? May I come too?"

"If you like," I answered, politely but indifferently; "I am only going to look for spoons."

"For—?"

"Spoons. I am collecting, you know; it is something to do— and one can always give them away when one is tired of them."

So we sauntered along, side by side; and as we did so I began to feel less bored, and more reconciled to the trouble of existence, and finally amused and interested and flattered.

For this quiet-looking middle-aged man— to whom my father had introduced me two days before, as an old friend of his, and whom I had mentally summed tip as "Rather handsome, clever perhaps, conceited possibly, and married probably"— was making himself agreeable as only a cultivated, polished man of the world, who wishes to make a favourable impression, can; and gradually I found myself acknowledging that his dark, intellectual face, with its crown of waving, iron-grey hair, was something more than handsome, and that his cleverness was suflicient to carry him beyond conceit, while apparently it did not set him above a very evident enjoyment of a girl's society and conversation. He had already learnt most of my tastes and occupations, and drawn from me, by a magnetic sympathy, some confessions as to my inmost thoughts and aspirations, telling me in return that he was travelling wearily in search of rest, authoritatively ordered by his doctor; and he was deploring his lonely bachelorhood, when my attention was attracted by some quaint spoons half hidden amongst other dull silver things in a forsaken-

looking little shop to which our wanderings had led us through narrow, dingy byways.

"I wonder how much they are," I said; and, asking me to wait outside, Colonel Haughton disappeared into the obscure interior. I remained gazing through the window for a moment, then, impelled by what idle impulse I know not, I walked slowly on.

The sound of a casement opening just over my head and a feminine laugh arrested me, and I looked up. It was a curious laugh, low and controlled, but with a malicious mockery in it that seemed a fit ending to some scathing speech; and just inside the open lattice, her arms resting on the sill and chin dropped lightly on her clasped hands, leant the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. It was but a glimpse of auburn hair on a white forehead, of eyes like brown pansies, and parted lips that looked like scarlet petals against the perfect pallor of her rounded cheeks, but it is photographed for ever on my brain. For, as I looked, a man's hand and arm, brown, lean, and very supple, with nervous fingers, on one of which a green stone flashed, clutching a poniard, came round her neck, and plunged the dagger, slanting-wise, deep down into her heart. The smile on the beautiful lips quivered and fixed, but no sound came from them, and the eyes turned up and closed; and as she swayed towards the open window, the spell that was upon me broke, and with a shuddering cry I fled. On, on— blindly, madly, desperately— with no sense or thought or feeling save an overwhelming horror. A red mist seemed to close round me and wall me in, and as I fought against it I felt my strength fail, and all was dark and still.

Somewhere in the darkness a voice speaking, the touch of a hand on my face, a glimpse of light, a sense of pain that some one was suffering, then consciousness and memory. My father's anxious face bent over me, and his voice, as though from a distance, said, "Theo, are you better, dear? No, don't get up— rest, and take this." And, sinking back, I vaguely understood that I was in my own room at the hotel, and that a stranger, a doctor no doubt, was present. He enjoined absolute quiet till he saw me again, and asked that he should be informed at once if there was any recurrence of fainting. Later, when I was in a condition to explain the origin of this attack, he would be able to prescribe for me. The light of dawn was struggling through the curtains, and I knew that I must have been unconscious for many hours. With the effort to banish all recollections of the terrible scene I had witnessed, came lethargy, and later, deep and dreamless sleep.

Some days of seclusion and rest partially restored my health and spirits, and I began to feel that what had passed had been a sort of evil dream, a terror that were best forgotten. My father when he heard my story was at first

incredulous; then, impressed in spite of himself by my earnestness, he gave an unwilling belief to it, but he entreated me to mention it to no one save himself. He could find no account of a murder in the local papers, nor could he ascertain whether the tragedy I saw was known to have taken place, and as be did not wish my name to be introduced in any inquiry he allowed the matter to drop. To him I spoke of it no more, but the remembrance of it would not be wholly banished. I was haunted by the sight of that lovely face, and the sound of that laugh with its dreadful sequel. And a strange fancy had come to me also that the face was in some way familiar to me; I would lie with closed eyes for hours, seeking in vain to recall the resemblance that just eluded me. One day meditating thus I roused myself from my reverie, and met my own reflection in a mirror that hung opposite. Breathless I gazed, while a new terror took possession of me. There was the resemblance I had sought: there were the auburn hair, the deep dark eyes, the colourless face with scarlet lips just parted. Not so beautiful, perhaps, as the one I had seen at the window; indeed, as I gradually comprehended it was myself I gazed upon, I could see no beauty in the familiar features; but so like— so wonderfully, terribly like! And then for the first time I began to doubt the reality of my vision, and to long eagerly for the power to put it from me. I determined to rest and dream no longer, and that afternoon I descended to the garden.

"At last!" said Colonel Haughton, taking both my hands. "I thought we were never going to see you again. I have been reproaching myself with having overtired you that day— with having left you: I had no intention of remaining away from you for more than a moment, and I want to explain what detained me. When I came out and found you gone, I concluded you had returned here, and hurrying on I was fortunate enough to reach you just before you fainted. Your father tells me you have had a touch of malaria, and I hope— -But I distress you, Miss Durant; I am tiring you. Let me find you a comfortable chair and leave you to rest."

"No, no," I cried eagerly; "stay;— I will sit here. Tell me, where did you get that ring?"

On his finger shone a curious green stone, that seemed the counterpart of the one I had noticed on the hand that held the dagger.

"That is exactly what I want to tell you," he said. "After getting your spoons for you, I noticed, resting on a carved bracket, this ring. It is a very curious stone. You see it looks quite dull now, yet it can sparkle with all the brilliancy of a diamond. And on the back of it is cut part of the head of a snake. I have only seen a ring like this once before, and that was long ago in a hill temple in India. They called it the Devil Stone, and worshipped it, and they told me the tradition of it. Centuries before, this stone had been discovered by a holy man,

embedded in a sacred relic, and he made a shrine for it, whence it was stolen by robbers. The next stage in its history was its division into two equal parts by a Maharajah, who had them set into rings, one of which he wore always himself, and the other he bestowed on his Maharanee, whom he loved greatly. One day he found it missing from her finger, and in a fit of jealousy he killed her, afterwards destroying himself. His ring passed into the possession of the Brahmins, but hers could never be traced."

"They say that eventually the two will be reunited, and that until this happens the lost ring will fufil its mission. It is supposed to impel its wearer to deeds of violence, and to his own destruction; and when the evil spirit within it is gratified, it flashes and sparkles. They say, too, that if you cast it from you, you throw away with it the greatest happiness of your life and lose the chance of it for ever. Yet, if you wear it, it dominates your fate. The instant I saw it, I recognised the lost ring, and asked the man his price for it. He refused to tell me— said it was not for sale; and I left the shop, because I did not wish to keep you waiting longer; but I returned next day, and succeeded in obtaining it. The old man, a curious old Italian, was very reticent about it, but he seemed to have gathered some knowledge of the tradition, and said it had the "evil eye," and was neither good to sell nor to wear. It had been sold to him by a compatriot, he said, who had a dark history— a man who was ever too ready with his knife, and who had come to a bad end. I told him I would steal it, and he might charge me what he liked for some other purchases, so we settled it that way."

"Are you not afraid to wear it?" I asked. "It makes me shudder to look at it. There is some deadly fascination about it, I am sure."

"I am afraid of nothing," he said lightly, "except your displeasure, Miss Theo. If it annoys you I will not wear it, but I confess it has a very great fascination for me. I do not believe in superstition, but I like the stone for its antiquity and strange history. Some day I will send it to my friends the Brahmins; meanwhile it inspires me with no evil propensity, and since it has interested you I am grateful to it so far."

So I resolved to put the ring and its story out of my mind, and to occupy myself only with the new interest that had dawned upon my life. The next few days went by so happily, and it seemed so natural to me that Lionel Haughton should be always at my side, that I did not stay to ask myself the reason for our close companionship— yet I think within my heart of hearts I knew.

And each day, each hour I spent with him, was bringing us nearer together and binding us with ties that would not easily be broken.

"Haughton is very much improved," said my father one day, "since I knew him many years ago— his brother was my great friend, and I did not, see much

of this one— he seems to have spent a good deal of his life in India, and I fancy it has affected his health. I suppose he won't return there. I must persuade him to come and pay us a visit when we go home, eh, Theo?"

One evening, when our stay was drawing to a close, we proposed to go to the Casino, where I wished to try my luck at gambling. "I am always lucky if things go by chance," I said, "and I have neglected my opportunity here sadly. Let us go and gamble tonight, and I will win fortunes for all of us." Colonel Haughton did not, however, join us as usual at *table d'hôte* that evening, and a note handed to me afterwards from him told me that he had been feeling ill, but was now better, and would meet us later at the Casino. It was the first time I had ever played, and before long it became apparent that my prophecy about my luck was being fulfilled: I won, and won, and won again, till a heap of gold and notes was in front of me, and I was the centre of all eyes at the table. I played recklessly, and yet I could not lose, till suddenly my attention was distracted by the arrival of Colonel Haughton, who leant over my shoulder and placed his stake next to mine. As he did so the ring seemed me to emit a faint sparkle, and I felt as if my careless good fortune had deserted me. I wanted to win now, whereas before I had played for the excitement only, with the true gambler spirit. And yet from that moment I lost. He also lost, heavily— so heavily that I wondered if he were rich enough to take it as philosophically as he appeared to.

Nevertheless so large a sum had I won at first that, though much diminished, it was still a small fortune that I gathered up when we left the tables.

"You brought me bad luck," I said to Colonel Haughton, as we walked back to the hotel. "Do you know, I think it was your ring."

"I would never wear it again if I thought that," he answered. Then as we reached the garden, and my father passed on to the salon, "Theo," he continued, "stay a moment. I have something to tell you My darling, I love you; I love you more than life: will you try to care for me a little in return? I want you for my wife. I worship you!"

Ah, Lionel! beloved! it scarcely needed the assurance of your love for me to bring me the certainty of mine for you! If ever the gates of Heaven open to mortal eyes, they stood ajar for us that night; the starlit garden was changed into a veritable Eden, and we walked with wondering joy therein, and thought not of an angel with flaming sword, who waited silently to drive us from our Paradise into outer darkness.

It was scarcely noon, the following day, when we began the ascent of the Dent du Chat, one of the mountain peaks that tower above Aix.

"I feel as if I had wings, and must soar into a higher atmosphere," I had said gaily; "and since we cannot fly, let us climb. I want to reach the top of that mountain with you, and leave the world behind us. Let us go."

We were to ride up to a certain distance, and then dismount and gain the highest point on foot.

Three guides accompanied us, following leisurely, talking and gesticulating to each other, and paying little heed to us, save an occasional frantic rush at the mules when we approached an awkward corner of the zigzag pathway, which had the effect of adding a momentary uncertainity and danger to our otherwise tranquil ascent. We were not sorry when, after two or three hours of this progress, the guides told us we must halt, and that they would remain in charge of the mules till we returned to them. It was rather a toilsome climb, and the sun was beating fiercely down upon us; but we felt rewarded when, not far from the top, we reached a plateau where we could rest, while a cool breeze from the distant snowy peaks revived us.

"Here is an arm-chair all ready for you," Lionel said, leading me to where a soft couch of mossy turf lay beneath the shadow of an upright, projecting piece of rock. A yard or two farther on, the precipitous side of the mountain descended, sheer and impassable down almost to its foot, terminating in a dark and narrow gorge between two ridges. Away on the left far below us nestled Aix, and by its side the Lac du Bourget, with its island monastery surrounded by water as blue as Geneva's own.

"How lovely it is!" I exclaimed; "I never knew before how beautiful life could be."

"Nor I," he answered; "I have been waiting for my wife to teach me." And then he told me of his life in India, and of many adventures he had had, and finally we spoke again of the ring and of my strange and sudden illness on that day.

"Some day I will tell you all about it," I said, "and why I have such a curious feeling against the ring. I wish you would not wear it; yet now that you possess it I have a sort of superstitious dread that if you part from it, it will revenge itself upon you in some way. I am sure I saw it sparkle last night when the cards went against us. You were so terribly unlucky."

"Unlucky at cards, lucky in love," he quoted; but I noticed a shadow on his face. "What have you done with all your wealth, little gambler?— you have not had time to spend it yet."

"Here it is," I answered, drawing out my pocket-book, in which I had stuffed the notes; "but I have taken a dislike to it— I shall give it away, I think. I would rather be lucky in another way," and I laid it down beside me on the grass.

"I will send the ring to India on my wedding day," Lionel exclaimed; "till then will you wear it for me?" and, drawing it from his finger, he was about to place it upon mine.

But I would not allow him to do so, and laying it on the bank notes I said, "There's a contradiction! Good luck and bad luck side by side! Let us leave them there," I added, half laughing, half in earnest, "and start again fresh."

He turned suddenly away, and, fearing he was vexed, I laid my hand upon his arm; but he shook it gently off and then I saw he was singularly pale, and that his breathing was quick and short, and his eyes had a strangely troubled and intent look. "Lionel, you are ill," I cried. "Oh, what is it, love? what can I do for you?"

"It is nothing," he said faintly, but his voice was changed: "it will pass off. I will return to the guides and get some water. Wait here till I come back."

"Let me come with you," I entreated, but he shook his head, and said he was better and would be quite well if I would do as he wished; then he began the descent. I watched him for a few moments, till he was lost to view at a bend of the mountain, before returning to my seat. But the sun had gone in, and it seemed cold and dark, and a dull heavy weight rested on my heart. I was lonely there without him, and the moments dragged on slowly and drearily, till I felt the suspense and stillness unendurable.

I decided I would wait only five minutes more and then I would follow him, and, leaning back wearily, I closed my eyes. A sort of faintness came over me—for I was tired, and the sudden change from perfect happiness to this anxiety, this vague alarm, had chilled and stupefied me.

It may have been a few moments after, or longer (I cannot tell), but I became aware suddenly that, although no sound of footsteps had reached me, there was some one near. I remained absolutely still and listened intently, and though there was no tangible movement or sound, there was an impalpable stir in the stillness round me, some vague breath that seemed to speak of danger. I felt paralysed with the same powerlessness that had seized me when the tragedy at the window was enacted before my eyes. It flashed into my mind that perhaps it was a thief, attracted by the notes and ring lying beside me, who had crept behind believing that I slept. My hand was almost touching them, and as I glanced down to see if I could reach them without moving, I noticed with a thrill of indescribable horror that the green stone was sparkling brilliantly with a thousand rays of scintillating light.

And then— something stirred behind me, and round my neck crept a hand, holding a short sharp knife such as Indians carry, and poised it over my heart as if to strike. With an instantaneous desperate throb of agonised revolt against my impending fate, I grasped the ring and flung it towards the precipice. As it

flashed through the air the knife dropped, and the murderer sprang to the edge in a vain effort to catch the stone ere it fell. He stumbled, missed his footing, and, with one terrible cry and his hands grasping the air wildly, he fell backwards into the abyss.

And it was Lionel— my beloved!

When the guides came to look for us I told them smilingly that the English gentleman had dropped his ring and in trying to find it had slipped and fallen over the precipice.

They led me down the mountain with reverent care and hushed steps and voices; for they said to each other, "Figure to yourself this English colonel was in love with the beautiful young lady, and he has perished before her eyes,— it is a terrible thing, and it has turned her brain."

And when my father told me gently, some days after, that they had found him and he was to be buried that day in the little cemetery, I laughed outright.

But I have never smiled since— and I am quite sane now— only I think I have done with laughter for the rest of my life. And I sometimes wonder why these things should have been; and if there is any explanation of them, save one.

———————

5: The Happy Couple

Max Afford

The Australian Women's Weekly, 29 May & 5 June, 1948

IT WAS JUST TEN O'CLOCK when Steve Harper laid down his novel and stretched himself in the deep armchair. He was tired of the printed word and it was too early for bed.

He was deliberating whether he would take a stroll when the telephone on the small glass topped table at his elbow rang sharply.

Harper reached across and lifted the receiver.

"Harper speaking..."

A deep voice, subdued but authoritative, answered. "This is Inspector Conway, of the C.I.B., Mr. Harper. Sorry to disturb you. But we understand that you act as legal adviser to Mr. George Wingate?"

"Yes. Wingate is one of my closest friends."

"So we understood." There was a slight pause before the unseen speaker continued. "Could you come over to his flat straight away?"

Little wrinkles of bewilderment formed between Harper's eyes. "Of course, if it's necessary. But why...?"

The deep official voice said levelly, "Mr. Wingate committed suicide in his own living-room about half an hour ago."

"Suicide!" The shocked, blank amazement that dulled Steve's mind was concentrated into that sharp exclamation. "Of course, I'll come right away... now!" Slowly he replaced the receiver. He did not notice how badly his hand was trembling.

It was not until ten minutes later, when he sat behind the wheel of his car, purring over the wet, dark roads, that the full realisation of the tragedy came to him.

George Wingate...suicide!

It seemed ridiculous to mention the words in the same breath— they were poles apart...night and day, black and white, cowardice and courage! There must be some mistake!

Again and again his mind hammered that point home, yet in spite of this some whispering caution told him it was true that the natural order of things had been reversed, and that bluff, hearty George Wingate had indeed taken his own life!

Steve had known Wingate since their days at school; they had grown up together and chosen different professions while remaining the best of friends.

It was the attraction of opposites— quiet, studious Steve Harper had made an admirable foil for the happy-go-lucky, clowning Wingate.

Life for this big man had seemed one long chuckle; one never saw him without a smile or a cheerful word on his lips. At parties and dinners it was always Wingate who kept the festivities going with some funny story or crazy stunt.

People said he was irresponsible, a child who had never grown up, yet there were few who were not charmed by his personality and his immense and overwhelming zest for life.

Matrimony had sobered George Wingate but little.

When he married shy Olga Martino, the half-Russian, half-Italian dancing teacher, people were amazed at the union. Olga, with her pale, slavonic face and her sombre, brooding eyes, seemed an oddly assorted mate for her intensely extroverted husband.

Steve, who had been best man at the wedding, secretly questioned this union of substance and pale shadow, and at the same time offered up a secret prayer that neither was making a mistake.

And his prayer was answered. After twelve months, the couple seemed happier than ever.

True, there were occasions when Wingate's clowning and his love of practical jokes aroused traces of irritation in his wife's serious, reserved nature. But these were trivialities, to be expected during the process of mutual adjustment.

Practically every person envied George Wingate, this prosperous, cheerful man who found twenty-four hours too short for his harum-scarum course through life.

And now...

Harper gave a little shiver and pressed the foot-brake, easing the single-seater gently to the pavement. Climbing out, he stood before the lighted block of flats for some moments.

From one of the windows floated dance music from a radio; shadows cast on the blind of another showed a party in progress. It was an incongruous setting for a violent death.

Even now, as he crossed the entrance hall and rang the bell of the ground-floor flat, he had a half-conviction that it was some fantastic error, that George, red-faced and ebullient, would answer the door, clap him on the back, and ask him to name his drink.

But it was a stranger who ushered him inside, a stocky, firm-jawed individual in quiet clothes who introduced himself as Inspector Conway. The hushed silence in the flat told its own story as the two men stood there together in the little entrance hall.

Conway said quietly: "Good of you to come, Mr. Harper. Mrs. Wingate asked me to ring you. It's a terrible blow to her." The Inspector's eyes slid toward an adjoining door. "The whole thing happened so suddenly. He was entertaining some friends at bridge when it happened. I've sent them home..."

They passed from the tiny hall into the living-room. Harper had just time to take in the two card tables and the scattered cards when he saw Olga standing at the far end of the room.

Even in the midst of tragedy Olga Wingate remained one of the most beautiful women Harper had ever seen. A long green frock emphasised the ebon sheen of her smooth hair. Her eyes were so large as to shadow her long face.

She gave a soft, choking cry and ran to him.

"Oh, Steve... Steve..." She clung to him, and, comforting, he placed one arm about her shoulders. "I can't believe it— I can't! Not what they say...about George... of all people..." He could feel her thin strong body trembling and twitching under his arm.

"How did it happen?" asked Harper quietly.

Suddenly, as though conscious of the Inspector's eyes on her, Olga moved away from Harper. She seemed embarrassed at her outburst, and now, as she strove for control, her tone was almost wooden.

"We had the Morrisons and the Traceys for dinner. Afterwards, I suggested bridge...you know how Emily Tracey loves a game! George was in great spirits..."

For a moment, her level tone faltered. "He had drunk a little too much at dinner," she went on, "and was more...more amusing than ever..."

She paused. No one spoke.

"We...we played bridge until nine-thirty. Then George was dummy. Major Morrison offered him a cigarette. George took it and rose from the table. He said he had something to show us and walked into the dining-room. He wasn't gone more than a minute. Suddenly we heard a shot. We ran into the room... and there... on the floor..."

The words choked suddenly in Olga Wingate's throat. She covered her face with her hands and sank into a chair, rocking backwards and forwards.

"Oh, Steve," she moaned. "Steve, you've got to help me! Why did he do it? Why...?"

Inspector Conway attempted clumsily gentle words. Harper stood miserably, shocked by the death of his friend, horrified by the patent grief of this lovely woman. He made a mental effort to clutch at something tangible in the dark chaos of his mind.

"He...he wasn't worried over anything... finance... business...?"

Mrs. Wingate shook her head. She dried her eyes on a small handkerchief and made another effort at control. "I know of nothing, Steve...nothing at all unless..."

"Unless what?"

"It was some secret anxiety... something so serious he wouldn't confide in me... for fear of upsetting me..." She broke off with a quick, foreign gesture. "Yet that is silly! What could be more upsetting than what has happened...?"

Harper turned from the woman to face the Inspector.

"I suppose it is suicide?"

Conway nodded. "No doubt about that, sir," he replied. "If there was anything to suggest... the other, well, it might make the business something less of a puzzle! But there isn't— the gun was still in his hand when he dropped."

Steve reached for his cigarette case. "Might I have a look?" he murmured. "He was my best friend, you know..."

"Of course. This way..."

The Inspector turned. Harper gave a brief glance at the woman huddled in the chair, then he turned and followed the official through the folding doors into the dining-room. Inside, Conway was removing a sheet from the sprawled figure on the floor.

"It's not very pretty," he said briefly. "The charge got him full in the face."

Steve Harper was not an emotional man. Years in his chosen profession had taught him to mask his feelings very successfully. But as he stood looking down at the body of his friend, his throat closed and a sudden mist blurred his sight. He gave a shudder of repulsion and turned away.

Conway muttered, "He must have held the gun about twelve inches from his face." He gestured to the table. "There's the weapon."

Steve glanced at it. A black automatic about five inches long, it seemed little more than a toy. Ridiculously small to have done this majestic act; taken the life of one the world could ill afford to lose. Yet, behind this tiny weapon had been a man's will. The will to die.

Almost as though divining his thoughts, the Inspector said quietly. "I'd call this one of the bravest suicides I know..."

Steve said bitterly, "Is there such a thing as a brave suicide?"

Conway nodded. "Imagine staring at that barrel and slowly pressing the trigger! That takes courage. Or lack of imagination! Yet, from what I hear of this man..." His voice slowed, stopped.

Harper was watching him, reading faint and puzzled doubt in the grey eyes, seeing it etched in the wrinkled forehead.

"Something troubling you about this, Inspector?" he asked quietly.

"Yes, sir."

"But you said it was straight out?"

"In some ways it is," Conway told him. "But in others...Look here, Mr. Harper, does a man commit suicide on the spur of the moment, like this? What sort of chap is it who laughs and talks with his guests one minute and takes his own life the next? And why? Where's the motive?"

A slight sound at the door made them turn suddenly. Olga Wingate stood there, her eyes fixed on the body of her husband, that lovely oval face a pale mask of horror. But in that moment Steve Harper had a curious fleeting sense that the expression on the woman's face was not caused by the sight of that disfigured thing on the carpet.

Something else had brought terror to that face, terror that was tinged with... yes... anxiety.

Olga Wingate was afraid!

But even as he sought that ivory mask for confirmation, dark lashes veiled the eyes, and Mrs. Wingate turned her face away. She said huskily:

"Steve, would you...attend to everything? You know so much more about these things...I'm going to lie down..."

She moved slowly from the room, one hand outstretched as though feeling blindly. Behind her, Inspector Conway was replacing the sheet over the body on the floor.

They buried George Wingate on the following day.

After the first shock, Harper's cold, analytical self was once more in control. And during the twenty four hours that passed between death and burial, he had driven his mind furiously.

Something was wrong! Something he had sensed in Mrs. Wingate's face as she stood there listening to Inspector Conway's doubts.

Yet whatever way his thoughts turned, back they came to the one indisputable fact— George Wingate had risen from that card table, walked into his own dining-room and, without pause or qualm, shot himself through the head with an automatic pistol!

"Almost as though he were hypnotised," muttered Harper, then smiled wryly at his own imaginings. People are not hypnotised into suicide, especially people like George Wingate.

The funeral was a melancholy business. After the ceremony, the mourners returned to the flat, impregnated with that subtle perfume of banked flowers hanging heavily like the very aura of death.

Mrs. Wingate retired to her room to rest after the ordeal. Friends drifted about in an aimless, subdued manner, talking hushed trivialities, inwardly questioning when they might with decency slip away.

Steve was relieved when the officiating minister brought him a message that Mrs. Wingate would like to speak to him, and that she would be waiting in her husband's study.

Harper slipped thankfully away from the living-room. But Wingate's apartment, with its sporting prints and the college oar decorating one corner, was empty. Steve did not linger there— memories were too vivid. He would probably find Olga in her own room.

He crossed the corridor and tapped softly. There was no answer. He tapped again, then pushed open the door and peered inside.

Olga Wingate's bedroom was small, faintly scented, and bright with satin cushions. But stronger than the perfume was the smell of burning that sent Harper's eyes to the large bronze ashtray on the small table near the bed.

But it was empty and polished clean. His wandering gaze moved to the fireplace, flickered, halted.

The grate was half filled with charred paper, gently rustling and faintly smoking.

Steve's first emotion was surprise. In this over-tidy, ordered room, that blackened bundle in the grate was as incongruous as a pair of hobnailed boots.

After surprise came curiosity. Was this the reason Olga had gone to her room? What was it that must be burned without further delay?

Quickly, he crossed to the grate and poking among the charred fragments that flaked under his groping fingers found a small wedge of paper that had escaped destruction. It was obviously the corner of a letter; he could make out a few isolated words in bold masculine handwriting.

Harper drew a sudden sharp breath, every latent suspicion crystallising sharply in his mind. He turned over the small wedge of paper. Again he read the words.

"...cannot fail. Ever your own... Mischa."

At the sound of footsteps he thrust the fragment of paper into his pocket and moved quickly from the fireplace.

Olga Wingate entered. Seeing him, she stopped short and her mouth set thinly. She could not quite control her voice when she spoke.

"Steve! Whatever are you doing in here? I said George's study..." Abruptly she paused and made a helpless little gesture. "Oh, what does it matter?" The words were heavy with dull resignation. "What does anything matter now?"

"I waited for you in the study," Harper said quietly. "When you didn't come, I took the liberty of coming here. I hope you don't mind."

"Mind?" She came forward, completely at ease now. "What a strange thing to say, Steve. We're friends. Why should I mind?"

He countered her question with another. "What was it you wanted, Olga?"

Mrs. Wingate crossed to a small cabinet, opened a drawer, and took out a bunch of keys.

"These belonged to George," she said quietly. "You'll find his private papers in the bureau in his study. If you'd relieve me of the business responsibility..."

"Naturally."

"Later, I'd like to have a talk with you about...myself."

"Yourself?" Steve asked quickly.

Olga had taken a cigarette from the silver box. Now she was lighting it, eyes on the match flame, avoiding his face. "I think I'll go away, Steve. Travel and try to forget."

"There's no reason why you shouldn't. You're a rich woman now."

Now the dark eyes came up, soft with anguished appeal. "Steve...!"

Harper said coldly. "Well, it's true, isn't it?"

Those long, beautifully shaped hands made another gesture, this time of distaste. "You should know that better than I. And I don't think this is the time to discuss such things. I...I'd rather not talk about them."

In that moment, Steve hated her.

Not trusting himself to speak, he nodded and turned away. He was conscious that Olga was watching him, that she had glimpsed the expression that crossed his face. He was aware that she was coming to him and turned as he felt her hand on his arm.

"Steve..." her voice was gentle, soft as her swimming eyes. "Steve, I know it's been a terrible shock to you. But don't take it out on me. Try to remember that I'm suffering, too." She touched her eyes with a damp handkerchief. "I was...very fond of him, too, you know."

"I'm sorry..." Steve wanted to say more, but the words wouldn't come. "Is there anything else?'

"Yes." Olga moved back to the bureau and took out that wicked toy-like automatic. Holding it limply, she returned.

"Inspector Conway gave me this yesterday. I want you to take it away—where I can never see it again!" And as he reached for it, she drew a sharp breath of protest.

"Steve, be careful! Conway tells me it's still loaded! I couldn't bear another...accident..."

Back in Wingate's study, Steve Harper lit a cigarette and sat down in his friend's sagging armchair, watching the film of smoke rise and curl in the air.

His mind was busy with that fragment of paper and the scrawled words which already he knew by heart.

"...cannot fail. Ever your own...Mischa."

Inspector Conway had asked, "Where's the motive?" Was it here in black and white? This man...the unknown Mischa and Olga Wingate. Mischa, who signed himself 'Ever your own' "?

Here was logic at last. Olga had sought another man and Wingate, proud to the last, had carried on with the enormous pretence, so that not even his closest friend suspected the truth.

When had Wingate found out? Perhaps he had discovered the letters— passionate letters which Olga had burnt in a frenzy of guilt and remorse.

Steve could imagine the scene; Wingate incredulous, still half-trusting, willing to be convinced; Olga sullen, evasive, until some blundering remark touched her on the raw. Then flashing out with the truth, bitter, seeking only to wound.

But how long had this been going on? Weeks...months...until at last George Wingate could bear it no longer and rising that night from the bridge table...

Harper moved irritably in his chair. No! He sought logic and found only melodrama Olga might have acted like that but never her husband. And there were too many loose ends.

Wingate, a fundamentally simple man, could never hide his true feelings. Elated or depressed, the whole world knew of it. And witnesses had sworn that on the night of the tragedy Wingate had been unusually happy, without a care.

Yet, less than ten minutes later...

Groping in his pocket. Harper found the tiny wedge of paper and scrutinised it afresh. If calligraphy was any guide, this Mischa would be a bold, swaggering fellow. There was power and ruthlessness in the thick, heavy downstrokes, arrogance in the flowing signature.

And what was the significance of the words "Cannot fail..."?

Something jingled in his fingers. For the first time he became aware that he was still holding the keys of George's desk, which Olga had given him.

Crushing out his cigarette, Steve rose and crossed to the heavy, old fashioned desk with its ribbed roller top. He set about the task of finding individual keys to fit the locks of the drawers down either side.

One by one the compartments yielded their contents— business correspondence, cheque-book stubs, bills unpaid and bills receipted, and once (subtle epitaph to his late friend) a packet of funny picture postcards.

Among this collection was a small square of pasteboard that had obviously accompanied a gift from Olga. Steve glanced at the prim, well-formed handwriting before he put the card aside.

"George, darling— here's something after your own heart. I picked it up this afternoon in town. You can trot it out to show the Morrisons to-night. Love, Olga."

The significance of this message did not dawn on Harper until a few moments later. He picked up the card and read the lines again.

Then he shook his head. No erring wife had written in that tone of gentle tolerance. Certainly not Olga, who was smoulderingly slow to forget an injury or a quarrel.

If this gift had changed hands a few hours before the bridge party yesterday— and the reference to the Morrisons proved that beyond all doubt— then Steve's theory regarding an estrangement was completely false!

Shrugging, Harper leaned forward and fitted a key into the last drawer.

Inside were more letters: letters and photographs and cuttings from magazines, advertisements relating to tricks and novelties such as might gladden the heart of a schoolboy.

Steve spilt the contents across the desk top and thumbed through them one by one. The folded circular was almost at the bottom of the pile.

His mind busy with a dozen recollections of the past, now brought vividly to the surface by a snapshot or a creased invitation card, Steve's eyes flicked mechanically over the black lettering.

Next moment he stiffened and with fingers that seemed suddenly unmanageable unfolded the circular and spread it wide on the desk...

"Oh, no..." said Steve Harper.

And then, as he read the printed words a second time..."Yes...yes!" And now incredulity had given way to a sickening realisation and a black, bitter rage that caused the words on the circular to waver and swim.

He closed his eyes.

Then, very deliberately, he folded the printed paper and rose to his feet. He knew also exactly where to look for the last piece in this crazy jigsaw. Yet no longer crazy, but now brutally, ruthlessly clear with all the logic of perfect planning.

He went straight back to Olga Wingate's bedroom, paused outside the door and knocked.

There was no answer. Without further summons, Steve entered, closing the door behind him.

Where would she have hidden it? What, in this softly silken room, offered the best chance of concealment?

His mind suggested a dozen places, but now he must think not with his own brain, but with Olga's. Where would this strange woman, having committed a murder with an unsuspected weapon, hide the instrument?

An unsuspected weapon, he thought again.

Therefore the hiding-place could not be complicated, lest this very fact arouse suspicion. It must be somewhere obvious, yet not too obvious. A handbag, or a drawer, or even the pocket of a jacket...

Steve crossed to the wardrobe against the wall and swung open the door. A dozen frocks, neatly arranged on hangers, faced him.

His exploring fingers riffled through them, disturbing a breath of perfume that hung on the quiet air. They yielded nothing. He closed the door sharply and moved to the bureau near the bed. But five minutes' careful investigation there proved as fruitless as before.

As he slammed the last drawer shut. Steve passed a worried hand over his face, to find it wet with perspiration.

Then he saw the handbag.

It was square and black and shiny; it had a catch like a small coiled snake which defied his trembling fingers for a few seconds. Then the lid snapped back and he emptied its varied contents on to the counterpane.

And there, among the phial of nail polish, the lipstick, the mirror and compact, the small silver comb, and a dozen other trivial articles, there it was.

At first glance it appeared to be a small automatic, twin of the murderous weapon he still carried in his pocket. Steve picked it up and, tightening his grip on the butt, pulled the trigger.

From the stocky barrel, a fat cigarette shot out, hit the bed and ricocheted to the floor. With the pressure of his finger came another and another until half a dozen cigarettes lay scattered on the carpet.

Still holding the toy, Steve reached in his pocket and flicked open the folded circular and read it for the third time. In bold type, it was headed, "Astounding Novelty! Surprise Your Friends!" A glowing description of the novelty followed.

"The Peerless Automatic Cigarette Case," Steve read on, "is the exact size, shape, and weight of the genuine article. Fool your friends! Harmless yet effective! The terror of Housebreakers! The Surprise of a Lifetime!

"Astound your friends with the Ching Lung Soo bullet trick! Hold the cigarette case about twelve inches from your face, press the trigger, and catch the cigarette in your mouth..."

Steve Harper's fingers closed convulsively round the paper, his mind a background of flickering words and dancing images!

"George, darling, here's something...I picked it up this afternoon in town...show the Morrisons tonight..."; George, slightly drunk, wandering happily into the living room...; "...exact size, shape and weight of the genuine article..."; "...hold the cigarette case about twelve inches from your face..."

"Steve!"

Olga Wingate stood just inside the door, watching him. For a moment she had eyes for nothing save that pale, set face, then she glanced down at his right hand.

Harper said nothing, but stood watching her...watching those slim fingers crawl suddenly to her throat, almost as though she felt the shadow of the noose fall across it. She seemed to swallow before she spoke.

"So... you know...?"

Harper said, "You did this thing. You and this man, Mischa." It was a statement.

Their glances met, locked. For five dragging seconds, the tension stretched. Then she said quietly, "What are you going to do about it?"

Steve Harper slipped the toy cigarette-case into his pocket. "I have my duty, not only as friend, but as a citizen. I am going to see you convicted of the crime of deliberate and calculated murder!"

Olga Wingate merely looked at him and about that lovely mouth there was gentle amusement. She came forward, sat down on the bed, and tapped the counterpane.

"Sit down, Steve," she said.

His lean body tightened in an instinctive shrinking.

"You're evil," he whispered, "evil! You ought to be destroyed!"

Olga Wingate said calmly, "You're making a fool of yourself, Steve. It's all right to do it here. I don't mind! But watch what you do...outside. Are you really prepared to have me arrested? To go into court with a story about a ridiculous toy that committed murder?"

"You changed that toy...for the real thing!"

That pale, oval face, child-like, bland, innocent, stared at him. "But why should I? We were so happy together, George and I. Everyone knew that! And what have you to prove otherwise? A few words on a corner of a letter... words which I could explain in a dozen innocent ways!"

Harper said bitterly: "And how would you explain the substitution of weapons?"

"Substitution? What substitution? I know nothing of that, Steve. But I think it quite likely that George confused the real thing for the toy. So would the jury— particularly as I can bring forward witnesses to prove that George had been... drinking that night."

Mrs. Wingate stood up. Calm, poised, confident, she put out her hand. "I think you'd better let me have that stupid toy before it causes more trouble."

Steve Harper knew— and the realisation sickened him— that this woman spoke the truth. What could he bring forward to support his story?

Suspicions— and a fragment of charred paper. A clever lawyer could explain those scattered words in a dozen innocent ways.

"I think you'd better let me have that stupid toy," Olga said, holding out her hand.

And Olga Wingate would have more than expert legal advice. Steve could already visualise her appearance in court; she would choose the blackest mourning to set off the pale, tragic face and the dark eyes, luminous with unshed tears.

"Well, Stephen?"

His fingers closed around the article in his pocket. He said quietly: "If I give this thing back to you, will you promise me one thing?"

"What do you ask?"

"That you will get out of this country and never set foot in it again as long as you live!"

Olga Wingate nodded and her expression was almost sedate.

"Mischa has made all arrangements for that. I told you I wanted to travel... and forget." She held out her hand. "Now, may I have George's little toy?"

Because there was nothing else to do, he handed it across. Olga took it, balanced it carefully in her hand.

Steve asked abruptly: "When did you begin to hate him?"

"After we were married. Not long after— two months, perhaps three. I realised what a bitter mistake I'd made. It was like being married to a mountebank— a great fool who acted like a child. It was all so different from what I expected..."

She paused. Harper did not speak. "It was, I think, the shame of it all. When we visited friends they expected him to perform for their amusement, and he, poor fool, loved it. The life of the party— but what kind of a life for me?"

"And Mischa?"

"Leave Mischa out of this!"

Steve said bitterly, "Because he evolved this plan of murder?"

"It was my plan— all mine! Mischa and I were together— in the ballet! Those wonderful days! I'm going to live them over again now."

Now the fire was back in her face, the color of it in her cheeks, the blaze of it in her dark eyes. She came forward and stood over him.

"You want to know the whole story? I bought this toy for George and persuaded him to learn the trick of catching the cigarettes in his mouth. Mischa's only part was to get the automatic and load it.

"Last night I changed the toys before we started the bridge game. I knew George could never resist showing off in front of friends. He'd been drinking at

dinner and his mind wasn't very clear. So he left the bridge table, walked into the dining-room, and picked up the loaded automatic."

A cynical smile curled on her lips. "He didn't even know the difference!"

She threw back her head and chuckled.

"Imagine it, Stephen! George picks up the automatic. He must have one practice shot before the performance. So he raises the weapon and holds it so..." She held the object in her hand level with her own dark eyes.

"And then, poor clown, he pulls the trigger... like this!"

In that closed room, the detonation shook the pictures on the walls. The body of Olga Wingate dropped to the floor, the automatic still clutched in her fingers. The faint reek of burnt powder hung on the still air.

Stephen Harper said softly: "He didn't even know the difference, Olga..."

And then suddenly he choked, feeling very sick. Rising, he moved blindly from that silken room and the battered thing lying on the floor.

In George Wingate's study it was quite five minutes before he could steady his hand sufficiently to lift the receiver and dial a number.

The voice of Inspector Conway sounded at the other end, a quiet, authoritative voice, a little shocked out of its calmness as Harper made his explanation.

"It all happened so suddenly, Inspector. I had given Mrs. Wingate her husband's automatic and, abruptly, she turned it on herself. Wingate's death probably played on her mind. You see... I believe they were one of the world's happiest couples."

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6: Buttercup-Night

John Galsworthy

1867-1933

The Atlantic Monthly, Jan 1914

WHY is it that in some places there is such a feeling of life being all one; not merely a long picture-show for human eyes, but a single breathing, glowing, growing thing, of which we are no more important a part than the swallows and magpies, the foals and sheep in the meadows, the sycamores and ash trees and flowers in the fields, the rocks and little bright streams, or even the long fleecy clouds and their soft-shouting drivers, the winds?

True, we register these parts of being, and they— so far as we know— do not register us; yet it is impossible to feel, in such places as I speak of, the busy, dry, complacent sense of being all that matters, which in general we humans have so strongly.

In these rare spots, that are always in the remote country, untouched by the advantages of civilization, one is conscious of an enwrapping web or mist of spirit, the glamorous and wistful wraith of all the vanished shapes which once dwelt there in such close comradeship.

It was Sunday of an early June when I first came on one such, far down in the West country. I had walked with my knapsack twenty miles; and, there being no room at the tiny inn of the very little village, they directed me to a wicket gate, through which by a path leading down a field I would come to a farmhouse where I might find lodging. The moment I got into that field I felt within me a peculiar contentment, and sat down on a rock to let the feeling grow. In an old holly tree rooted to the bank about fifty yards away, two magpies evidently had a nest, for they were coming and going, avoiding my view as much as possible, yet with a certain stealthy confidence which made one feel that they had long prescriptive right to that dwelling-place.

Around, as far as one could see, there was hardly a yard of level ground; all was hill and hollow, that long ago had been reclaimed from the moor; and against the distant folds of the hills the farmhouse and its thatched barns were just visible, embowered amongst beeches and some dark trees, with a soft bright crown of sunlight over the whole. A gentle wind brought a faint rustling up from those beeches, and from a large lime tree that stood by itself; on this wind some little snowy clouds, very high and fugitive in that blue heaven, were always moving over. But what struck me most were the buttercups. Never was field so lighted up by those tiny lamps, those little bright pieces of flower china out of the Great Pottery. They covered the whole ground, as if the sunlight had fallen bodily from the sky, in tens of millions of gold patines; and the fields

below as well, down to what was evidently a stream, were just as thick with the extraordinary warmth and glory of them.

Leaving the rock at last, I went toward the house. It was long and low and rather sad, standing in a garden all mossy grass and buttercups, with a few rhododendrons and flowery shrubs, below a row of fine old Irish yews. On the stone verandah a gray sheep-dog and a very small golden-haired child were sitting close together, absorbed in each other. A pleasant woman came in answer to my knock, and told me, in a soft, slurring voice, that I might stay the night; and dropping my knapsack, I went out again.

Through an old gate under a stone arch I came on the farmyard, quite deserted save for a couple of ducks moving slowly down a gutter in the sunlight; and noticing the upper half of a stable-door open, I went across, in search of something living. There, in a rough loose-box, on thick straw, lay a long-tailed black mare with the skin and head of a thoroughbred. She was swathed in blankets, and her face, all cut about the cheeks and over the eyes, rested on an ordinary human's pillow, held by a bearded man in shirt-sleeves; while, leaning against the whitewashed walls, sat fully a dozen other men, perfectly silent, very gravely and intently gazing. The mare's eyes were half closed, and what could be seen of them dull and blueish, as though she had been through a long time of pain. Save for her rapid breathing, she lay quite still, but her neck and ears were streaked with sweat, and every now and then her hind-legs quivered spasmodically. Seeing me at the door, she raised her head, uttering a queer half-human noise, but the bearded man at once put his hand on her forehead, and with a 'Woa, my dear— woa, my pretty!' pressed it down again, while with the other hand he plumped up the pillow for her cheek. And, as the mare obediently let fall her head, one of the men said in a low voice, 'I never see anything so like a Christian!' and the others echoed, in chorus, 'Like a Christian— like a Christian!'

It went to one's heart to watch her, and I moved off down the farm lane into an old orchard, where the apple trees were still in bloom, with bees— very small ones— busy on the blossoms, whose petals were dropping on the dock leaves and buttercups in the long grass. Climbing over the bank at the far end, I found myself in a meadow the like of which— so wild and yet so lush— I think I have never seen. Along one hedge of its meandering length was a mass of pink mayflower; and between two little running streams grew quantities of yellow water-iris— 'daggers,' as they call them; the 'print-frock' orchid, too, was everywhere in the grass, and always the buttercups. Great stones coated with yellowish moss were strewn among the ash trees and dark hollies; and through a grove of beeches on the far side, such as Corot might have painted, a girl was running, with a youth after her, who jumped down over the bank and

vanished. Thrushes, blackbirds, yaffles, cuckoos, and one other very monotonous little bird were in full song; and this, with the sound of the streams and the wind, and the shapes of the rocks and trees, the colors of the flowers, and the warmth of the sun, gave one a feeling of being lost in a very wilderness of nature. Some ponies came slowly from the far end,— tangled, gypsy-headed little creatures,— stared, and went off again at speed. It was just one of those places where any day the Spirit of all Nature might start up in one of those white gaps that separate the trees and rocks. But though I sat a long time waiting— hoping— She did not come.

They were all gone from the stable when I went back up to the farm, except the bearded nurse and one tall fellow, who might have been the 'Dying Gaul' as he crouched there in the straw; and the mare was sleeping— her head between her nurse's knees.

That night I woke at two o'clock to find it almost as bright as day, with moonlight coming in through the flimsy curtains. And, smitten with the feeling that comes to us creatures of routine so rarely,— of what beauty and strangeness we let slip by without ever stretching out hand to grasp it,— I got up, dressed, stole downstairs, and out.

Never was such a night of frozen beauty, never such dream-tranquillity. The wind had dropped, and the silence was such that one hardly liked to tread even on the grass. From the lawn and fields there seemed to be a mist rising— in truth, the moonlight caught on the dewy buttercups; and across this ghostly radiance the shadows of the yew trees fell in dense black bars.

Suddenly I bethought me of the mare. How was she faring, this marvelous night? Very softly opening the door into the yard, I tiptoed across. A light was burning in her box. And I could hear her making the same half-human noise she had made in the afternoon, as if wondering at her feelings; and instantly the voice of the bearded man talking to her as one might talk to a child: 'Oover, my darlin'; yu've a-been long enough o' that side. Wa-ay, my swate— yu let old Jack turn yu, then!' Then came a scuffling in the straw, a thud, that half-human sigh, and his voice again: 'Putt your 'ead to piller, that's my dandy gel. Old Jack wouldn' 'urt yu; no more'n if yu was the Queen!' Then only her quick breathing could be heard, and his cough and mutter, as he settled down once more to his long vigil.

I crept very softly up to the window, but she heard me at once; and at the movement of her head the old fellow sat up, blinking his eyes out of the bush of his grizzled hair and beard. Opening the door, I said,—

'May I come in?'

'Oo ay! Come in, zurr, if yu'm a mind tu.'

I sat down beside him on a sack. And for some time we did not speak, taking each other in. One of his legs was lame, so that he had to keep it stretched out all the time; and awfully tired he looked, gray-tired.

'You're a great nurse!' I said at last. 'It must be tiring work, watching out here all night.'

His eyes twinkled; they were of that bright gray kind through which the soul looks out.

'Aw, no!' he said. 'Ah, don't grudge it vur a dumb animal. Poor things they can't 'elp theirzelves. Many's the naight ah've zat up with 'orses and beasts tu. 'T es en me— can't bear to zee dumb creatures zuffer.' And laying his hand on the mare's ears, 'They zay 'orses 'aven't no souls. 'T es my belief they've souls zame as us. Many's the Christian ah've seen ain't got the soul of an 'orse. Same with the beasts— an' the ship; 't es only they'm can't spake their minds.'

'And where,' I said, 'do you think they go to when they die?'

He looked at me a little queerly, fancying perhaps that I was leading him into some trap; making sure, too, that I was a real stranger, without power over his body or soul— for humble folk must be careful in the country; then, reassured, and nodding in his beard, he answered knowingly,—

'Ah don't think they goes so very far!'

'Why? Do you ever see their spirits?'

'Naw, naw; I never zeen none; but, for all they zay, ah don't think none of us goes such a brave way off. There's room for all, dead or alive. An' there's Christians ah've zeen— well, ef they'm not dead for gude, then neither aren't dumb animals, for sure.'

'And rabbits, squirrels, birds, even insects? How about them?'

He was silent, as if I had carried him a little beyond the confines of his philosophy; then shook his head.

''T es all a bit dimsy. But you watch dumb animals, even the laste littlest one, an' yu'll zee they knows a lot more'n what we du; an' they du's things tu that putts shame on a man 's often as not. They've a got that in them as passes show.' Not noticing my stare at that unconscious plagiarism, he went on,' Ah'd zooner zet up of a naight with an 'orse than with an 'uman— they've more zense, and patience.' And stroking the mare's forehead, he added, 'Now, my dear, time for yu t' 'ave yure bottle.'

I waited to see her take her draft, and lay her head down once more on the pillow. Then, hoping he would get a sleep, I rose to go.

'Aw, 't es nothin' much,' he said, 'this time o' year; not like in winter. 'T will come day before yu know, these buttercup-nights.'

And twinkling up at me out of his kindly bearded face, he settled himself again into the straw.

I stole a look back at his rough figure propped against the sack, with the mare's head down beside his knee, at her swathed black body, and the gold of the straw, the white walls, and dusky nooks and shadows of that old stable illumined by the dimsy light of the old lantern. And with the sense of having seen something holy, I crept away up into the field where I had lingered the day before, and sat down on the same halfway rock.

Close on dawn it was, the moon still sailing wide over the moor, and the flowers of this 'buttercup-night' fast closed, not taken in at all by her cold glory! Most silent hour of all the twenty-four— when the soul slips half out of sheath, and hovers in the cool; when the spirit is most in tune with what, soon or late, happens to all spirits; hour when a man cares least whether or no he be alive, as we understand the word.

'None of us goes such a brave way off— there's room for all, dead or alive.' Though it was almost unbearably colorless, and quiet, there was warmth in thinking of those words of his; in the thought, too, of the millions of living things snugly asleep all round; warmth in realizing that unanimity of sleep. Insects and flowers, birds, men, beasts, the very leaves on the trees— away in slumberland.

Waiting for the first bird to chirrup, one had perhaps even a stronger feeling than in daytime of the unity and communion of all life, of the subtle brotherhood of living things that fall all together into oblivion, and, all together, wake. When dawn comes, while moonlight is still powdering the world's face, quite a long time passes before one realizes how the quality of the light has changed; so it was day before I knew it. Then the sun came up above the hills; dew began to sparkle, and color to stain the sky. That first praise of the sun from every bird and leaf and blade of grass, the tremulous flush and chime of dawn! One has strayed so far from the heart of things, that it comes as something strange and wonderful! Indeed, I noticed that the beasts and birds gazed at me as if I simply could not be there, at this hour that so belonged to them. And to me, too, they seemed strange and new— with that in them 'that passed show,' and as of a world where man did not exist, or existed only as just another form of life, another sort of beast. It was one of those revealing moments when we see our proper place in the scheme; go past our truly irreligious thought: 'Man, hub of the Universe!' which has founded most religions. One of those moments when our supreme importance will not wash either in the bath of purest spiritual ecstasy, or in the clear fluid of scientific knowledge; and one sees clear, with the eyes of true religion, man playing his little, not unworthy, part in the great game of Perfection.

But just then began the crowning glory of that dawn— the opening and lighting of the buttercups. Not one did I actually see unclose, yet, all of a sudden, they were awake, the fields once more a blaze of gold.

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7: The Isle of Skulls

Gertrude Atherton

1857-1948

In: *The Splendid Idle Forties*, 1902

Stories of Old California

Prolific Californian novelist and feminist with at least half a dozen of her novels made into movies.

THE GOOD PRIESTS of Santa Barbara sat in grave conference on the long corridor of their mission. It was a winter's day, and they basked in the sun. The hoods of their brown habits peaked above faces lean and ascetic, fat and good-tempered, stern, intelligent, weak, commanding. One face alone was young.

But for the subject under discussion they would have been at peace with themselves and with Nature. In the great square of the mission the Indians they had Christianized worked at many trades. The great aqueduct along the brow of one of the lower hills, the wheat and corn fields on the slopes, the trim orchards and vegetable gardens in the cañons of the great bare mountains curving about the valley, were eloquent evidence of their cleverness and industry. From the open door of the church came the sound of lively and solemn tunes: the choir was practising for mass. The day was as peaceful as only those long drowsy shimmering days before the Americans came could be. And yet there was dissent among the padres.

Several had been speaking together, when one of the older men raised his hand with cold impatience.

"There is only one argument," he said. "We came here, came to the wilderness out of civilization, for one object only— to lead the heathen to God. We have met with a fair success. Shall we leave these miserable islanders to perish, when we have it in our power to save?"

"But no one knows exactly where this island is, Father Jiméno," replied the young priest. "And we know little of navigation, and may perish before we find it. Our lives are more precious than those of savages."

"In the sight of God one soul is of precisely the same value as another, Father Carillo."

The young priest scowled. "We can save. They cannot."

"If we refuse to save when the power is ours, then the savage in his extremest beastiality has more hope of heaven than we have."

Father Carillo looked up at the golden sun riding high in the dark blue sky, down over the stately oaks and massive boulders of the valley where quail flocked like tame geese. He had no wish to leave his paradise, and as the

youngest and hardiest of the priests, he knew that he would be ordered to take charge of the expedition.

"It is said also," continued the older man, "that once a ship from the Continent of Europe was wrecked among those islands—"

"No? No?" interrupted several of the priests.

"It is more than probable that there were survivors, and that their descendants live on this very island to-day. Think of it, my brother! Men and women of our own blood, perhaps, living like beasts of the field! Worshipping idols! Destitute of morality! Can we sit here in hope of everlasting life while our brethren perish?"

"No!" The possibility of rescuing men of European blood had quenched dissent. Even Carillo spoke as spontaneously as the others.

As he had anticipated, the expedition was put in his charge. Don Guillermo Iturbi y Moncada, the magnate of the South, owned a small schooner, and placed it at the disposal of the priests.

Through the wide portals of the mission church, two weeks later, rolled the solemn music of high mass. The church was decorated as for a festival. The aristocrats of the town knelt near the altar, the people and Indians behind.

Father Carillo knelt and took communion, the music hushing suddenly to rise in more sonorous volume. Then Father Jiméno, bearing a cross and chanting the rosary, descended the altar steps and walked toward the doors. On either side of him a page swung a censer. Four women neophytes rose from among the worshippers, and shouldering a litter on which rested a square box containing an upright figure of the Holy Virgin followed with bent heads. The Virgin's gown was of yellow satin, covered with costly Spanish lace; strands of Baja Californian pearls bedecked the front of her gown. Behind this resplendent image came the other priests, two and two, wearing their white satin embroidered robes, chanting the sacred mysteries. Father Carillo walked last and alone. His thin clever face wore an expression of nervous exaltation.

As the procession descended the steps of the church, the bells rang out a wild inspiring peal. The worshippers rose, and forming in line followed the priests down the valley.

When they reached the water's edge, Father Jiméno raised the cross above his head, stepped with the other priests into a boat, and was rowed to the schooner. He sprinkled holy water upon the little craft; then Father Carillo knelt and received the blessing of each of his brethren. When he rose all kissed him solemnly, then returned to the shore, where the whole town knelt. The boat brought back the six Indians who were to give greeting and confidence to their kinsmen on the island, and the schooner was ready to sail. As she

weighed anchor, the priests knelt in a row before the people, Father Jiméno alone standing and holding the cross aloft with rigid arms.

Father Carillo stood on deck and watched the white mission under the mountain narrow to a thread, the kneeling priests become dots of reflected light. His exaltation vanished. He was no longer the chief figure in a picturesque panorama. He set his lips and his teeth behind them. He was a very ambitious man. His dreams leapt beyond California to the capital of Spain. If he returned with his savages, he might make success serve as half the ladder. But would he return?

Wind and weather favoured him. Three days after leaving Santa Barbara he sighted a long narrow mountainous island. He had passed another of different proportions in the morning, and before night sighted still another, small and oval. But the lofty irregular mass, some ten miles long and four miles wide, which he approached at sundown, was the one he sought. The night world was alight under the white blaze of the moon; the captain rode into a small harbour at the extreme end of the island and cast anchor, avoiding reefs and shoals as facilely as by midday. Father Carillo gave his Indians orders to be ready to march at dawn.

The next morning the priest arrayed himself in his white satin garments, embroidered about the skirt with gold and on the chest with a purple cross pointed with gold. The brown woollen habit of his voyage was left behind. None knew better than he the value of theatric effect upon the benighted mind. His Indians wore gayly striped blankets of their own manufacture, and carried baskets containing presents and civilized food.

Bearing a large gilt cross, Father Carillo stepped on shore, waved farewell to the captain, and directed his Indians to keep faithfully in the line of march: they might come upon the savages at any moment. They toiled painfully through a long stretch of white sand, then passed into a grove of banana trees, dark, cold, noiseless, but for the rumble of the ocean. When they reached the edge of the grove, Father Carillo raised his cross and commanded the men to kneel. Rumour had told him what to expect, and he feared the effect on his simple and superstitious companions. He recited a chaplet, then, before giving them permission to rise, made a short address.

"My children, be not afraid at what meets your eyes. The ways of all men are not our ways. These people have seen fit to leave their dead unburied on the surface of the earth. But these poor bones can do you no more harm than do those you have placed beneath the ground in Santa Barbara. Now rise and follow me, nor turn back as you fear the wrath of God."

He turned and strode forward, with the air of one to whom fear had no meaning; but even he closed his eyes for a moment in horror. The poor

creatures behind mumbled and crossed themselves and clung to each other. The plain was a vast charnel-house. The sun, looking over the brow of an eastern hill, threw its pale rays upon thousands of crumbling skeletons, bleached by unnumbered suns, picked bare by dead and gone generations of carrion, white, rigid, sinister. Detached skulls lay in heaps, grinning derisively. Stark digits pointed threateningly, as if the old warriors still guarded their domain. Other frames lay face downward, as though the broken teeth had bitten the dust in battle. Slender forms lay prone, their arms encircling cooking utensils, beautiful in form and colour. Great bowls and urns, toy canoes, mortars and pestles, of serpentine, sandstone, and steatite, wrought with a lost art,— if, indeed, the art had ever been known beyond this island,— and baked to richest dyes, were placed at the head and feet of skeletons more lofty in stature than their fellows.

Father Carillo sprinkled holy water right and left, bidding his Indians chant a rosary for the souls which once had inhabited these appalling tenements. The Indians obeyed with clattering teeth, keeping their eyes fixed stonily upon the ground lest they stumble and fall amid yawning ribs.

The ghastly tramp lasted two hours. The sun spurned the hill-top and cast a flood of light upon the ugly scene. The white bones grew whiter, dazzling the eyes of the living. They reached the foot of a mountain and began a toilsome ascent through a dark forest. Here new terrors awaited them. Skeletons sat propped against trees, grinning out of the dusk, gleaming in horrid relief against the mass of shadow. Father Carillo, with one eye over his shoulder, managed by dint of command, threats, and soothing words to get his little band to the top of the hill. Once, when revolt seemed imminent, he asked them scathingly if they wished to retrace their steps over the plain unprotected by the cross, and they clung to his skirts thereafter. When they reached the summit, they lay down to rest and eat their luncheon, Father Carillo reclining carefully on a large mat: his fine raiment was a source of no little anxiety. No skeletons kept them company here. They had left the last many yards below.

"Anacleto," commanded the priest, at the end of an hour, "crawl forward on thy hands and knees and peer over the brow of the mountain. Then come back and tell me if men like thyself are below."

Anacleto obeyed, and returned in a few moments with bulging eyes and a broad smile of satisfaction. People were in the valley— a small band. They wore feathers like birds, and came and went from the base of the hill. There were no wigwams, no huts.

Father Carillo rose at once. Bidding his Indians keep in the background, he walked to the jutting brow of the hill, and throwing a rapid glance downward

came to a sudden halt. With one hand he held the cross well away from him and high above his head. The sun blazed down on the burnished cross; on the white shining robes of the priest; on his calm benignant face thrown into fine relief by the white of the falling sleeve.

In a moment a low murmur arose from the valley, then a sudden silence. Father Carillo, glancing downward, saw that the people had prostrated themselves.

He began the descent, holding the cross aloft, chanting solemnly; his Indians, to whom he had given a swift signal, following and lifting up their voices likewise. The mountain on this side was bare, as if from fire, the incline shorter and steeper. The priest noted all things, although he never forgot his lines.

Below was a little band of men and women. A broad plain swept from the mountain's foot, a forest broke its sweep, and the ocean thundered near. The people were clad in garments made from the feathered skins of birds, and were all past middle age. The foot of the mountain was perforated with caves.

When he stood before the trembling awe-struck savages, he spoke to them kindly and bade them rise. They did not understand, but lifted their heads and stared appealingly. He raised each in turn. As they once more looked upon his full magnificence, they were about to prostrate themselves again when they caught sight of the Indians. Those dark stolid faces, even that gay attire, they could understand. Glancing askance at the priest, they drew near to their fellow-beings, touched their hands to the strangers' breasts, and finally kissed them.

Father Carillo was a man of tact.

"My children," he said to his flock, "do you explain as best you can to these our new friends what it is we have come to do. I will go into the forest and rest."

He walked swiftly across the plain, and parting the clinging branches of two gigantic ferns, entered the dim wood. He laid the heavy cross beneath a tree, and strolled idly. It was a forest of fronds. Lofty fern trees waved above wide-leaved palms. Here and there a little marsh with crowding plant life held the riotous groves apart. Down the mountain up which the forest spread tumbled a creek over coloured rocks, then wound its way through avenues, dark in the shadows, sparkling where the sunlight glinted through the tall tree-tops. Red lilies were everywhere. The aisles were vocal with whispering sound.

The priest threw himself down on a bed of dry leaves by the creek. After a time his eyes closed. He was weary, and slept.

He awoke suddenly, the power of a steadfast gaze dragging his brain from its rest. A girl sat on a log in the middle of the creek. Father Carillo stared

incredulously, believing himself to be dreaming. The girl's appearance was unlike anything he had ever seen. Like the other members of her tribe, she wore a garment of feathers, and her dark face was cast in the same careless and gentle mould; but her black eyes had a certain intelligence, unusual to the Indians of California, and the hair that fell to her knees was the colour of flame. Apparently she was not more than eighteen years old.

Father Carillo, belonging to a period when bleached brunettes were unknown, hastily crossed himself.

"Who are you?" he asked.

His voice was deep and musical. It had charmed many a woman's heart, despite the fact that he had led a life of austerity and sought no woman's smiles. But this girl at the sound of it gave a loud cry and bounded up the mountain, leaping through the brush like a deer.

The priest rose, drank of the bubbles in the stream, and retraced his steps. He took up the burden of the cross again and returned to the village. There he found the savage and the Christianized sitting together in brotherly love. The islanders were decked with the rosaries presented to them, and the women in their blankets were swollen with pride. All had eaten of bread and roast fowl, and made the strangers offerings of strange concoctions in magnificent earthen dishes. As the priest appeared the heathen bowed low, then gathered about him. Their awe had been dispelled, and they responded to the magnetism of his voice and smile. He knew many varieties of the Indian language, and succeeded in making them understand that he wished them to return with him, and that he would make them comfortable and happy. They nodded their heads vigorously as he spoke, but pointed to their venerable chief, who sat at the entrance of his cave eating of a turkey's drumstick. Father Carillo went over to the old man and saluted him respectfully. The chief nodded, waved his hand at a large flat stone, and continued his repast, his strong white teeth crunching bone as well as flesh. The priest spread his handkerchief on the stone, seated himself, and stated the purpose of his visit. He dwelt at length upon the glories of civilization. The chief dropped his bone after a time and listened attentively. When the priest finished, he uttered a volley of short sentences.

"Good. We go. Great sickness come. All die but us. Many, many, many. We are strong no more. No children come. We are old— all. One young girl not die. The young men die. The young women die. The children die. No more will come. Yes, we go."

"And this young girl with the hair—" The priest looked upward. The sun had gone. He touched the gold of the cross, then his own hair.

"Dorthe," grunted the old man, regarding his bare drumstick regretfully.

"Who is she? Where did she get such a name? Why has she that hair?"

Out of another set of expletives Father Carillo gathered that Dorthe was the granddaughter of a man who had been washed ashore after a storm, and who had dwelt on the island until he died. He had married a woman of the tribe, and to his daughter had given the name of Dorthe— or so the Indians had interpreted it— and his hair, which was like the yellow fire. This girl had inherited both. He had been very brave and much beloved, but had died while still young. Their ways were not his ways, Father Carillo inferred, and barbarism had killed him.

The priest did not see Dorthe again that day. When night came, he was given a cave to himself. He hung up his robes on a jutting point of rock, and slept the sleep of the weary. At the first shaft of dawn he rose, intending to stroll down to the beach in search of a bay where he could bathe; but as he stepped across the prostrate Californians, asleep at the entrance of his cave, he paused abruptly, and changed his plans.

On the far edge of the ocean the rising diadem of the sun sent great bubbles of colour up through a low bank of pale green cloud to the gray night sky and the sulky stars. And, under the shadow of the cacti and palms, in rapt mute worship, knelt the men and women the priest had come to save, their faces and clasped hands uplifted to the waking sun.

Father Carillo awoke his Indians summarily.

"Gather a dozen large stones and build an altar— quick!" he commanded.

The sleepy Indians stumbled to their feet, obeyed orders, and in a few moments a rude altar was erected. The priest propped the cross on the apex, and, kneeling with his Indians, slowly chanted a mass. The savages gathered about curiously; then, impressed by the solemnity of the priest's voice and manner, sank to their knees once more, although directing to the sun an occasional glance of anxiety. When the priest rose, he gave them to understand that he was deeply gratified by their response to the religion of civilization, and pointed to the sun, now full-orbed, amiably swimming in a jewelled mist. Again they prostrated themselves, first to him, then to their deity, and he knew that the conquest was begun.

After breakfast they were ready to follow him. They had cast their feathered robes into a heap, and wore the blankets, one and all. Still Dorthe had not appeared. The chief sent a man in search of her, and when, after some delay, she entered his presence, commanded her to make herself ready to go with the tribe. For a time she protested angrily. But when she found that she must go or remain alone, she reluctantly joined the forming procession, although refusing to doff her bird garment, and keeping well in the rear that she might not again look upon that terrible presence in white and gold, that

face with its strange pallor and piercing eyes. Father Carillo, who was very much bored, would have been glad to talk to her, but recognized that he must keep his distance if he wished to include her among his trophies.

The natives knew of a shorter trail to the harbour, and one of them led the way, Father Carillo urging his footsteps, for the green cloud of dawn was now high and black and full. A swift wind was rustling the tree-tops and tossing the ocean white. As they skirted the plain of the dead, the priest saw a strange sight. The wind had become a gale. It caught up great armfuls of sand from the low dunes, and hurled them upon the skeletons, covering them from sight. Sometimes a gust would snatch the blanket from one to bury another more deeply; and for a moment the old bones would gleam again, to be enveloped in the on-rushing pillar of whirling sand. Through the storm leaped the wild dogs, yelping dismally.

When the party reached the stretch beyond the banana grove, they saw the schooner tossing and pulling at her anchor. The captain shouted to them to hurry. The boat awaiting them at the beach was obliged to make three trips. Father Carillo went in the first boat; Dorthe remained for the last. She was the last, also, to ascend the ladder at the ship's side. As she put her foot on deck, and confronted again the pale face and shining robes of the young priest, she screamed, and leapt from the vessel into the waves. The chief and his tribe shouted their entreaties to return. But she had disappeared, and the sky was black. The captain refused to lower the boat again. He had already weighed anchor, and he hurriedly represented that to remain longer in the little bay, with its reefs and rocks, its chopping waves, would mean death to all. The priest was obliged to sacrifice the girl to the many lives in his keep.

ii

DORTHE DARTED through the hissing waves, undismayed by the darkness or the screaming wind; she and the ocean had been friends since her baby days. When a breaker finally tossed her on the shore, she scrambled to the bank, then stood long endeavouring to pierce the rain for sight of the vessel. But it was far out in the dark. Dorthe was alone on the island. For a time she howled in dismal fashion. She was wholly without fear, but she had human needs and was lonesome. Then reason told her that when the storm was over the ship would return to seek her; and she fled and hid in the banana grove. The next morning the storm had passed; but the ship was nowhere to be seen, and she started for home.

The wind still blew, but it had veered. This time it caught the sand from the skeletons, and bore it rapidly back to the dunes. Dorthe watched the old bones

start into view. Sometimes a skull would thrust itself suddenly forth, sometimes a pair of polished knees; and once a long finger seemed to beckon. But it was an old story to Dorthe, and she pursued her journey undisturbed.

She climbed the mountain, and went down into the valley and lived alone. Her people had left their cooking utensils. She caught fish in the creek, and shot birds with her bow and arrow. Wild fruits and nuts were abundant. Of creature comforts she lacked nothing. But the days were long and the island was very still. For a while she talked aloud in the limited vocabulary of her tribe. After a time she entered into companionship with the frogs and birds, imitating their speech. Restlessness vanished, and she existed contentedly enough.

Two years passed. The moon flooded the valley one midnight. Dorthe lay on the bank of the creek in the fern forest. She and the frogs had held long converse, and she was staring up through the feathery branches, waving in the night wind, at the calm silver face which had ignored her overtures. Upon this scene entered a man. He was attenuated and ragged. Hair and beard fell nearly to his waist. He leaned on a staff, and tottered like an old man.

He stared about him sullenly. "Curse them!" he said aloud. "Why could they not have died and rotted before we heard of them?"

Dorthe, at the sound of a human voice, sprang to her feet with a cry. The man, too, gave a cry— the ecstatic cry of the unwilling hermit who looks again upon the human face.

"Dorthe! Thou? I thought thou wast dead— drowned in the sea."

Dorthe had forgotten the meaning of words, but her name came to her familiarly. Then something stirred within her, filling her eyes with tears. She went forward and touched the stranger, drawing her hand over his trembling arms.

"Do you not remember me, Dorthe?" asked the man, softly. "I am the priest— was, for I am not fit for the priesthood now. I have forgotten how to pray."

She shook her head, but smiling, the instinct of gregariousness awakening.

He remembered his needs, and made a gesture which she understood. She took his hand, and led him from the forest to her cave. She struck fire from flint into a heap of fagots beneath a swinging pot. In a little time she set before him a savoury mess of birds. He ate of it ravenously. Dorthe watched him with deep curiosity. She had never seen hunger before. She offered him a gourd of water, and he drank thirstily. When he raised his face his cheeks were flushed, his eyes brighter.

He took her hand and drew her down beside him.

"I must talk," he said. "Even if you cannot understand, I must talk to a human being. I must tell some one the story of these awful years. The very thought intoxicates me. We were shipwrecked, Dorthe. The wind drove us out of our course, and we went to pieces on the rocks at the foot of this island. Until to-night I did not know that it was this island. I alone was washed on shore. In the days that came I grew to wish that I, too, had perished. You know nothing of what solitude and savagery mean to the man of civilization— and to the man of ambition. Oh, my God! I dared not leave the shore lest I miss the chance to signal a passing vessel. There was scarcely anything to maintain life on that rocky coast. Now and again I caught a seagull or a fish. Sometimes I ventured inland and found fruit, running back lest a ship should pass. There I stayed through God knows how many months and years. I fell ill many times. My limbs are cramped and twisted with rheumatism. Finally, I grew to hate the place beyond endurance. I determined to walk to the other end of the island. It was only when I passed, now and again, the unburied dead and the pottery that I suspected I might be on your island. Oh, that ghastly company! When night came, they seemed to rise and walk before me. I cried aloud and cursed them. My manhood has gone, I fear. I cannot tell how long that terrible journey lasted,— months and months, for my feet are bare and my legs twisted. What kind fate guided me to you?"

He gazed upon her, not as man looks at woman, but as mortal looks adoringly upon the face of mortal long withheld.

Dorthe smiled sympathetically. His speech and general appearance struck a long-dormant chord; but in her mind was no recognition of him.

He fell asleep suddenly and profoundly. As Dorthe watched, she gradually recalled the appearance of the old who had lain screaming on the ground drawing up their cramped limbs. She also recalled the remedy. Not far from the edge of the forest was a line of temascals, excavations covered with mud huts, into which her people had gone for every ill. She ran to one, and made a large fire within; the smoke escaped through an aperture in the roof. Then she returned, and, taking the emaciated figure in her arms, bore him to the hut and placed him in the corner farthest from the fire. She went out and closed the door, but thrust her head in from time to time. He did not awaken for an hour. When he did, he thought he had entered upon the fiery sequel of unfaith. The sweat was pouring from his body. The atmosphere could only be that of the nether world. As his brain cleared he understood, and made no effort to escape: he knew the virtues of the temascal. As the intense heat sapped his remaining vitality he sank into lethargy. He was aroused by the shock of cold water, and opened his eyes to find himself struggling in the creek, Dorthe holding him down with firm arms. After a moment she carried

him back to the plain and laid him in the sun to dry. His rags still clung to him. She regarded them with disfavour, and fetched the Chief's discarded plumage. As soon as he could summon strength he tottered into the forest and made his toilet. As he was a foot and a half taller than the Chief had been, he determined to add a flounce as soon as his health would permit. Dorthe, however, looked approval when he emerged, and set a bowl of steaming soup before him.

He took the temascal twice again, and at the end of a week the drastic cure had routed his rheumatism. Although far from strong, he felt twenty years younger. His manhood returned, and with it his man's vanity. He did not like the appearance of his reflected image in the still pools of the wood. The long beard and head locks smote him sorely. He disliked the idea of being a fright, even though Dorthe had no standards of comparison; but his razors were at the bottom of the sea.

After much excogitation he arrived at a solution. One day, when Dorthe was on the other side of the mountain shooting birds,— she would kill none of her friends in the fern forest,— he tore dried palm leaves into strips, and setting fire to them singed his hair and beard to the roots. It was a long and tedious task. When it was finished the pool told him that his chin and head were like unto a stubbled field. But he was young and well-looking once more.

He went out and confronted Dorthe. She dropped her birds, her bow and arrow, and stared at him. Then he saw recognition leap to her eyes; but this time no fear. He was far from being the gorgeous apparition of many moons ago. And, so quickly does solitude forge its links, she smiled brightly, approvingly, and he experienced a glow of content.

The next day he taught her the verbal synonym of many things, and she spoke the words after him with rapt attention. When he finished the lesson, she pounded, in a wondrous mortar, the dried flour of the banana with the eggs of wild fowl, then fried the paste over the fire he had built. She brought a dish of nuts and showed him gravely how to crack them with a stone, smiling patronizingly at his ready skill. When the dinner was cooked, she offered him one end of the dish as usual, but he thought it was time for another lesson. He laid a flat stone with palm leaves, and set two smaller dishes at opposite ends. Then with a flat stick he lifted the cakes from the fry-pan, and placed an equal number on each plate. Dorthe watched these proceedings with expanded eyes, but many gestures of impatience. She was hungry. He took her hand and led her ceremoniously to the head of the table, motioning to her to be seated. She promptly went down on her knees, and dived at the cakes with both hands. But again he restrained her. He had employed a part of his large leisure fashioning rude wood forks with his ragged pocket-knife. There were plenty of

bone knives on the island. He sat himself opposite, and gave her a practical illustration of the use of the knife and fork. She watched attentively, surreptitiously whisking morsels of cake into her mouth. Finally, she seized the implements of civilization beside her plate, and made an awkward attempt to use them. The priest tactfully devoted himself to his own dinner. Suddenly he heard a cry of rage, and simultaneously the knife and fork flew in different directions. Dorthe seized a cake in each hand, and stuffed them into her mouth, her eyes flashing defiance. The priest looked at her reproachfully, then lowered his eyes. Presently she got up, found the knife and fork, and made a patient effort to guide the food to its proper place by the new and trying method This time the attempt resulted in tears— a wild thunder shower. The priest went over, knelt beside her, and guided the knife through the cake, the fork to her mouth. Dorthe finished the meal, then put her head on his shoulder and wept bitterly. The priest soothed her, and made her understand that she had acquitted herself with credit; and the sun shone once more.

An hour later she took his hand, and led him to the creek in the forest.

"C—c—ruck! C—c—ruck!" she cried.

"C—c—ruck! C—c—ruck!" came promptly from the rushes. She looked at him triumphantly.

"Curruck," he said, acknowledging the introduction.

She laughed outright at his poor attempt, startling even him with the discordant sound. She sprang to his side, her eyes rolling with terror. But he laughed himself, and in a few moments she was attempting to imitate him. Awhile later she introduced him to the birds; but he forbore to trill, having a saving sense of humour.

The comrades of her solitude were deserted. She made rapid progress in human speech. Gradually her voice lost its cross between a croak and a trill and acquired a feminine resemblance to her instructor's. At the end of a month they could speak together after a fashion. When she made her first sentence, haltingly but surely, she leaped to her feet and executed a wild war dance. They were on the plain of the dead. She flung her supple legs among the skeletons, sending the bones flying, her bright hair tossing about her like waves of fire. The priest watched her with bated breath, half expecting to see the outraged warriors arise in wrath. The gaunt dogs that were always prowling about the plain fled in dismay.

The month had passed very agreeably to the priest. After the horrors of his earlier experience it seemed for a time that he had little more to ask of life. Dorthe knew nothing of love; but he knew that if no ship came, she would learn, and he would teach her. He had loved no woman, but he felt that in this vast solitude he could love Dorthe and be happy with her. In the languor of

convalescence he dreamed of the hour when he should take her in his arms and see the frank regard in her eyes for the last time. The tranquil air was heavy with the perfumes of spring. The palms were rigid. The blue butterflies sat with folded wings. The birds hung their drowsy heads.

But with returning strength came the desire for civilization, the awakening of his ambitions, the desire for intellectual activity. He stood on the beach for hours at a time, straining his eyes for passing ships. He kept a fire on the cliffs constantly burning. Dorthe's instincts were awakening, and she was vaguely troubled. The common inheritance was close upon her.

The priest now put all thoughts of love sternly from him. Love meant a lifetime on the island, for he would not desert her, and to take her to Santa Barbara would mean the death of all his hopes. And yet in his way he loved her, and there were nights when he sat by the watch-fire and shed bitter tears. He had read the story of Juan and Haidée, by no means without sympathy, and he wished more than once that he had the mind and nature of the poet; but to violate his own would be productive of misery to both. He was no amorous youth, but a man with a purpose, and that, for him, was the end of it. But he spent many hours with her, talking to her of life beyond the island, a story to which she listened with eager interest.

One night as he was about to leave her, she dropped her face into her hands and cried heavily. Instinctively he put his arms about her, and she as instinctively clung to him, terrified and appealing. He kissed her, not once, but many times, intoxicated and happy. She broke from him suddenly and ran to her cave; and he, chilled and angry, went to his camp-fire.

It was a very brilliant night. An hour later he saw something skim the horizon. Later still he saw that the object was closer, and that it was steering for the harbour. He ran to meet it.

Twice he stopped. The magnetism of the only woman that had ever awakened his love drew him back. He thought of her despair, her utter and, this time, unsupportable loneliness; the careless girl with the risen sun would be a broken-hearted woman.

But he ran on.

Spain beckoned. The highest dignities of the Church were his. He saw his political influence a byword in Europe. He felt Dorthe's arms about him, her soft breath on his cheek, and uttered a short savage scream; but he went on.

When he reached the harbour three men had already landed. They recognized him, and fell at his feet. And when he told them that he was alone on the island, they re-embarked without question. And he lived, and forgot, and realized his great ambitions.

THIRTY YEARS LATER a sloop put into the harbour of the island for repairs. Several of the men went on shore. They discovered footprints in the sand. Wondering, for they had sailed the length of the island and seen no sign of habitation, they followed the steps. They came upon a curious creature which was scraping with a bone knife the blubber from a seal. At first they thought it was a bird of some unknown species, so sharp was its beak, so brilliant its plumage. But when they spoke to it and it sprang aside and confronted them, they saw that the creature was an aged woman. Her face was like an old black apple, within whose skin the pulp had shrunk and withered as it lay forgotten on the ground. Her tawny hair hung along her back like a ragged mat. There was no light in the dim vacuous eyes. She wore a garment made of the unplucked skins of birds. They spoke to her. She uttered a gibberish unknown to them with a voice that croaked like a frog's, then went down on her creaking knees and lifted her hands to the sun.

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8: The Story of a Wrong

Ambrose Pratt

1874-1944

The Australian Magazine, 30 May 1899

Ambrose Pratt was a successful novelist, mostly specialising in historic novels; this rare short story is set in 1860s colonial New South Wales.

THE HON. JOSEPH PEDEN, M.L.C., and Henry Pedley, Esq., M.L.A., were good friends five-and-thirty years ago, for all the fact of the wooden faces they wear when they pass each other in the street; that is to say, the wooden faces that they used to wear when they passed each other in the street up to last Saturday, for last Saturday they met face to face at Randwick after each had backed a "stiff-un," and a common, simultaneous impulse led them to shake hands. They looked at each other rather sheepishly for a while afterwards; then they laughed, also sheepishly each thinking of the same thing, the incident which had led them to pass each other with wooden faces in the street for five-and-thirty years.

"How are you, Joe?" asked Henry Pedley.

"Quite well, Harry," returned Joseph Peden. "Come 'n 'ave-a-drink." Then they linked arms and toddled off to the members' bar, to the amazement of several acquaintances who passed them on the way. Joseph Peden looked reflectively into his whiskey and soda as he raised it to his lips,

"What about that wrong, Hal?" he murmured with a twinkle in his eye.

Henry Pedley, for answer, poked his companion in the ribs with a long-forgotten gesture. "I never thought you d turn out such a d——d scoundrel," he chuckled. "You know I trusted you, Joe."

"Yes, and I trusted you," chuckled the other, "we were a fine pair, eh?"

And they laughed heartily, delighted both with the recollections of the past and the reconciliation of the present.

At King's School, Joe Peden and Hal Pedley were chums and inseparables; when they left they were chums still, but, of necessity, inseparables no longer.

Joe's father was a squatter, living close to Parramatta; Hal s uncle, his only living relative, was an auctioneer, whose business was conducted in the town itself. Joe left school to sub-manage his father's station, Hal to graft hard at a desk in the office of his uncle, who was both a hard nail in business and a martinet for discipline as regarded his clerks. The chums met once a week, however, at a little race meeting which they had themselves instituted among the ex-students of the college, and which soon became quite a popular institution throughout the district.

Now a word as to their characters and habits. Joe was a simple, open-minded lad, remarkable for a large trustfulness in human nature and a hearty admiration and affection for his friend; he bore the reputation of being a bit of a fool, but he was a crack rider and could use his fists like a professional boxer— the two accomplishments most dear to the hearts of young Australians, so his simplicity was never actually thrown in his face, so to speak.

Hal, on the other hand, was a bit of a cynic, and a very smart fellow indeed. He liked his friend Joe Peden extremely, but he did not scruple to make use of him Possessing only a scanty salary himself, for which he worked some ten hours daily, he found Joe's perennially bulging purse a constant comfort and blessing, which he availed himself of frequently; but then Joe had more than he could spend and kept no account of his outgoings, so what did it matter?

Hal Pedley owned a mare, "Graybird," which was the envy of the district. 'ln the weekly Wednesday afternoon meetings on the old Parramatta course, Graybird invariably beat everything opposed to her. Even Joe Peden, with his long purse and all the station horses at his disposal, found it impossible to find a match for her. Graybird always scudded past the post an easy winner, and grass-fed she was, too, as everybody knew. But there was a secret behind that little fact. Graybird, for all her speed, was a rank weed. Take her off the grass half an hour before the race and she would gallop like a witch; stable-feed her for a week and she couldn't last a furlong. It was the ambition of Joe Peden's life to beat Graybird. After a dozen bad lickings at the hands, or rather heels, of his chum's mare, he would have given a finger to beat her in a fair race. Every week he brought a different horse to match the mare, but every week Graybird seemed to win more easily. It was not the money he lost to his friend that Joe cared about; it was the fact of himself, the best jockey for miles round, always being left at the post by a tyro in the saddle like Hal Pedley— for the friends always rode their own horses, and, truth to say, Hal Pedley knew little more about riding than the art of sticking on; but he won, he always won, when Graybird was his mount, and Joe Peden swore a vow that he'd find a horse to beat that mare or die trying.

One day he went to Kiss's stables in Pitt Street to attend a sale. Old Kiss, as he entered, was offering a bumble-footed thoroughbred chestnut, with an evil-looking eye, to the man who coufd ride her. Already the wild 'un had sent a couple of daring youngsters as high as gum trees, but Joe got on and stuck on in spite of everything the chestnut could do. He gave the crowd an exhibition of rough riding that brought forth rousing cheers, and finally rode home on his acquisition.

The following week it was whispered abroad that Joe had got a horse to beat Graybird at last. Joe trained the chestnut carefully for a while, then rode

into Parramatta and showed her to his friend. Hal Pedley was a better judge of horse-flesh than a rider, and he noticed the bumble foot; so he took the wager offered, a level hundred, and smiled knowingly as he thought of Graybird. He mentioned the matter also to his associates and townies, and tipped them that the chestnut was no good; he could win.

Uneasy rumours came to him during the next few days, however. His cronies, who, relying on his well-known smartness, had all backed Graybird down to their last copper, commenced to drop in and tell alarming tales of trials in which the chestnut had shown a miraculous turn of speed, in spite of his bumble foot. Then came news of a timed trial that eclipsed all former efforts, and it became plain that the chestnut was a tough nut to crack. Hal Pedley and his cronies held a conference. Times were compared, comparisons made, financial matters discussed It was confessed that one and all would be ruined if the chestnut beat Graybird. It was solemnly declared that Graybird must win, but the chestnut's last trial stared them in the face like a grim spectre prophesying defeat. Hal Pedley rose to the occasion:

"Money's nothing to Joe," he remarked.

"Nothing," agreed his pals.

"But it's everything to us."

"Rather," chorussed the others.

"Well," said Hal, "in face of that trial which you fellows saw and timed for yourselves, it's all up with Graybird."

"And our money," added his pals, dolefully.

"I have a powder in the drawer of my desk," observed Hal, tentatively.

His pals looked at one another enquiringly.

"What's the effect?" demanded one.

"If the chestnut were to take it the morning of the race Graybird would win, trial or no trial."

The cronies looked at each other again, thoughtfully.

"But," said one, "that's just the difficulty; how can we get a chance? Joe will only bring the chestnut into town the morning of the race, and you bet your boots he'll look after her."

"He always puts up at the Wool Pack; easy bribe a groom," suggested another.

"Bosh," cried a third; "you ought to know Joe better than that; he always tends his horse himself, and you bet he'll watch the chestnut for all he's worth on Wednesday."

"I have provided for that," said Hal Pedley.

The others waited eagerly: "Go on," they cried.

"Well," said Hal, "Wednesday morning you fellows all keep out of the way. Joe will bring the chestnut in about ten, the race is at two; I'll have to work in the office till one, as you know. About eleven I'll send a clerk round for Joe, and tell him that I can't go myself, and I've no one I can trust to send out to the paddock for Graybird, as all the fellows have backed his mount, see ! I'll ask him to get a horse at the pub and ride out and get Graybird himself, else there'll be no race. He's soft as putty, and he'll like being trusted. He'll go like a shot, and while he's away— do you tumble?"

The crowd tumbled, and congratulated their captain heartily on his smartness.

All befell as it was arranged. Hal sent for Joe at eleven o'clock on Wednesday, and confided to him his difficulty.

"You see, Joe," he said, "all the fellows here have seen your trials, and they've all backed the chestnut, so I dare not let any of them go out to fetch Graybird, for there's none of 'em I can really trust; they might dose the mare on the way, see?"

"Why can't you go yourself?" asked Joe doubtfully.

Hal shook his head: "I can't," he answered; "Uncle is in the devil's own scot this morning; he won't let me out of his sight two secs., and if I took French leave he'd sack me like a shot. If you don't go, Joe, there'll be no race; for straight wire, old chap, you're the only man I'd trust to bring Graybird in this morning."

Joe felt much touched by this proof of his friend's confidence.

"All right, old man," he replied, "I'll get her for you; but I warn you I'll beat Graybird to-day, he added.

Hal smiled: "Not you," he answered, "Graybird will win in a canter," and he meant what he said.

Joe Peden rode out to the paddock thinking all the way what a fine fellow was Harry Pedley.

"It's great to think, he mused, " that although we're running against each other for all we're worth in this race, it don't interfere with our friendship one scrap. He trusts me, and I trust him, and we like each other better than ever."

The paddock was a fairly large one, but he soon drove Graybird into the stockyard and put the halter on her easily.

"Do you hear that, Graybird— not a dog's chance?"

Graybird was in the pink of condition, and looked fit to run for a kingdom. She was a long-barrelled, flea-bitten grey, with great muscular shoulders and slender tapering legs, the very model of a racer; but her lack of breeding showed in the big ugly head and a certain slight narrowness in the chest.

Joe, being in no great hurry, sat on a rail and watched her meditatively for a while, examining her points with the eye of a practised connoisseur. The narrowness of her chest did not escape him. Presently he addressed the mare aloud:

"Now, he said, "if some rascal of a fellow had come out here to fetch you instead of me, old girl, and he were to take it into his head to send you full belt round this paddock a couple of times, do you know you'd have no chance against my chestnut this afternoon at all? Do you hear that, Graybird, not a dog's chance; you're grass fed, and you've no wind to brag about at the best of times, do you mind that, Graybird?"

The mare, an intelligent brute, feeling herself addressed, answered to the best of her ability. She cocked up her ears and snorted, staring straight into Joe Peden's face.

Joe took off his hat and scratched his head; then he looked forth at the paddock, which was surprisingly level all round the fence and quite free from obstructions, save for one small creek a hundred yards away, which any horse could jump in its stride.

"Just as good as any training track," said Joe aloud, and he looked at Graybird again; she was in aggressively good condition.

"Wonder it the beggar can do me," muttered Joe to himself; "I don't believe she's ever shown her best speed yet, she's always won so blanky easily." He went up to her and felt her all over; she was tough and firm to the touch as if she'd been in training for half a dozen months.

Joe eyed her and eyed her; then he put on a big sneer and addressed her again:

"Pooh," he said, contemptuously, "You're only a weed after all; I'll beat you as easily as that"— he snapped his fingers— "blood will tell, Graybird, you mark my words, blood always tells."

The mare didn't like his tone and backed away from him nervously. Joe brought her up with a snap of the halter and stepped down from the fence.

"Come on," he said, and led her to the outer slip-rails. There he paused and looked about him. The place was a desert as far as human beings were concerned. He turned to Graybird curiously: "I wonder if the beggar can jump?" he asked himself aloud; "for two pins I'd try her over that creek."

No one offered him the two pins, but apparently Joe did not really need them, for he led the mare and his own horse back into the stockyard together and shifted the saddle and bridle in a jiffy. Then he mounted Graybird and rode her slowly to the creek.

"I'm bound to find out whether you can jump, old girl," he said; "now you've seen it, back we go a bit, now, turn, come on," he touched her with his heels to a gallop. "Over!"

The mare cleared the gully at a bound, and pulled up at the other side. Joe bent over the saddle and patted her neck:

"Not bad for a first attempt," he cried, with sparkling eyes; "try it again!" Over they went once more. "Again!" cried Joe, and this time he did not pull up, but sent her at a stretching gallop round and round the paddock once, twice, thrice, four times. He pulled up when he reached the creek the fifth round, for the mare was badly blown. She had galloped a good six miles, and stood reeking with sweat, trembling all over, and puffing like a steam engine.

"If anyone, soliloquised Joe, "had told me I could ever be such a damned scoundrel, I'd have broken his neck." He looked all round to see if, perchance, his rascality had been observed, but still not a soul was in sight.

"It cuts me to the heart to think that I've turned out such a rogue," was his next remark, as he dismounted and surveyed his work; but his heartache did not prevent a humorous smile from playing round his lips, nor a glint of triumph from visiting his eyes, as he marked the mare's distended flanks and quivering limbs.

"Do you know," he observed presently, reflectively addressing the empty air, "this poor brute is simply dying for a drink. I know jolly well if I were to run a hundred yards I'd want a wet; blow me if I don't let her have a mouthful; I can't bear to see a horse in trouble."

He took Graybird to the creek, and when he led her afterwards to the stockyard, it was the same as leading a half-filled water-cart, for the rumbling noises behind him were distinctly audible for yards around. Arrived at the yard he changed the saddles again, and rubbed the mare vigorously all over with a wisp of grass until the saddle and girth marks were removed and no trace of sweat remained. Then he mounted his own horse and led Graybird by the halter at a slow walk townwards. This walk gave him plenty of time for meditation, and, to tell the truth, before he was half way to Parramatta Joe's conscience properly woke up and remorse commenced to prick at his heartstrings. He handed the mare to Hal Pedley as the clocks were striking one, with a suspiciously criminal effusiveness, but Hal was similarly effusive in his thanks for the service rendered.

"She was a bit hard to catch," said Joe, "and very dirty when I caught her, so I gave her a wash in the creek and rubbed her down a bit."

"It was awfully good of you Joe, old boy," said Hal, scarcely glancing at Graybird, who was not too presentable even then, "you're a true pal."

"We ought to have a good race," said Joe, moving off.

"I reckon I'll get a bit of lunch now."

"Hold on," cried the other, "do you want to put any more money on the chestnut?"

Joe was tempted, the apple had been offered to him earlier in the day, and he did eat thereof; it was easier to fall a second time. Joe fell.

"How much?" he asked.

"Say another tenner?"

"You'll lose it, Hal."

Pedley's eyes gleamed as he saw his fish taking the bait.

"I'm willing to risk that," he answered, "is it a go?"

Joe said "Yes," and went to his lunch feeling very mean in the certainty of winning, in all, some two hundred pounds; this same certainty interfered with his appetite, and his training fare of tea and toast seemed more unattractive than usual to him that day.

The course was crowded long before the great race, but Joe found to his surprise, considering what his friend had told him the same morning, that Graybird was a hot favourite. The books were laying three to one against the chestnut. Joe booked a great number of bets, and when the bell rang dressed quickly and went to look at his horse, which he found already saddled. The chestnut seemed a bit sleepy and coughed incessantly; his eyes, too, were dull and heavy.

"The brute's sick!" cried Joe, aghast.

The groom wore a most concerned face, but could throw no real light on the matter. "He do look sick, sir," he confessed. "I can't make out what's come over him, he's been coughing ever since his last feed. I fancy a bit of chaff must ha' got among his oats, and it's gone the wrong way."

"Run and get me a bottle of brandy," said Joe, quickly, "take the cork out at the bar, look sharp!"

When the groom returned, Joe poured the brandy down the chestnut's nose; he gave him the whole bottle, and the spirit brightened the creature wonderfully. Joe mounted and rode to the starting post, for the first time glad that he had done what he had done earlier in the morning.

The race was to be a full mile and the start was a good one. Joe forced the running from the jump on his chestnut, to Hal Pedley's wild amaze. For two furlongs he rode as if it was a five furlong race, and Hal was compelled to follow his lead and urge Graybird on. At the quarter mile post they were close together. Joe looked at Graybird and saw, to his delight, that she was galloping her hardest, and already showing signals of distress. At the half mile post the mare was done; Pedley was already using whip and spur. Joe chuckled softly to himself and touched the chestnut with his heels, but the brute did not

respond. He used the pricks, but apparently the horse was doing his best; he was then slightly in the lead, but nothing to speak of. For the first time Joe paid earnest attention to his own mount, and discovered that the chestnut was going groggily, every stride an effort. He sat down to ride then, and nursed his horse as only a splendid jockey can. Graybird crept up and passed him under the lash. "You d—— rogue," cried Hal, as he came abreast, "what did you do to my mare this morning?"

Like a flash of light it occurred to Joe that his own horse's sudden sickness might not have been all an accident.

"What have you been doing to my chestnut?" he shouted.

Hal half turned his head, and his face wore a smile of triumph, for Graybird was forging fast ahead.

"What do you think, you fool?" he cried, and settled down to hard work with whip and spur. But before the three-quarter mile post was passed, Graybird was completely done, and the utmost flogging Hal could administer could not extract more than a laboured gallop, hardly faster than a pony's canter. The chestnut was very little better, but as yet his rider had not used the whip, and Joe nursed him along carefully, a half-dozen lengths behind the mare. In the last furlong the breeding of the chestnut told. Under the whalebone he sprang forward in a big final effort, which Joe had almost delayed too long, and won by two short lengths from the panting Graybird. The mile had taken four and a half minutes to accomplish. The friends walked their horses into the paddock side by side, amidst a wild babel of cheers and hootings from the crowd. Joe had been thinking hard during the last part of the race, and he took the initiative in the abuse which he foresaw must follow. "Hal," he said solemnly, "you nobbled my chestnut, while I was away getting Graybird for you. I swear I never thought you could play me such a dirty trick."

"Joe," said Hal, "you're a damned scoundrel. I trusted you with Graybird, and you went back on me— you must have knocked the devil out of her."

"You sent me to fetch her, so as to get me out of the way while you dosed the chestnut," cried Joe.

Hal was on the verge of giving Joe the lie direct, but he remembered his friend's prowess with the gloves, and refrained in time. He was wildly angry, but he managed to control himself, and assumed the expression of a hero of melodrama addressing the stage villain, and even that with an effort; for he possessed a keen sense of the ridiculous, and in spite of his defeat, his rage, and everything, the humour of the situation so appealed to him, that a lurking smile almost spoiled his affectation of pathos. "Say no more, say no more," he spoke, with a grand air, and a stately wave of his hand, "you have done me a great wrong, Joe, but I forgive you."

"Well, you've got a cheek," gasped Joe, "I've done you a wrong, have I?" He was too overcome to speak further, but Hal was quite self-possessed.

"Yes," he repeated, "you've done me a great wrong, Joe, you've hurt my faith in my own judgment"— he leaned forward confidentially; "up to five minutes ago, I'd have taken my oath anywhere that you were the biggest fool in Parramatta."

Which speech made, Joe Peden immediately realised the limitations of the English language. For, however much he spluttered and stuttered, and tried to speak, not a word could he find fit to express his feelings.

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9: The Vault Murder

George Allan England

1877-1936

Detective Fiction Weekly, 5 Oct 1929

1: Locked In!

IT was exactly twelve minutes past two, on the afternoon of May 26, when William J. Blair, vice president and cashier of the Middleburg, New York, First National Bank, casually remarked:

"Guess I'll have to get that other ledger from the vault."

Bookkeeper Joslyn Harrison, in the next cage, distinctly heard him say this. Harrison also heard him get up, open the grilled door leading into the corridor that ran toward the bank vault, and walk down that corridor. Paying Teller Marden, who just, then happened to glance down the corridor, plainly saw Blair enter the vault.

It was some four minutes later that bank president Harvey Nelson Payne came unsteadily to the grilled door, hoarsely exclaiming:

"Blair— he's shut himself in! The time lock's sprung!"

Harrison, a meek man with perpetually inky fingers, looked up from his desk. He faced round at Payne, his pale blue eyes blinking as he tried to grasp what had happened.

"What? What's that you say, sir?"

Even to his rather dull brain, skilled only in figures, it was obvious that something serious indeed had taken place. The bank president's appearance was full guarantee of that! Now, not at all his usual dignified self, he stood there a picture of dismay. That picture was anything but agreeable. For Payne bore nearly seventy years on his bowed shoulders. Paunchy and baggy jowled, with his mane of white hair all dishevelled his deep-set black eyes staring and his jaw agape, he now presented anything but the conventional portrait of the president of the oldest and largest bank in a hustling American city of more than forty thousand.

"What— what's that you say?"

Bookkeeper Harrison mustered breath enough once more to query. "You don't mean Cashier Blair has gone an'—"

"Thats what he has, Harrison! He's shut himself up in the vault! And the time lock—"

For a tense moment the two men, chief and subordinate, stared at each other. From Harrison's poised pen a large, flat blob of ink dropped to the immaculate page of a ledger that constituted his greatest pride. That this catastrophe remained unnoted showed what perturbation of spirit Harrison

was now undergoing. The president's seemed no less. His alarmed figure looked almost grotesque as the old man still remained framed by the door of the bookkeeper's cage.

Leading from that cage and ending at that door, extended the corridor, down to the back wall of the bank building; a corridor that with its six-foot width separated Payne's private office from the bank vault where this alarming event had just been so startlingly reported.

Harrison was first to break the silence.

"The time lock?" he thickly exclaimed. "You don't mean to say it's—"

"Sprung! And that means it'll be at least fourteen hours before—"

"But it couldn't spring, sir!"

"Damn it, are you arguing against a fact? Were up against a fact now, and weve got to get that man out o' there! Get him out, quick. If we don't, good God, he'll stifle to death! He'll die!"

The old man's voice broke into almost a falsetto. Never in all the years that Harrison had known him, and those years had been many, had Payne exhibited any such flood of emotion.

"Die?" cut in another voice, as Paying Teller Marden— sallow, thin shouldered and spectacled— thrust his way into the bookkeeper's cage. The gray-uniformed watchman, special policeman or whatever his title might be, who had been pulling down the shades in the public part of the bank— now that the business day was over— came shuffling on flat feet.

Jethro Tibbetts, his name was; a silent, glum and taciturn old fellow; confirmed woman hater, and man without vices. Loyal to the bank, with a kind of doglike tenacity, his lean face and emotionless eyes— gray as his uniform— had time out of mind been identified with the fortunes of the institution. Now, for once a little shaken out of his aplomb, he queried through the metal bars:

"The combination, sir! Won't that open it? Ain't there no way to get him out?"

Feminine footsteps sounded as Hattie Forster and Winnifred Alden came hurrying. Hattie, plump and personable, was the bank stenographer. Winnifred, who wielded a wicked finger at an adding machine, uttered disjointed words that mingled with the jumble of exclamations now confusing the atmosphere of the First National:

"Oh, dear me!" " How did it happen?" "Die? He'll die in there?" "What the—" " But we've got to open it!" "How the devil could a man do such a fool trick as that?" "Get a safe expert, quick!" "How long can a man live in there?" "Help! Get help!"

The only cool person in the bank, apparently, was Waldo K. Wheeler— "Wally," as his Country Club pals all knew him. Wally was receiving teller. For

about three years, now, his sandy hair, smooth ruddy face, suave manners had formed part of the bank's social assets. For Wally's family was one of the very best in town, ranking only second to president Payne's itself.

Now, as with a green celluloid eye-shade pushed back from his untroubled brow, this young Chesterfield stood his hands on hips surveying the scene, he proffered sage advice:

"Don't go into high, folks! Take the grade on low! We'll snatch old Blairey out of his box just as quick as we can drag a couple o' men up from Plummer & Tagle's. They installed the vault. And can't they crack it, too. If they can't—"

Turning to the bookkeeper's desk he caught up the phone, called: "Main, 318!"

"Get him out, nothing!" ejaculated Marden. "When a time lock lets go—"

"That means blowing open the vault, if it's to be opened inside the time limit," tremulously put in President Payne. "Shattering the door! And that, by gad, sir, may kill him!"

Already, even as Wally Wheeler was just getting in touch with Plummer & Tagle down on Division Street, the old watchman had entered Payne's office and was advancing through it to the door that opened on the corridor opposite the vault.

Turning, Payne half stumbled down that corridor, reaching the vault door just as old Jethro Tibbetts got there. All the others, excepting Wally, came crowding after. The corridor echoed with footfalls and broken words.

In front of the vault they all anxiously gathered. The massive door, they saw, was indeed fast shut. It presented only a baffling complex of huge hinges, bars, levers, wheels and dials that, to the uninitiated, seemed like a mere confusion. Somewhere behind this impenetrable barrier—though how such a thing could have happened rather staggered the imagination— a human being was immured.

In that cramped space a man who only' a few minutes before had been one of them, and had been most commonplacely bent over his desk, now might have found a living tomb. More than one tongue tried to moisten dry lips. More than one forehead gleamed with a sweat not justified by the cool freshness of that late May afternoon.

Harvey Payne, walking like a man in a daze, turned and entered his office. Outside, a motor siren hooted. A girl's laugh drifted in from Commercial Street. As yet ignorant of the tense drama there in the bank, the life of Middleburg was flowing on, untroubled.

"God grant they can do something, in time!" groaned the old president, as he swung to the little wall phone that communicated with another similar instrument inside the vault.

Clotting at the office door, the bank personnel stared and listened as their president, in a queer and shaking voice, called :

"Hello, in there! Hello there, Blair! Can you hear me? Can you—"

Old Payne broke off short. He listened intently. So too did all the rest, with unbreathing intensity.

Through their silence, the voice of Wally Wheeler— snappy, crisp— echoed back to them:

"Hello, there! Hell-o! Plummer & Tagle? Oh, is that you, Ed? Say, this is the First National. Bill Blair, he's got himself locked in the vault. What? Sure he did it by accident! What d'you think a— Yeah! And listen! The time-lock's sprung! How can we open it? What? Can't be opened except by force, till the time's up? Yeah, that's what I thought. Send a couple o' your best men up, right off! What? And you'll come yourself? Fine! Make it on high, Ed! This is a hell of a jam we're in! S'long!"

The click of his instrument, as he hung up, blent with the resuming voice of old Harvey Payne:

"You hear me in there? Good! How in the name o' Heaven did you ever happen to— But never mind that! Thing is to keep cool. Don't get excited, William! Whatever you do, don't get excited!"

The president's face, twitching and dewed with perspiration, his trembling lips and panicky eyes contrasted strangely with his advice, as he stammered on:

"If you get excited, you'll breathe more air! Listen— don't breathe any deeper than you positively have to. And— what's that you say—"

Again he broke off, the receiver pressed to his ear. He nodded, and the tension in his face visibly eased off.

"What's he say?" demanded somebody. "What— how does he feel, and—" A confused hum of questions rose from men and women alike. "What's—"

"Shhh! Wait!" commanded Payne, raising his free hand. "Let me hear what he says, can't you? Oh, all right, William! I'm glad you feel O.K. And— what's that? You'll be all right! Better lie down on the floor. Air will stay fresher there. And listen; don't get excited! Yes, we've sent for help. Phoned Plummer & Tagle. They're rushing a couple of their best men. Tagle's coming himself. We'll get you out of there in time, if we have to tear the door down, plate by plate. And meantime, we can drill through, pipe in oxygen to you, and—"

"That's right, oxygen!" exclaimed Joslyn Harrison, as Wally joined the frightened group. "Wheeler, call up the Memorial Hospital and tell 'em to send down a cylinder, with plenty of rubber tubing!"

"Just a minute!" put in old Payne. "Tell them at the hospital to keep this strictly quiet. Plummer & Tagle won't say anything, but the hospital might. And

any news of this leaking out would hurt the bank. Cart tell what it mightn't do! Might even start a run, or—"

"I know, sir! I'll tell 'em to keep it quiet!" And once more the jaunty Wheeler returned to the phone.

President Payne began talking again into the instrument that communicated with the vault:

"We're doing everything humanly possible, William. Ordering oxygen up from Memorial. Count on me, William— count on all of us! Not a thing in the world to get excited about. It'll be a joke by to-morrow— sooner, too! You'll be none the worse for it, and—"

His voice died. His face went blank with horror and amaze. He clutched the receiver till his knuckles whitened.

"William! William!" he gasped, in a voice of tense panic. "What— for God's sake— What's that I heard? What— can you hear me, William? Are you there—"

Marden, round-shouldered and spectacled, pushed forward to the president, and clutched his arm.

"What is it now? What's happened?"

The others crowded, stammering questions. But old Payne gave no heed. Frantically he was thumping the hook of the receiver up and down, with a hand that shook as with the ague; trying to signal the instrument inside the vault.

"What's the matter?" half hysterically choked Hattie Forster. "Telephone broken? Can't you—"

"William! You, in there!" the old man hoarsely commanded, his panic plain to all beholders. "For Heaven's sake, William, answer me! What's happened? What've you done—"

His voice trailed off into a groan. Dropping the instrument, that swung loosely a-dangle, he stumbled back and all but collapsed into the big leather-padded chair at his desk. With horror-smitten eyes he sagged there, vacantly staring at the group of white-faced bank employees.

"What is it, sir?" the watchman queried. "What— what's happened now?" His voice was hardly a whisper.

"I—only wish I knew!" thickly the president made reply.

"Don't Mr. Blair answer?"

Old Payne shook his white-maned head.

"I heard—" he began with trembling lips. "I—"

"Heard what, sir?"

"A shot, in there."

"A shot?"

"Yes! A revolver shot. And now— all's silent in the vault!"

2: The Missing Gun

THE silence that greeted this terrifying announcement was so utter that through it could be heard the tense breathing of those there present, the tick-tack-tick of the big clock in the public space of the bank, the buzz of an early bluebottle fly on a window of the president's room. Then the rumbling growl of a motor-truck as it jolted down Porter Avenue, at the side of the building, seemed to break the spell.

"He— he can't have shot himself in there, can he?" half whispered Harrison. "If he has—"

"If he has," old Harvey Payne took up the word, "we're all in for a terrible time! And the bank—" Now, as ever, his main thought seemed to be for the reputation of the First National Bank, the institution that had grown with the growth of Middleburg itself.

The institution in which he had worked up to the presidency, from a minor clerkship, and around which for more than forty-eight years all his business life had centered. "If Blair has— but, my God, that's too horrible a tragedy to even think of!" groaned Payne.

He sat there loosely, as if ready to collapse at his desk. Young Wally Wheeler, running to the vault phone, caught up the still dangling receiver.

"Hello, in there!" he echoed, rattling the hook. "Hello!" No answer, while bonds of horror tightened to the breaking point. "Blair! What's happened? What's the matter in there? For God's sake, answer!"

Ashen-faced and quivering, old Payne tugged a huge handkerchief from the breast-pocket of his well-worn black suit, and mopped his brow.

"No use," he managed thickly to articulate. "Hes done it, all right. He's— he's shot himself there in the vault !"

"But, holy heavens! Why?" demanded Marden; while Hattie Forster began to cry and Winnifred Alden showed symptoms of a fainting spell.

"That's right, why?" Joslyn Harrison echoed, his mild and pale-blue eyes winking. "Why should a man with a fine position, new house up in Myrtle Park, one o' the best wives in town, and three children growing up—"

"Never mind!" Payne interrupted. "Thing to do now is—"

"Call the police! Ring up Frank Dexter, the new chief—"

"No! Wait! We've got to minimize the terrible publicity were bound to get." Something of a fighting gleam lighted his eye. "When the yellow journals get hold of this—"

"Can't we keep 'em out, sir?" Marden queried.

"Keep 'em out? How? Tell me that!" demanded the old president; while Wally Wheeler hung up the useless phone. Harrison turned away, stepped to the door of the vault— across the six-foot corridor— and stood there, with inky fingers rather absurdly scratching his bald-spot as he stared at the massive and impenetrable door. The door behind which now lurked a mystery of such terrific potentialities.

"How can we keep the yellow press out of this?" Payne once more questioned. "Is there any known way? No, sir, by gad, they'll flock to this like flies to carrion! This horrible thing will be flashed from Maine to California, and the First National Bank of Middleburg, New York, will be—"

He finished only with a groan.

Two or three stood there in his office, frightened, confused and helpless. Others, including Jethro Tibbetts the watchman, drifted out to where Joslyn Harrison was futilely peering at the vault door, the time-lock. In this emergency useless, they murmured banal questions and senseless answers.

A vague sense of personal danger had begun to penetrate their first sense of shock and pity. After all, "my shirt is near me, but my skin is nearer." And with the swift down-swooping of dire, tremendous complications, with possible losses, a run on the bank or its ruin, more than one of these people might be thrown out of a position that gave them not only a comfortable living, but also the respect of the entire community. A banking job is not to be plucked from every blackberry bush; no, indeed!

Thus, within a very few moments of the fateful announcement by Payne: "I heard a shot in there!" reactions had begun to develop. The personal equation of selfishness had begun to make itself felt. And as in panic aboard a sinking ship, each human being— save perhaps the heroic captain— may think only of his own escape, so now each member in the personnel of the First National had already begun to ponder: " Well, if worse comes to worst, how can I save myself?"

Marden was first to voice a selfish thought.

"If we call Chief Dexter, or let the *Times-Express* get hold of this before things are straightened out a bit," he ventured, "there's going to be one hell of a scandal. We've got to hold the lid on, sir— at least, a little while."

"But how?" groaned the old president in a hopeless tone. His gesture was tremendously sketched. "A pistol shot— no answer— our cashier, one of this town's biggest citizens, dead in the vault. How in God's name can we keep the *Times-Express* out? Or Frank Dexter and the police? And you know Dexter's on the other side of the political fence from me. You know how he'd like to crucify me, and this bank, and all of us! You know—"

Another silence followed, while Harrison, Wheeler and the watchman fingered the mechanisms of the vault door; the knob of the combination, the polished wheel, even the mocking and defiant time-lock itself, as if by some miracle or magic they might find an "Open Sesame!" to fling the barriers wide. As if some hope might exist that human muscle, unaided, might penetrate complex and costly mechanisms of tool-steel. As if some possibility still existed that they might find, once more alive, their companion they knew only too well was lying dead within that vault of tragic mystery.

Then all at once, the sharp-toned rrrrrrrrrr! of an electric bell, startlingly loud through the echoing spaces of the bank, set every nerve crisply a-tingle. Everybody stiffened, keyed to the next unfoldment of the drama that so swiftly, so unexpectedly had swooped down vulturelike into their quiet lives.

"Oh, what's that?" cried Winnifred Alden.

"That's Tagle, with his men!" Wally made answer. "I'll let 'em in!"

And turning on his heel, he ran diagonally through the president's office, then into the space occupied by Miss Alden and the stenographer. Beyond this he traversed a swinging gate in a railing. His footsteps sounded over the marble floor of the public room, as he reached the front door.

Seeming to fear the approach of fate itself, old Payne and the bank employees held utter silence as the door swung open.

John Tagle and his two safe experts entered with bags of tools and explosives.

"Hello, what's all the row about?" Tagle demanded.

Wally jerked a thumb toward the rear of the bank.

"Talk to him! I've got nothing to say. Ask Payne."

"We got here as quick as we could," declared Tagle. "Took some time get the stuff together. An' we sure burned the pavement on the way here. You say—"

"I don't say a word. Ask the old man!"

"Hmph! grunted Tagle, and stalked officeward, his two mechanics following. Wally came last, cynically pondering:

"Good thing these birds are going to operate while were watching 'em. If that biggest one isn't an ex-yegg, I lose my guess!"

His guess was right.

Ex-yeggs are notoriously useful when they go straight and take jobs with safe companies.

"Well, what's all the excitement?" was Tagle's pointblank question as he and his henchmen strode into the president's office. An extinct cigar ornamented his mouth. He looked, and was, an abrupt sort of person. "Got a man locked in the vault, have you?"

Dumbly, old Payne nodded. Fear dwelt in his cavernous eyes.

"Blair, is it?"

"Yes— Blair."'

"And you're all scared stiff, ain't you? Well, say! Snap out of it!' commanded Tagle, while his experts stood rough-clad and grimy, with their much- worn leathern bags of implements. "There's nothin' in that to paralyze you all. Happens every now an' then. O' course, the air ain't so good in there. An' if a man had to stay a few hours, he'd prob'ly be all in. But we'll have Blair out in time, never you fear!"

"You can get him out," groaned Payne, " but not in time. It's too late, now."

"Forget it! Inside of a couple hours—"

"He's dead, already!"

"He's what?"

"Dead."

"The hell you say! He ain't been in there half an hour, an' yet—"

"It's true, or were afraid it's true,"

put in Marden, as the old man choked, unable to say more. "The whole thing's changed, since we phoned you. If Blair isn't dead, he's at least seriously wounded."

"Wounded? What with?"

"Fact is, he's shot himself."

" He's—? Say! Quit your kidding!"

"No kidding at all, Tagle," Harrison added his word. "Mr. Payne, here, heard the explosion of the gun. Heard it over the vault telephone."

"That's right," gulped the old man, nodding.

"And since then," Harrison went on, "not a sound out of the vault. Still as a— tomb."

"Well, by God!" ejaculated Tagle. The cigar dropped from his sagging jaw of amazement. "Can you beat

that?" A moment of blank silence followed. "But, say, he mightn't be dead yet, after all, Quicker we get into that vault—!"

"Call the cops!" demanded the workman who looked like (and was) an ex-yegg. "I seen too many jams, in my day, to want to get in any more. If the cops ain't here when we cracks this here crib, somebody's liable to get somethin' pinned on 'em good. Cops, here, or I'm quittin' right now. That's me!"

Wearily old Payne assented :

"We don't need the police in on this, Mr. Payne!" the gray-uniformed watchman protested. "I'm a special officer, myself. I rank as a policeman, and if I make a report—"

"Not good enough," the president negatived this vigorous declaration. "Joslyn, or some of you, phone the Chief."

But Wally was first at the telephone on the president's desk. Hardly had the fateful, the now irrevocable news shot over the wire to Police Headquarters on Forrest Avenue, when once more the trilling of the electric bell announced another arrival at the front door.

Marden, at a gesture from old Payne, went to admit the new-comers —two men from the Memorial Hospital with a cylinder of oxygen and with piping.

"I guess the beans are pretty thoroughly spilled, by now," judged young Wally, as the hospital attendants carried their apparatus into the corridor before the vault. "All this phoning and everything, Everybody in town'll get it, now—and when the cops show up here—"

Old Harvey Payne groaned:

"And after that, the buzzards of the press will begin closing in. And after that—!"

Three hours and seventeen minutes from that time— the vault door having proved more recalcitrant by far than expected— a haggard and nerve-strained bank staff watched the very last bond broken that kept concealed the tragic mystery within,

Chief of Police Frank Dexter and two of his captains were also present. So, too, were Mayor Carter Hayes and half a dozen leading citizens who could not be denied; to say nothing of editor Amos B. Ferguson and a couple of the *Times-Express*'s brightest reporters. Also a representative of the Amalgamated Press.

The event seemed already to have assumed something the character of a public reception, a big sporting event. Up at the Eagle House, rumors stated that bets were being laid as to whether William Blair would be taken out alive or not; the odds being quoted at one to twelve in favor of his being dead.

If old President Payne had foreseen and dreaded publicity, now, indeed, had disaster on blackest wing plunged down upon him and the bank that for so many decades had been his life!

Late afternoon, inside the building, brought the electric lights into full glare. Harsh shadows cut across pale and anxious faces. The place echoed with the clank of metal. Disrupted steel, once of high value but now only junk, lay bent, riven, shattered in the corridor. The smell of sweat, of toiling flesh, of fumes from muffled explosions made the close air rank and foul inside that place of misery.

Outside it, along Porter Avenue and up Commercial Street— yes, and even in Patriot Square, one corner of which commanded a view of the bank— curious idlers congregated, formed little groups, then dissolved to listen to some fresh exponent of a guess, a rumor, a theory, a slander.

Newsboys were shouting:

"Here yare. *Times-Express*! All 'bout the bank mystery! Cashier Blair shoots himself in the bank vault! Leadin' citizen suicides! Shortage o' funds suspected! Get the news, now —here y'are— suicide mystery—!"

Yes, and up in Myrtle Park, in the new $25,000 house that (so tongues of malice had already begun more than to whisper) had fatally over-strained the bank cashier's resources, a stricken and gray-faced woman with three frightened children awaited news that might mean ruin, desolation, anguish intolerable.

Clang! fell the last obstruction. It echoed like a note of doom through the fevered tension of the bank.

"Well, there she is!" announced Tagle, sucking at the butt of another dead cigar. In shirt sleeves and with rumpled hair, sweaty, grimy, he looked as much a yegg as the helper who had really been one. " A damn tough job, I'll say. Don't understand it. When this here time lock was set to snap on at six, for a fourteen-hour lockup, how the hell he set it back to 2.15 an' why—?"

"Forget it!' growled the ex-yegg. "There's the job, now; an' a good, A-1 wreck I calls it, too." His lips, brown with tobacco juice, grinned as he smeared them with the back of an ape-hairy paw. "Were done. It's up to the bulls now. They got the right o' way now!"

It was Chief Dexter who pioneered the investigation. He it was who first sniffed into the littered gloom of the vault, while outside it fear and morbid exultation reigned, and fading hopes and ever-growing terror. The chief himself it was who, clad in his best uniform and with his most impressive voice solemnly declared:

"Yes, gentlemen, I reckon I smell powder smoke, even now!" Sniff, sniff! "You smell it too, Sam—? I mean, Captain Bailey? An' you, Henry an' Charley—? Hm! I mean, Captain Nuttall an' Coroner McIntyre?"

All the officials, at the door of the shattered vault, agreed that they could smell something that at least suggested powder smoke. Only with some difficulty could an Amalgamated Press photographer be prevented from adding the very real smoke of a flashlight explosion, as he struggled to get a view of the opened vault— with (he hoped) the body lying in sight.

The powder smell, if indeed anybody could detect it after so long a time, was dissipated even as the officials made their way in.

"Hello, in there! Hello, Blair! Where are you?"

No answer to the chief's hail.

"Where are you, William?" cried the coroner— a neighbor of Blair's, up at Myrtle Park. "William!"

"Gosh, he don't answer!"

"Reckon he's dead, all right."

"Yeah! Looks that way!"

"Somebody switch on the light in here!"

A hush fell, as the old watchman pushed a button that flooded with electric glare the interior of that tomb-like place. Indeed, a tomb! For there, a little more than half way to the rear of the vault, they saw the huddled bulk of Cashier Blair.

Pitilessly the raw light revealed him. Face down, drabbled with blood that had clotted from a neat little wound on the right temple, there he lay— just a lax, distorted thing that once had been a man.

"Only Coroner McIntyre an' my men in here now!" commanded the chief, removing his cap. Through all his horror for the death of one of his best friends— they had gone to school together as boys, and had known each other all their lives— yet, in this moment he could hardly suppress a thrill at being, if only for a flash of time, in the world's limelight. This find would mean being photoed, interviewed, having his name heralded to the four corners of notoriety. "Only officials in here now!"

He knelt by the body, closely scrutinizing it, while the coroner bent close and the other police officers craned their necks to see. In tense silence they studied the corpse.

"God!" breathed the chief, at last. "He done it himself, all right. That's so, ain't it, Charley?"

"Yes, that's so," agreed the coroner. "Can't be any two ways about that, Frank. Though why he should have— well, that'll all come out later, when the books an' accounts are gone over!"

A certain malice trembled in his voice. He had been a political enemy of the dead man, now lying a mere lump of helplessness on the blood-drabbled concrete before him. The cashier had, moreover, held a second mortgage on the coroner's home, McIntyre added:

"Yep, clear case o' suicide, all right. I don't even hardly have to impanel a jury to settle that!"

"Wonder where he dropped his gun?" asked Captain Nuttall; while outside at the vault door eager faces trembled and pressed forward; and while— slumped in a collapse in his big desk chair— old Harvey Payne shuddered and groaned. "Where the devil an' all is his gun?"

"Must be round here somewheres," the chief opined. "Locate it. That's an important exhibit in the case."

"That's so, too," Captain Sam Bailey affirmed. " Gotta have the gun, to make a clear case of it. Hmmm! Let's see, now— where in time—?"

"Gosh, that's funny!" exclaimed Nuttall, searching. "I don't see no gun in here! Do you, Charley? You, Sam?"

"No, but she must be 'round here, some place. Look in that there corner. No? Not there? By jing! Well—"

They all hunted for the gun. With increasing puzzlement, with an astonishment that swiftly mounted almost to panic, they searched. They "fished" the body for it, rolling it over, emptying the pockets. No gun!

Into every corner, nook and cranny of the vault they poked, using electric flashlights to render the search more vivid. They even had Wally Wheeler bring keys with which they opened drawers, doors, boxes, every and any place that could possibly conceal a weapon. Nor did they forget to look on the little shelf that supported the electric fan. Even to ridiculous lengths (while outside, excitement grew to fever-pitch) they carried their hunt, examining places that by no possibility could have hidden a weapon the size of a revolver.

No weapon of that size or any other whatsoever came to light. In all that place where it seemed so utterly obvious a pistol must be found, nothing was found.

High or low, no gun!

Baffled, the imagination of the bank personnel, of the police, the press, the townsfolk, and presently the world at large, shrank in a kind of superstitious horror from a mystery whereof no one could devise any possible explanation.

A mystery, indeed!

The mystery of this utterly, maddeningly established fact that Cashier William J. Blair had either shot himself, or been shot to death, in a time-locked vault. And yet that the weapon had absolutely and entirely vanished, as if it never had existed!

A mystery supreme!

3: An Interview

WHEN, as was his custom, T. Ashley— Connoisseur of Crime— next morning read his newspapers with an eye out for startling cases and apparently inexplicable events, he was not long in picking up this item:

EXTRAORDINARY SUICIDE!

Cashier Dead in Bank Vault;

No Gun Found

SERIOUS SHORTAGE
OF FUNDS DISCOVERED

Middleburg, N. Y., May 27—This city is at fever heat of excitement over the ultra-mysterious suicide of Cashier William J. Blair, 54, who yesterday afternoon shut himself up in the time-locked vault of the First National Bank and there put a .38 revolver bullet through his brain.

The problem of how he managed to do this, when the breaking open of the vault and the most painstaking search have failed to reveal any firearms, has strained the nerves of Middleburg almost to the breaking-point.

After this eminently "journalese" introduction, several paragraphs followed, in great detail rehearsing events as we have already seen them. The article ended thus:

Although up to this time Mr. Blair, a lifelong resident of Middleburg, has borne an unblemished reputation, his suicide in so spectacular a manner has created an immediate examination of the bank's funds to be made. This has already revealed a shortage of at least $256,000 in cash and negotiable securities, which loss may be far greater when a more complete check-up is made. The loss is partly covered by Mr. Blair's bonding company; and President Harvey N. Payne states that the bank can continue business, but from other sources less optimistic reports are current.

Indications are that Mr. Blair's peculations have extended over more than three years, dating back to about the time when he began the construction of a $25,000 home in the exclusive Myrtle Park section. To meet this expense, unwarranted by his salary, Mr. Blair evidently began speculating with the bank's funds, and became so hopelessly involved that yesterday he solved his personal problem in a manner both quick and efficient.

The mystery of how he was able to manipulate the books so cleverly as to cover his trail would be a major one, were it not completely overshadowed by the far greater one of how, when at last confronted by an impending bank examination due next week, he managed to commit suicide in a manner that suggests the doings of spiritism or at least of the late Houdini. Never in all its history has Middleburg been confronted by so baffling a problem.

T. ASHLEY smoked a couple of pipes over this, in his office-laboratory on Boylston Street, Boston.

"Here's a good one," he decided, his mild blue eye and smoothly ruddy face expressing a very lively interest. "If the facts are as stated, it looks like spiritism, Houdini-ism or the Fourth Dimension. Seems to me this case may be just what I need for a spring tonic."

Before his second pipe was burned to ashes, he had decided that Middleburg, N. Y., probably needed him; that certainly he needed Middleburg, N. Y.

"Which amounts to the same thing, for all practical purposes," he concluded, and looked up Middleburg in his atlas, It turned out to be a thriving little city in the eastern part of the State, not far from Saratoga Springs.

"Things have been a trifle dull for me, of late. Nothing really to stir my imagination. Looks to me as if the suicide of an embezzling cashier in a time-locked vault— a suicide by shooting, yet without any gun at all— might offer certain novel and pleasing elements.

"Yes, decidedly, I think I'll have to take a run out to Middleburg, and see what's what!"

THOUGH not ordinarily a fast driver, the investigator that day rather stepped on the gas. So it was that by 3:55 his eight-cylinder special pulled up in front of the Jefferson House.

A little stiffly T. Ashley got out ot his car, and for a moment stood gathering general impressions. The town might have been any one of dozens of those standardized, rubber-stamp communities which make America monotonous— a public square with the usual granite Civil War soldier stiffly holding the customary musket; the brisk and bustling business section; the Masonic Hall and Y. M. C. A.; and, leading away toward "additions" and the Country Club, well shaded streets where all types of architecture engaged in hand-to-hand combat.

"Looks like anything but the scene of a first-class mystery," thought the connoisseur, "or the setting for a spooky drama such as a Fourth Dimensional expert like Einstein would enjoy, or Houdini would have revelled in!"

After a bit of a clean-up, he sat in a rocking chair on the broad, old-fashioned piazza and found the man next him— a cigar salesman from New York— only too willing to discuss the case.

"Tough on old man Payne. The bank's been kind of his own vest property, good many years. You know what I mean. And now—! And the old boy's all alone, too. Wife and daughter, they're in Yurrup. Been gone a month. Makes it bad for him. Rough on Blair's widow, too. And kids. Sure, I've known 'em all for years. The men, I mean. Been makin' this burg ever since '17, This here smash has sure shook the place up some!"

"Must have," agreed the connoisseur. "Bound to make things bad here. I suppose, though, the loss can be partly made good by the bank taking over the cashier's property."

"Yeah, but that's hell for the widow. She'll lose everything. Insurance, too. Suicide knocks it cold— thirty-five thousand, I hear. Feller ought to think of them things. Think of the frau and kiddies before he starts going wrong. Now, if it had of been me—! Guess the widow'll have to take in boarders, or washing. Hell, ain't it? You know what I mean!"

After a few minutes of this, T. Ashley yawned and excused himself. He strolled off across the square, toward Walnut Street where—o the salesman had informed him— old man Payne lived. Without difficulty he found the banker's house at the corner of Walnut and Pleasant, four blocks up from the monument. Both streets were arched with elms now feathery-green in all the beauty of their new spring foliage. Life and the spirit of life, inherent in the springtide, somehow made death and ruin strangely incongruous.

Old Harvey Payne's house, the connoiseur saw, was Victorian, with a porch that could be reached either via a front gate or by way of a side gate and a walk leading past a garage where a heavy type car— visible through open doors— lent about the only touch of modernity there visible. So old style was the property, which occupied half a block, that the investigator saw an iron fence, and, still better, a cast iron deer on the lawn.

"Great!" he approved. " It's been a good while since I've seen an iron deer on a lawn. But then, it's been a good while since I've had dealings with a place like Middleburg, New York!"

The maid, frankly Irish, admitted that Harvey Payne was at home, but:

"He ain't seein' anybody now, sor. All them newspaper fellers has got him so wore out, an' so has all this black trouble down to the bank that—"

"I know. It's too bad," murmured the sympathetic T. Ashley. "He must be fearfully tired." A five-dollar bill found its way deftly into the maid's hand. "But I'm not a 'newspaper feller' at all. I think Mr. Payne will find me helpful. And it's really very important, so if you'll please take in my card—"

The maid, capitulating before the V and the genial smile of this so pleasant stranger, took in the card. Some few minutes later a very drawn and haggard bank president was offering the investigator a chair in an old-fashioned library.

"Well, sir, since you've come all the way from Boston to see me, I suppose I'll have to talk," Harvey Payne agreed. "But in heaven's name, make it brief. After what I've been through, yesterday and to-day—"

"Of course," nodded T. Ashley. He felt real sympathy for the stricken old man. "Hard as this tragedy is on Mr. Blair's family and friends, I can see it's equally hard for you."

And, sitting down, the connoisseur of crimes threw a much-seeing glance about him.

The library, he perceived, was of curious octagonal form, occupying the lower story of a tower that rose at the southwest corner of the mansion. Its many shelves of leather-bound books, many of them by forgotten authors, and its heavy black walnut furniture seemed to exhale an atmosphere of dust and age. The place harmonized with Harvey Payne. A relic, too, he made one think of decades long and long ago.

Rugged and rough-hewn, as if of old pioneer stock, the bank president sat there a figure of dejection. His impressive mane of white hair, his deep-set and heavily pouched black eyes, stubby-fingered hands maculated with the brown spots of old age, made him a figure not easy in these modern times to duplicate. His well-worn and decent black suit, round cuffs with huge onyx buttons, square-toed boots and slightly yellowed linen shirt with the black string tie, reminded one of family portraits.

Heavily his nearly seventy years now bowed his once straight shoulders; more heavily than ever, since disaster had with lightning stroke shattered the bank wherein his whole life work and interest had been centered.

"Well, sir?" he queried, fixing a vacant eye on his visitor. "And what —if anything—can I do for you?"

"You can answer a few questions, sir."

"I hope you'll make them brief. For, by gad, sir, I'm at the ragged edge of a collapse."

"And not to be wondered at, either, Mr. Payne. So, yes, I'll try to be as brief as possible. Now—"

"But, by the way, who are you? And why do you want me to talk about this terrible affair?"

T. Ashley concisely explained his professional interest, and then added:

"So you see for yourself, Mr. Payne, that if this mystery can be solved, it will be a great relief to you as well as to all concerned."

"Yes, yes. It's enough to drive a man mad! Do you believe in spirits, sir?"

"Sometimes I'm almost tempted to. But never mind about that. For the present we'll discard the supernatural. And now, sir, to our questions!"

Under the investigator's succinct queries the whole story was very quickly developed, its every detail just as we have already seen it. Perhaps twenty minutes were thus consumed, during which T. Ashley, lighting a cigar, half closed his eyes and listened with keenest attention. Now and then he fired an incisive word that hit the mark like a bullet. At the end of the interview he smiled and summed up:

"So then that ends the tale! With all possible refunds from the late cashier's estate the bank will lose one hundred and thirty-one thousand, five hundred dollars. And a hitherto respected citizen is lying dead in a ruined home with a bullet hole in his head. A widow and three children are reduced to beggary. Your institution is involved in a mystery that is giving it the most unfavorable sort of publicity. A 'run' is threatened; the bank may go under. Is that correct?"

"Yes, sir, correct! To say nothing of the destruction of that very valuable door, time lock and all. And now, if you'll be so kind, PII ask you to excuse me. I'm totally exhausted. And tomorrow, by gad, sir, promises to be even worse than to-day!"

The connoisseur rose to go.

"I quite understand," he assured the old banker. "I thank you most heartily. If by any chance I discover anything of value in this tragic affair I'll let you know. By the way, Mr. Payne, do you mind if I inspect the bank building tomorrow?"

"Not in the least, sir," answered Payne, also getting up. The old man leaned heavily against his library table, piled with papers and banking reports that almost snowed under the telephone. "If there's anything I can show you."

"That's very kind of you. And— just one thing more— has the bullet been located ?"

"Yes, sir, it has."

"Where?"

"The autopsy found it lodged inside Mr. Blair's skull, just below the left ear."

"Ah, so? And Mr. Blair was shot on the right side of the head?"

"Yes. Right temple. The bullet went through his brain."

"Did, eh? What caliber?"

"Thirty-eight, I hear."

"And where is that bullet now?"

"They've got it at police head-quarters, over on Forrest Avenue. Frank Dexter— he's our chief of police— is keeping it, for the insurance people, in case it's needed."

"I see. Was Mr. Blair's skin much powder burned?"

"Not hardly at all. Dexter says the cartridge must have been loaded with some kind of smokeless powder that wouldn't burn a great deal."

"That may furnish a clew to solving the mystery. Though. at present it seems utterly insoluble," judged the investigator, rubbing his carefully- razored chin, " where that gun could have possibly disappeared to—"

"Yes, sir, where could it have gone?" demanded the old banker, his voice shaking. "That's the question that's driving me half mad! Where, in heaven's name? A mystery like that is enough to send a man to the insane asylum!"

"Just one more question, Mr. Payne. Have you ever heard of any insanity in Mr. Blair's family?"

"No, sir. None of his folks on either side, that I ever heard of, were ever crazy. But I'll be, if this impossible thing isn't explained before long! It'll kill me, sir— that, and the horrible situation my bank is in now! Oh, by gad, sir, it's awful, awful—"

Sensing that the aged banker stood on the very brink of collapse, T. Ashley took his leave without further ado. Harvey Payne went with him out of the library into the front hall with its wide curving stairs, its furnishing in a gloomy and almost funereal style of decades long past.

At the door Payne extended a shaking hand.

"Good-by, sir," he said in a broken voice that betrayed tones of the falsetto which old age brings on. "If you can manage to help me in any way—"

As the investigator took that withered and wrinkled hand he felt its trembling. Impersonal as he almost always remained, none the less he could not now help feeling a thrill of pity for this lonely and afflicted old man.

"Too bad," he thought, as the doorclosed and he took his way down the walk, past the iron deer.

4: The Fourth Dimension

CHIEF of Police Dexter, red-faced and rotund and with no mean idea of his own importance, viewed the investigator with ill-concealed provincial suspicion. It was only after having been somewhat rigorously questioned himself that T. Ashley was allowed to examine the fatal bullet.

"Well, there she is," said Dexter at last as he opened the top right-hand drawer of his desk and took out a match box. "An' you can consider it quite a special privilege, in this man's town, that you're gettin' to see it at all!"

Inasmuch as every reporter in Middleburg, to say nothing of every visiting journalist, every policeman and prominent citizen— to say nothing of a good many others not prominent at all— had already inspected this bit of lead, Chief Dexter very largely overstated the privilege. T. Ashley, however, cared nothing for all this. He wanted only to see the bullet.

And now, as he held it in his deft fingers— just a tiny bit of metal that had snuffed out a human life and brought woe to how many other lives!— he felt a certain hunch; the hunch that so often before had tingled through his nerves when on the right trail of a criminal mystery.

"Thank you very much indeed, chief," he murmured. "I do indeed consider this a favor." His blue eyes crinkled with an amused smile. Then they grew serious once more as he went to one of the windows of the chief's office, a window that looked out over the square, to westward. He drew a fairly powerful lens from his pocket, and at once began examining the fatal piece of lead.

Though the hour was now well past six, sufficient light still slanted from the ruddy sky to make all details plainly visible. Perhaps three minutes T. Ashley studied the bullet, turning it this way and that. Then finally, with another smile, he came back to Chief Dexter.

"Well, chief, here you are— and many thanks."

Dexter's match box, once more heavy with a leaden "exhibit," was closed and dropped into the desk drawer.

"Reckon you make a whole lot out o' that, mister?" half sneered the chief.

"More or less."

"An you've reached the valuable conclusion that if you could only locate the gun that fired it you'd have this here mystery all buttoned up tight, eh?"

"Less or more."

"Humph!'" And Dexter slammed the drawer. His eye was hostile.

"Well, what else d'you happen to want now?"

"Nothing, thank you. I'm very grateful, believe me. Good evening, chief!"

Dexter's only reply was another grunt as— puzzled just how it would be safe to insult this stranger— he watched the connoisseur take a well satisfied leave.

THAT NIGHT, T. Ashley once more idled in one of the big rockers on the piazza of the Jefferson House.

"Too bad they can't prove it a murder," opined a ready-to-wear salesman in the next chair. "If they could Blair's widow could get the insurance, an' I don't see how— it bein' hers— the bank could touch it. Sure is one tough case!"

"Tough, yes," murmured the investigator. "Especially on old Payne."

The ready-to-wear man rambled on at considerable length, while T. Ashley sat there watching the life of the little city as it passed and repassed along Patriot Square.

Nothing in the routine of Middleburg suggested that any great event had taken place there, save that a casual knot of curiosity seekers lingered near the bank. Inside the building lights were visible. All funds and securities had been temporarily transferred to the vaults of the Middleburg National for safe keeping, while already repairs had been begun.

After watching for a little while, the connoisseur went up to his room. From his suitcase he extracted some books on the Fourth Dimension, by Simeon Newcomb and Ouspensky. He settled himself to read till nearly midnight. Even at that hour, as he got ready for bed, he could from his window still discern the knot of morbid idlers gathered before the bank. Nothing to see there; not a thing in the world. And yet like ants around a dead beetle they clustered.

"After all,' thought the investigator, "how much more important than ants are they, in the cosmic scheme? How much more valuable is any man or woman than an ant in the infinite universe that includes not only the Fourth Dimension but endless others?"

His smile was a bit cynical as he put out his light and, leaning at the window, finished his good-night cigar.

Next morning, about ten o'clock, he called at the bank and was admitted by the grim old watchman, Jethro Tibbetts. This worthy fellow looked more glum, thin-faced and cadaverous than ever. His emotionless gray eyes, that for decades had seen so many changes in the bank, were no more revealing than those of a codfish as he led T. Ashley through the railing and to Harvey Payne's private office at the rear.

A tense hush reigned in the bank. Its doors were now closed to ordinary business, while two State bank examiners subjected the books, cash and securities to rigid inspection. Marden, paying teller, with Winnifred Alden, was absent at the Middleburg National. Now only Wally Wheeler, receiving teller, and bookkeeper Joslyn Harrison, together with Hattie Forster, remained. Harrison's fingers were inkier than ever, his pale blue eyes more mild and worried. Miss Forster looked flushed and agitated. As for Wally, he had lost a good deal of his self-satisfied assurance. For at least once in his life his sleek sandy hair was ruffled, his smooth and ruddy face singularly anxious. This possibility of the bank going under, after all; this prospect of losing a good position, weighed heavily on him as on all the personnel.

Everybody seemed ready, almost officiously eager to be questioned; to do any and everything required to prove entire innocence in this disaster. The atmosphere was strained almost to a point of rupture.

Old President Payne looked far from unscathed. After an almost sleepless night he seemed— during only those few hours since the connoisseur had last seen him— to have aged five years. More heavily now hung the bags of loose skin under his deep-set black eyes. More pendulously sagged his wattles. Contrary to all his life-long custom, he had that morning forgotten to shave; and now stiff white bristles dotted his cheeks and chin.

Profound discouragement, prescient of defeat, dragged 'on his bent shoulders like a cloak of lead. At seventy it's hard to face business annihilation. At seventy one does not easily begin life again.

As Jethro Tibbetts ushered the visitor into Payne's office—

"Well, sir?" he dully asked, without getting up from his now badly littered desk.

"Good morning, sir," said the investigator. "I'm sorry to trouble you again. But you remember you promised to let me look at the premises, and here I am."

"Oh, all right," the president re-

turned, as if painfully recalling his agreement. "If you think any good purpose can be served by your inspecting the scene of the tragedy."

"I hope so, at any rate."

" What would you like to see, first?"

"The bank vault, sir. And that, I think, will be the last thing too. Just that alone will suffice."

Payne nodded, and heavily arose.

"It's right there," he pointed, and led the way out into the corridor.

"Hmmm!" said the investigator, following, while Jethro Tibbetts— sharp-eyed and suspicious— kept close behind him. "They've certainly made a wreck out of that door, haven't they?"

The process of dismantling the ruins still was under way, with grimy and oily men at work, tools scattered all about.

"Thousands of dollars went into building that door," grieved the bank president. "And now, by gad, sir, look at it! Just look at it, will you?"

"That's what I'm here for," smiled T. Ashley; and for a moment stood inspecting the débris of what had only two days before been one of the show sights of Middleburg—one of the best advertisements of the bank, in attracting deposits.

Débris, indeed! Had it been necessary merely to open the door without urgent and almost frantic haste, the task could have been accomplished without wrecking everything. But as possibly life and death had depended on speed, as possibly William Blair might have been only wounded and not killed outright all considerations of economy had been thrown to the wind.

No means, no violence had been spared; not even the use of "soup," or nitro-glycerine, nor yet of thermit, and of "strippers," "drags" and "spreaders" — with all of which methods the ex-yegg employee of Plummer & Tagle was only too familiar.

Now only a sad and twisted mass of wreckage met the eye. All the delicate mechanisms of the time lock and the combinations had assumed the

appearance of a junk heap struck by lightning. The heavy outer door sagged on bent hinges that once had so delicately balanced it that a child's hand could have swung it shut. The inner door, of steel bars, hung awry with drunken mockery of its once faultless accuracy. Sad, indeed!

Before these ruins, old Tibbetts, the watchman, shook a mournful head. To him the bank property, in its tangible and physical aspects had long been sacred. Of loans, interest and disounts he understood nothing. Mortgages, securities and surplus meant nothing to him. But the building, its doors and windows, walls, metal grilles and bars, vault, mechanisms, everything of that sort had been a sort of sanctum sanctorum, a holy of holies, not to be defiled or desecrated by any profaning hand.

Death, to his mind, would have been far too light a punishment for any one injuring the equipment of the Middleburg First National Bank. No wonder that he now viewed this ravaged crypt with eyes of almost fanatic horror—as perhaps some Maya high priest might have regarded a shattered Yucatan pyramid temple after the Spanish conquerors had riven it and flung its idol down the lofty stairway!

"Well, sir, now you see the condition we're in," President Payne all at once wearily remarked. "If we ever recover from this it will be a miracle. By gad, sir, a miracle from Heaven!"

"Don't say that, Mr. Payne," the connoisseur tried to cheer him up. "A few days will make a great difference here. So this is where the tragedy took place, eh?"

"Yes, sir, right in there."

"Do you mind if I look at the inside of the vault?"

"Not at all, sir. Tibbetts, will you please shove that inner door open?"

"For him?" sullenly demanded the old watchman.

"There now, Tibbetts!" the president sharply rebuked his employee. "No argument! This gentleman is a— an inspector. He wants to see the inside of the vault."

"All right, sir," agreed the watchman. He kept on grumbling as if to himself: "Though Lord knows why we can't have an end of all this pokin' and pryin'. I'm fair sick of it myself, sir. But if you say so, well—"

Still growling like a watchdog required to admit some suspicious-looking character to a house he had been set to guard, the watchman switched on the lights inside the vault, and with considerable effort shoved back the inner door of bent steel bars, T. Ashley plainly saw the interior of the chamber where events so tragic, so baffling to all human reason had recently taken their amazing course.

With both President Payne and old Tibbetts closely following him, the connoisseur of crime stepped into the vault. By the raw glare of the lights overhead he stood looking round, making a preliminary inspection.

At his right extended several rows of safe-deposit boxes; at his left the cash-vault presented an impassive front. Drawers, boxes and safes of various sizes, at the end of the chamber, held different kinds of securities and negotiable paper, also the bank's books and records. On a shelf stood an electric fan; and near it was the vault telephone.

"That, of course," remarked the investigator with a gesture, "is where you heard Mr. Blair speaking from?"

"Yes, sir," nodded old Payne, while Tibbetts stood glowering with an expression of sullen hostility. "That's the instrument that brought his voice to me, and"— with a shudder— "the sound of the shot."

"Must have been a terrible shock to you, sir."

"By gad, sir! I'll never forget it, the longest day of my life. Not though it's a thousand years— which, thank God, it won't be!"

"Yes, yes, a terrific shock, no doubt," murmured T. Ashley, with commiseration. Then, after a pause, he asked: "And the unfortunate Mr. Blair was found lying—"

"Just in front of where you're standing."

"Spot o' blood there yet, on the floor!" in an aggrieved tone, added the watchman. A spot of any kind on his floors— even in the vault— seemed to constitute a grievance of the most deadly.

"Spot, eh?" asked the connoisseur. Kneeling, he looked at it. Yes, even though the place had been scrubbed, a faint dark trace still vaguely discolored the rough concrete.

For a long minute T. Ashley studied this. Then once more he got up, and with something like a smile remarked:

"I think I've seen enough."

"And I've seen far more than enough, sir!" half groaned the old banker. "When you've known a man intimately, cheek-by-jowl neighbors with him all his life, and worked with him more than a quarter century, and then by gad, sir, see him lying dead with a bullet hole in his temple—"

"Terrible, terrible!"

"And not be able to figure out any possible way it could have happened!"

"Not according to any obvious and natural ideas, at all events," T. Ashley said. "It almost makes one believe in some sort of Houdini mystification, doesn't it? Or in the Fourth Dimension!"

"The Fourth Dimension, sir? What's that?"

"It is— but, well, never mind. It would take me far too long even to begin an explanation. And your time's valuable, Mr. Payne. So is mine. Again I thank you— and good-bye!"

5: In a Boat, and Out

FOR a man who claimed his time was valuable, T. Ashley that afternoon appeared to be extremely wasteful indeed of values. For he devoted himself to idleness. At least so any casual observer might safely have assumed.

Inquiries of the obliging clerk at the Jefferson House informed him that about six miles to eastward, on level reaches of Green River, there was located an amusement resort, rather ambitiously named "Paradise Park." And there, he learned, boating and fishing were to be had.

"Pout an' pickerel, sir, if you know where to look for 'em. Try the reedy places for pickerel. Now, just last summer, a feller named Ferrell Garland hooked one he said weighed close on six pounds, an'—"

To Paradise Park, after a quiet and solitary lunch, T. Ashley drove his car. The road, skirting Green River for more than half the way, offered wild and rugged beauty, with now or then really entrancing bits of river glimpsed through forests of pine, oak and birch.

Hiring a boat and fishing tackle, and by no means overlooking the detail of paying the legal fee for an out-of-state fisherman, the connoisseur rowed about three miles up the winding stream. There, along a reed-grown stretch, he dropped the piece of railway iron that served as an anchor, and for a couple of hours cast his hook. Seemingly without a thought or care in the world, he now or then snatched a fish from the sun-sparkled river, smoked his pipe, and luxuriated in the spring-tide. An idle fellow, he!

Two hours' fishing, however, seemed to satisfy him. At the end of that time he reeled in; then, taking the oars, began to ply his little craft a bit further upstream. Charming prospects surrounded him, seeming infinitely far from all suggestions of pain or death.

Three days before, rain had fallen; and now with her face freshly washed, Mother Nature was outdoing herself, prinked gaily in all the charm of her new spring garments. Rarely had the investigator seen prospects more alluring. On the other side of the river extended forest, some of it virgin growth. Now or then, half glimpsed through thickets of trees, a car swiftly passed along the river road.

Save for that slight reminder of civilization, one might have thought one's self a hundred miles from human habitation. No sound of voices troubled the stillness. No other boat was visible. Only a bird song, among cool branches,

drifted across the water. If solitude in which to ponder was the connoisseur's goal, here indeed he was finding it.

"The Fourth Dimension," he was thinking, as after a time he rested on his oars and let the boat begin drifting slowly downstream. "If it only existed, how easily it would explain everything! If only—! For just as a flat, two-dimensional creature shut up inside a circle drawn on paper, couldn't imagine any way of putting anything outside of that circle without breaking the circle, so a man shut up in a closed container can't possibly imagine any way of putting anything outside that container without breaking its walls.

"And yet we— as three-dimensional creatures—can easily throw an object outside a circle, without breaking that circle, merely by moving it in the third dimension, up or down.

"Likewise," he continued his reflec- tions, as lazy pipe smoke drifted, "if a man in a container could only move an object in the Fourth Dimension, he could easily throw that object out of the container, without anywhere piercing its walls. Yes, if—!"

After a pause he murmured: "But as all human beings are, after all, only three-dimensional creatures, have I the right to suspect that so incomprehensible a factor as the Fourth Dimension has been used in this case? That, ah, is a very delicate point!"

He was just engaged in considering this very delicate point more in detail when a swift jet of water, up-spurting from'the surface of the river, dashed him with spray. Instantly half a dozen other jets leaped up in a long line, each smaller than the one preceding it, till the last one became a mere ripple.

"Hello!" thought the investigator. "That looks like the richocheting of a bullet, now!"

As if to echo his realization—

Tunk!

A bullet, indeed, struck the inside of the gunwale, not a foot ahead of where he sat. Splinters flew.

"A bullet, by jove!" he knew. "And somebody's shooting at me!"

Even though he heard no report of firearms, the fact was clear that he was a target for somebedy's purposeful marksmanship. With the presence of mind that had on more than one occasion saved his life, he flung up both arms and pitched forward, flat in the bottom of the boat.

Face-downward he fell into the muck of such uncleanness as usually is found in boats hired out for fishing. When life itself is the prize at stake, what matters a little mud and water?

Lying now completely masked from observation by any one on the highway skirting the river, he let the boat drift.

One oar slid from its rowlock, and with a plash! dropped into the water. There it began slowly to lag away. Never mind that oar! All the investigator's senses were now sharpened down to just the one sense of listening for any further signs of his assailant.

That assailant, up there somewhere on the thickly-wooded bank— what was he doing now? Was he satisfied of the investigator's death; or, penetrating the ruse, was he still waiting for another chance to shoot? Might he not, indeed, have a boat of his own concealed somewhere along the shore; a boat in which he could row out, to make sure the job was completed?

"If so, what a damn fool I am not to be armed!" thought T. Ashley. "Never occurred to me I might need a gun, out here on this peaceful river. Well, even Achilles had a vulnerable heel. And this river may reveal mine!"

But almost at once his anxieties were set at rest by a growl of gears, the sudden purr of a swiftly-accelerating exhaust.

"Somebody 's stepping on the gas," realized T. Ashley. "If I only knew who it was, now—"

Though all danger of further attack by this unknown foe now seemed ended, the investigator took no unnecessary chances. For full ten minutes he let the boat drift, as he lay snugly hidden in the bottom. The bullet, he saw, had buried itself almost out of sight in the gunwale. This bullet he intended to have, as soon as he could safely get it. For the present, however, he let it remain.

"Time enough for that, and to spare," he smiled to himself, "once this confounded boat decides to go ashore."

The boat seemed little disposed to follow any such program; but after what seemed an eternity, the current gently drove it into an eddy that presently grounded its keel on a muddy bank under close-arching alders. Here, after a little intent waiting, he decided it would be safe to get up.

No untoward results followed this move. His assailant, whoever this might have been and for whatever motive, had obviously enough departed in that speeding car. Convinced that the second shot had proved fatal to the interloper, that assailant would in all probability not risk discovery by remaining anywhere near the river road. Continued danger from that source now seemed unlikely.

"Though not," reflected the connoiseur with due caution, "though not, of course, impossible."

His first care, after getting up and brushing some of the dirt from his clothing, was to dig the bullet out of the gunwale. This he did with his pocketknife, destroying a good deal of woodwork, but taking extreme care not in any way to mar the precious pellet of lead.

No sooner had he got it clear than he once more took out his lens and carefully studied the bullet.

"Come, little bit of metal that just by one foot missed teaching me life's biggest lesson, death!" he apostrophized his trophy. "Come, give up your secret— if you have one!"

For several minutes he gave the bullet a most painstaking scrutiny, at last nodding with considerable satisfaction.

"Not bad!" he murmured. With a half whimsical smile he added: "If there is any Fourth Dimension, I wonder whether material objects acting in that dimension act noiselessly? Or whether they can act at all?"

He wrapped the bullet in the softest bit of paper he had, namely, a well-worn ten-dollar note, and very carefully stowed it in his pocketbook. Then, clambering ashore, he tied his boat and pushed through the clump of alders by the river's edge, up toward higher ground.

Listening from moment to moment for any sound that might mean danger, he mounted a slope covered with heavy spruce timber, and thus presently reached the motor road. No car was in sight, nor any human creature. Turning upstream, he walked at a round pace in the direction of the place whence the shots had been fired at him. This he reached in a few minutes.

"Now then!" And he began casting about like a hound seeking the spoor of game.

The center of the road was dry and hard; but along its edges here or there a little half-dried mud still remained from the rain of three days previously. In a small patch of this mud, on the riverward side of the highway, some tire tracks plainly showed. Very painstakingly the investigator studied these telltale revelations.

"Now we are getting on!" he smiled. Then, without any loss of time, he swung about and struck a rapid gait back toward the boat.

The hum of an approaching motor warned him to take cover. He must not, at all hazards, be seen anywhere along this road. A woodside thicket received him. In this he lay flat till the vehicle—a heavily-loaded truck— had roared and rumbled past. This gone, and out of sight around a curve, he once more took the road, arriving presently at the boat by the clump of alders. With some relief he saw it again, inasmuch as he had half feared to find it gone.

He cast the boat off, and, using his single oar as a paddle, started down-stream toward Paradise Park. Though he kept a sharp eye and ear out for any possible menace, none revealed itself. Neither did he succeed in locating the lost oar. Aided by the current, however, he succeeded in reaching the park in something more than an hour. A two-dollar bill and the gift of his pickerel squared the loss of the oar— an old one, anyhow, and beginning to crack. And

his untidy state excited no comment; such being' the common lot of every fisherman since Jonah.

With nerves beginning pleasantly to tingle, now that he felt himself on the right trail, he drove directly back to town. He stopped at the Kash Klothing Kompany, on Maple Street, and (hinting at having had to "get out and get under") bought a complete new outfit. Into this he changed, in the establishment, taking care to transfer all the contents of his pockets into the new clothes.

This done, and the hour now being a little past six, he stepped into a drug store at the next corner and called the house of old Harvey Nelson Payne.

"Hello?" he recognized the Irish maid's voice. "Hello, who is it, then?"

"Mr. Payne at home?"

"Yes, sor. But he can't see nobody. Nobody at all. Them's his strick orders!"

"Where one five-dollar bill came from," he murmured into the transmitter, "there's another one waiting."

"Oh, sorr!"

"But don't mention the fact that I'm coming. If you do, colleen, no five!"

"Oh, faith then—"

Smiling to himself in an odd way, T. Ashley hung up the receiver. As he left the drug store, with thumb and finger he assured himself he had a V neatly folded in his vest pocket, ready to be slipped to that invaluable maid.

"There's a wonderful lot of power in a fiver," he reflected. "And just at present there's a lot more inside that wrapped-up ten-spot I've got in my pocketbook. Power enough, if nothing slips, to blow this case wide open— and with it, all of Middleburg and all the newspapers from Eastport to El Paso!"

Getting into his car, he drove to the Jefferson House. There he bought a couple of cigars in the office, asked the clerk whether any mail had come for him, and also inquired whether anybody had phoned, asking for him. Some one had. With what appeared a merely casual interest, he listened while the clerk told him of an inquiry that had been made for him, only half an hour after he had gone fishing.

"Sorry to have missed the call," he affirmed. "But I can see that party any time, no doubt."

He yawned, set his watch by the clock in the office, idly strolled out on the piazza and lit one of his cigars. Then, once more in his car, he drove round the square and finally approached the house of the iron deer; the staid, old-fashioned residence of Harvey Payne, deeply-stricken president of the wrecked First National Bank.

6: Grooved Bullets

FOR what reason, who can say, he approached the house by way of Pleasant Street— that is, at the side— and halted his machine near the back of the lot. Getting out here, he walked along Pleasant, to the side gate. This he entered. When he reached the house, a swing to the left brought him to the small end steps of the front porch.

These tactics seeméd a bit peculiar, but perhaps the connoisseur's wits were just a trifle abstracted by reason of the nerve-shaking events of the past two hours. At all events, he reached the front door, rang with a firm touch, and stood a moment waiting, while sunset glowed golden through a fine, tenuous haze that hung beyond the new-leaved elms and oaks of Banker Payne's broad-reaching lawn.

Presently the massive door swung open, and the Irish maid appeared.

" Yes, sor, lib'ary," she smiled, five dollars richer. Without waiting for her to lead the way, T. Ashley walked down the gloomy hall, turned to the left and— not even knocking— entered the odd, octagonal room.

He saw old Payne immediately, sitting with his back to the library door.

On the desk masses of papers were heaped. The old man was intently reading a document. Others, torn and crumpled, lay in a wire wastebasket or scattered over the rug.

So absorbed was the banker in his task, whatever it may have been, that he did not hear his visitor. T. Ashley had to knock sharply on the door-jamb, to call the old man's attention.

At sound of this rapping, Payne swung round. He half started up, fixed widening eyes on the intruder, and for a moment remained tense, rigid.

"You?" he exclaimed. "You again?"

"Yes, Mr. Payne," the investigator smiled. "Back again, for another little talk."

"But, by gad, sir! I'm not at home to anybody. I told the maid—"

Harvey Payne's air was hostile in the extreme. Had he been a younger man, he might have undertaken to eject this unwelcome visitor by force. But as any such attempt would have been manifestly absurd, he only growled an oath, shoved his papers into a heap and laid a bronze weight on them, then acidly demanded:

"Well, what the devil is it now? I'm busy. Make it short, sir, and let's have no more of you!" And Payne sank back in his chair.

"I'll make it as short as possible," promised the connoisseur, advancing into the library. "And after that, I promise you'll have no more of me. No occasion to get excited, my dear sir. I've only come to ask your opinion about a matter of considerable importance."

"My opinion, sir? My opinion! Everybody's asking my opinion these days. As if I hadn't enough to bother me without giving my opinion to Tom, Dick and Harry! Why, damn it—"

And the old man, his nerves frayed to tatters, spluttered incoherently. "Well, what the devil opinion do you want now? Out with it, sir, and let's have no more of this!"

T. Ashley laid his hat on a revolving bookcase, sat down quite at ease in a chair across the table from the old banker, and in his smoothest tone queried:

"Do you happen to know anything about the Fourth Dimension?"

"The fourth what?"

"Dimension, sir."

"Never heard it! Why?"

"I dare say you never have. Fourth mortgages, now, might be more in your line. But anyhow, no harm in asking. It's just a mathematical concept, a speculative property of space. In the Fourth Dimension, for one thing, objects can enter or leave closed boxes without anywhere breaking the walls, and—"

"If you've come here to talk nonsense, sir," interrupted the banker, "or if you're an escaped lunatic—" And he cast a glance at the phone on his library table.

"In the Fourth Dimension," T. Ashley implacably continued, "a shot could be fired from outside a safe or vault, and kill a man inside it. But as this dimension still remains only an abstraction, we may rule it out as a practical means of solving crime mysteries. Such being the case, we must proceed on the basis of the physically possible, as mere human beings understand those terms. And, this being understood, let me tell you a little story."

"I want to hear no stories, sir!" retorted the banker. "Can't you see I'm busy? My bank is wrecked. I'm trying to straighten out matters, and salvage what I can." He gestured at his papers. "And yet you intrude in my home, probably by bribing my maid—"

"Most certainly by bribing your maid," smiled the investigator.

"Damn her, I'll fire her! And as for you—"

"As for me, you'll listen to my story!" T. Ashley's tone hardened a little. The old banker's fist clenched, but in conflict with this younger man he remained powerless. All he could do was cast a poisonous look at the intruder, and growl:

"Well, out with it then! But I warn you—"

"As a story, it is not without a certain interest. But before I begin, do you know I was nearly killed this afternoon?"

"Nearly killed, were you? Why couldn't it have been quite?"

"It might been, if somebody using a pistol with a silencer had been a little better shot. A silencer, Mr. Payne. The very same silencer which was on the pistol that killed William Blair!"

At this the banker visibly stiffened.

"The pistol that killed Blair?" he repeated, in a voice that seemed to vibrate with utter amazement. "You mean— you've found that gun?"

"Not yet," smiled the connoisseur, "but none the less I know something about it. That, however, is only part of my story. And after all, why bother you with this story? If your time is really so very valuable, perhaps you'd rather not hear it." And T. Ashley glanced at his hat. "Perhaps I'd better be going now."

"Wait!' commanded Payne, raising a thin, corded hand. "I can give you a few minutes more. Let's have your story— fantastic though it is!"

"Well, just as you wish. It's not long, sir. I can't positively guarantee every detail, but in its main outlines I believe that when I get through you'll agree I'm correct. Your opinion will be valued."

"And your story's about—"

"Its about the murder of Cashier Blair."

"His suicide, you mean."

"No, sir, his murder!"

"Of course, that's absurd to begin with," affirmed the banker. "But I can't expect anything else from you! What makes you claim he was murdered? In a locked vault, mind you, and all alone!"

"I've come to that view by a process called cogitation, sir. A process you probably have never developed to any high degree. In this way I have brought Mr. Blair's death out of the Fourth Dimension and into the Third— that is to say, out of a maddening and supernatural mystery, into the plain, everyday world of human actions."

"You have, eh?" And Payne scornfully laughed. That laugh sounded as if it needed oiling. "And how have you done all this?"

"Merely by excluding all impossibilities, one by one. Then by including all possibilities. And finally by arranging all details of the puzzle so that they fit nicely together. Do all this, sir, and— presto, you have the answer. What could be simpler?"

"This is all Greek to me," declared the old banker, shaking his head with its mane of white hair. "I'm not quite sure, even yet, you're not an escaped lunatic from—"

"Your opinion as to my mental qualifications, sir, is a matter of no importance. The only thing that is important, now, is my story. That, and your statement as to events. Are you positive, Mr. Payne, you heard the shot that killed Cashier Blair?"

"Positive? What do you mean, sir?"

"Aren't my words sufficiently explicit? Your cashier was killed by a shot. You heard that shot over the vault telephone?"

"Heard it? Of course, I heard it!"

"Think hard now! Would you swear to that in court?"

"I most certainly would!"

"Would, eh? Then you'd be committing perjury."

"Perjury? Why, damn it— what d'you—"

"If you weren't so agitated, Mr. Payne, you'd recall what I just said a minute ago—that there was a silencer on the pistol that killed Blair."

At this, the old man's face grew blank with seeming amazement.

"A— a what?" he demanded.

"A silencer. Are you not familiar with the apparatus? It reduces the explosion of a firearm to a mere hiss; and in many States the mere possession of one is a criminal offense."

"Yes, yes, I know. I've heard of such things. But— how could there have been a silencer in this case when I distinctly heard—"

"I think you'll understand when you hear my story. I have examined the bullet that killed Mr. Blair. Examined it under a rather good lens. I have that bullet now. Here it is!"

He extracted a wad of paper from his vest-pocket, unwrapped it, and held up a bit of lead. The old man's jaw gaped.

"You told me smokeless powder was used," said the investigator grimly. "That was a deliberate lie. This bullet bears traces of having been propelled by old-fashioned black powder. And inasmuch as Blair's skin showed no powder burns, the bullet was fired at him from a considerably greater distance than if he had committed suicide. You, Mr. Payne, are a liar—and not alone in this instance."

"Its you that's lying! Telling me you have the fatal bullet— when Chief Dexter's got it!"

"He had it, you mean," smiled the investigator. "When he showed it to me, I had another one of the same caliber in my pocket, to substitute, and without any difficulty borrowed the fatal one. Now this bullet, Mr. Payne, shows certain markings due to an irregularity in the rifling of the revolver that did the killing. The bullet that I dug out of the woodwork of the boat, this afternoon, shows the same markings. Two shots were fired at me. There was no report. Those bullets passed— must have passed— through a silencer. And here is one of those selfsame bullets."

Taking from his pocket the folded ten-dollar bill, T. Ashley showed the banker the bullet that had barely missed killing him. He held both pellets on his outstretched palm, in front of the banker's widening and startled gaze.

"Same kind and caliber, both of them!" he exclaimed. "Both bear the same markings. I could gamble that the one which killed Blair also passed through a silencer, like this other one. Well, sir, now what have you to say?"

7: Poetic Justice

MR. Payne gripped the arm of his chair.

"I— you—" he stammered.

"But—I don't understand at all—"

"Listen! This bullet was fired at me, without noise. The bullet that killed Blair— from a distance, as it didn't powder-burn his skin— must have had an equally silent course. Therefore, in stating that you heard a pistol-shot in the vault, you told another monumental lie!"

The banker jumped up, as if actuated by a spring.

"Damn you! I'll make you eat those words!"

"Indeed? How interesting!"

The two men— as T. Ashley also arose— confronted each other across the table. " None the less, I affirm that by no human possibility could Blair have shot himself inside a time-locked vault, and then disposed of the gun. Therefore, when you stated that he met his death inside that vault with the door shut, you told lie number three."

"You'll suffer for this!" the banker menaced.

"Never mind about me!"

"I have other testimony to support my statements."

"None whatever, as a matter of fact!" And the connoisseur laughed a little harshly. "In the confusion and the great excitement of the moment, you most shrewdly counted on the fact that no details would be very closely inquired into. You reckoned— and cleverly— that no one would perceive the essential fact *that you and you alone claimed to have talked with Blair over the vault phone! That you, and only you, claimed to have heard the fatal shot! No other testimony whatever exists, on those vital points, except your unsupported word*!"

"But— damn you, sir—"

"The fact is, Mr. Payne, you're rather a consummate actor." And T. Ashley, slipping the bullets back into his pocket, smiled a bit grimly. "But, like a good many actors, you've over-played your part. You've lied with such excessive cleverness that you've trapped yourself in your own web of falsehood, and—"'

"You're crazy, man! You're—"

"Here's how the whole puzzle fits together, to a nicety. These years and years past— though just how many years I can't exactly say, and it's quite immaterial— you have been more or less juggling with the bank's funds. Your reputation for sterling integrity protected you for a long while, but at last the time came, as it always does, when you'd be 'caught with the goods' if you didn't do something to cover your tracks."

"You outrageous slanderer! I'll sue you for criminal libel! I— I'll—"

"How could you avoid impending disaster?" implacably the investigator continued. "Only by throwing the blame on somebody else. Blair made an admirable victim. He was known to have incurred large obligations that greatly worried him. It could easily be made to appear that he had misappropriated the bank's funds. But to succeed in that accusation, you must get Blair out of the way. Put him permanently beyond all power of proving his own innocence and your guilt. In other words, kill him."

"Out with you, sir!" cried the banker in a terrible voice, the voice of a man outraged in the deepest recesses of his soul. "Out of my house, before—"

"Before you shoot me out? Is that it, Mr. Payne?" smiled the investigator. "Well, if your aim now is no better than it was this afternoon, I'm in no great danger."

"This— this afternoon? What—"

"Nothing simpler than for you to phone the hotel and find out I'd gone fishing, down Green River— which, in fact, I have discovered you did. I was fired at, twice, from a car on the river road. When I came here, just now, I entered by the walk past your garage, and needed only a glance to show me the tire-pattern on the car down the river was the same as the pattern on your rear tires. Two and two still make four, Mr. Payne, even in the much-juggled world of figures that you inhabit!"

"God curse you! Are you accusing— me?"

The investigator laughed, as with a certain mild amusement.

"No need to, Mr. Payne," he answered. "The facts are quite sufficient. You've had this thing planned a long time. My inquiries have brought out the information that you installed a time-lock some months ago, and also put in a vault telephone. What could be clearer than that you installed that phone so you could ' hear' your victim talking in the vault, and also 'hear' the shot that killed him? You sent your wife and daughter to Europe, so as to have a freer hand. And then, at last—"

"Why— why, these are the ravings of a maniac!" gulped Payne, still fighting even in the last ditch. But his baggy face had turned ash-gray; his eyes had sunk, gone hollow and death-like. "When I confront you, sir, in court—"

"Very well! But just another word and I'm through. The psychological moment arrived. A bank inspection was due, and, moreover, very probably Blair had begun to find discrepancies, to suspect you. You simply had to get rid of him. You had to make him seem to commit suicide. But how? How, without any risk to yourself?

"Thus, Mr. Payne. While the bank forces were all busy, day before yesterday afternoon, the unfortunate Blair happened to go to the vault. The instant was propitious. It might never return.

"Seated at your desk you had a clear view through your office door, right across the corridor and into the open vault. From your desk drawer you took a pistol with a silencer attached. It was a close, easy shot. Blair fell in the vault, the victim of a most atrocious and cold-blooded murder.

"You put the silencer back into your desk, pocketed the pistol and— watching your chance— crossed the corridor. The peril at this second was extreme; but it was only for a second. None of the employees saw you. You reached the vault, entered, and dragged the bleeding victim a few feet nearer the phone. My examination of the vault floor shows that the body was dragged. A tiny smear of blood, from near the door and extending in the direction of the phone, adequately proves this.

"What next? You had, of course, intended to lay the gun beside Blair. But— as so often happens in a crime— something slipped. Your plan went awry. You may have heard a sound outside and thought somebody was coming. Or else, suddenly panic stricken, your mind may for a second have failed to function properly. No matter; you forgot to leave the gun. It was still in your pocket when you stole out of the vault, and— again risking discovery, but none the less escaping it— set the time-lock and noiselessly closed the vault door.

"Back in your office again you acted quickly. It had to be quickly, so that you yourself could make the dramatic announcement before anybody else, and be the chief actor. Even though the gun wasn't in the vault, you had to make it appear that the cashier had shot himself in there. Otherwise, a suspicion of murder might have arisen. You were caught on the horns of a dilemma, for a suicide without any weapon being found was certain to make a tremendous sensation. Never mind, it was that or nothing now!

"So you hid the gun in your desk, roughed up your hair, and assumed an expression of terror and dismay— not hard, since you really were frightened almost to the point of collapse. You ran to the grilled door of Harrison's cage. You stammered: 'Blair— he's shut himself in! The time-lock's sprung!'

"And lo! the cycle is complete. The last bit of the puzzle is fitted snugly home. The story's told, the mystery all solved. No Houdini business; no Fourth Dimension at all. Just murder. The murder of a trusting friend and long-time

associate; a murder involving the ruin of his reputation and his family. Reptilian, long-premeditated murder— the kind of murder that sends even a most highly-respected citizen and substantial banker to the electric chair, and—"

"Damn you, it won't send me!" screamed the entrapped old man. His voice broke into a shrill falsetto; his face became a mask of terror, hate and rage.

He snatched open his desk drawer. T. Ashley, leaping, struck up the muzzle of a revolver— a muzzle fitted with a silencer— just as with a hardly-audible whistling hiss, Harvey Payne fired at him.

The bullet, clipping past his head, shattered the glass front of a bookcase and sprinkled the floor with tinkling splinters.

T. Ashley wrenched the gun from his raging assailant. Thrusting the old man away with a contemptuous arm, he "broke" the weapon. Into his palm he emptied six cartridges. Three of them had been fired.

"So you didn't even bother to reload, after your pot-shots at me down the river, eh?" gibed the investigator. "Thought you'd finished me. You're a good actor, Payne, but maybe I'm not such a rank amateur myself!"

He dropped the cartridges into his vest-pocket, while the old man gulped and stammered wordless mouthings. Twisting the silencer from the gun-muzzle, he thrust gun and silencer into pockets of his coat.

"More exhibits in the case!" he laughed.

Then with no further word he turned, walked out of the library and started along the hall. Wide-eyed, from a doorway, the Irish maid stared at him. She had obviously been eavesdropping, and now was frightened almost numb.

To her ears, as to the investigator's, came the confused sound of oaths, of exclamations as old Payne raged in impotent desperation. That sound, as T. Ashley left the house, was music to him; music whereof the theme was justice, restitution.

Surely Payne's estate would liquidate for enough so that the bank could continue, and the fortunes of so many townsfolk be protected. Surely now Blair's widow would be protected, too!

Warm with satisfaction in this knowledge, T. Ashley walked toward the front gate, with police headquarters as his goal.

Hardly had he passed through that gate and turned along Walnut Street on the way to his car, when the front door of the gloomy old house burst open. A shrill feminine screech startled the peace of evening.

Pausing, the investigator lookeed round.

"The master! Saints preserve us!"

It was the Irish maid, now distractedly running down the walk. As she sped, she cried in panic:

"The master! Help— *help*! The master, then!"

T. Ashley met her just at the gate.

"What's happened?"

"Sure, then, just now I heard a heavy fall in the lib-ary! An'—an'—"

She grew hysterical.

The investigator shook her by the arm.

"Tell me! What is it?"

"Hiven help us! It's that pizen, same as he killed a cat with last week. The cat give one kick, an' dead as—"

"Mr. Payne's dead?"

"He is, then! An' wid the bottle in his hand, an' him layin' there on the floor—"

A block down Walnut Street, the investigator saw a leisurely-sauntering policeman who was just now waking up to the fact of a disturbance of the peace at Banker Payne's front gate. With a loud and imperative whistle, T. Ashley still more forcibly attracted his attention.

"What's all the row?" demanded the officer, arriving on the run. "What's happenin' here now?"

"Justice," replied T. Ashley, pointing toward the house. "You'll find it, in Harvey Payne's library. Poetic justice, there— the finest in the world!"

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10: Snow Hunters

Raymond S Spears

1876-1950

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IN THE beginning a snow-storm does one thing well; it covers over, it hides, and it conceals. But in the end, snow reveals, with relentless and unmistakable clearness. Therefore it is easy to make a serious mistake about snow-storms and snow.

There are four thousand square miles of the big woods and the forest canopy covers mountains, ridges, knolls and flats; it covers valleys, swamps, bottoms and lowlands. In the autumn, winter makes tentative advances upon the wilderness by scouting snow-clouds, which lay miles-wide swaths of snow, like white ribbons across the woods and mountains.

The snow sometimes covers the land and trees from the mountain tops down to the twenty-three-hundred-foot level, say, and while all the land above that level is white with snow, very sharply, the parts below that level are dark, black even, with autumnal purples and wetness.

Of humans, hunters are most concerned with the autumn snows. They want tracking snow, so that they can tell where the deer have been, where they came from, and especially, whither they are bound.

Up to, and including the 15th of November, the woods are greatly occupied by men who wish to let go of their instinct to kill their own meat, but on the 16th, the great majority of hunters put on their packs, tuck their guns into the crooks of their elbows and amble down out of the woods and climb stiffly into their conveyances, to take their courses to less exposed, more comfortable, less attractive abodes and places of occupation.

Men commonly desert the wilderness, just when it become most wild; just when the woods are most solemn, quiet, given over to the perfect coordination of Nature's forces, humans turn their back on the fastnesses, because, perforce, the law no longer permits them to kill deer— of all large wild creatures, the easiest and the most pitiful to kill.

Take bears, for example; bears are legal game, and there are only four or five real bear hunters among the two or three hundred thousand hunters who go in the big woods. By bear hunters one does not mean men who set traps, baited with odorous and attractive temptations to suit a bear's appetite, but men who shoulder their rifles and slip into the wilderness, to hunt down the bear, and shoot him in the spot where it will do the most damage— wherever that may be, as hunters continually dispute whether a heart, neck or head shot is worst for bears.

Bears are self-sufficient animals. They take advantage of those first autumnal snows. They use them in visualizing the presence of their natural born enemies, the riflemen of the woods.

A bear, following a beech flat, from nut tree to nut tree, will inspect a hunter's moccasin track with nose, and even with tentative picking with a long forepaw claw. Of all noses in the woods, a bear's is the keenest and the most accurate; it registers the odor of a man from a mile, or even miles, up wind; and a bear's ears put a deer's or fox's to shame for acuteness and identification.

A bear knows the step of a deer, the jump of a rabbit, the whir of a partridge's wings, and the faint, practised, villainous craunch of a still-hunter, armed with a rifle, with a point blank of two hundred yards.

A human, with keen ears, will hear the distant scared cry of a cub suddenly deserted— for lesson's sake— by a mother bear, in full flight at the least taint in the woods' pure air.

The fact is, the woods are full of odors, and a fish caught dead upon a lake beach, a deer dead of slow wounds, the muck of dead-wood, the slip of wet leaves— all these things are pure and of the woods; but not the odor of men, modern men, with their tobacco, their cooked food, their natural smell, for not even the smoke of an open dead-wood fire— the abomination of the woods in these days of burning dead and down timber, instead of slim beech, birch, and maple— not even the dank smudge of half-rotten spruce or balsam, can purify a man and make him sweet to the green timber creatures.

Snow blankets the earth, and covers all that was; but immediately everything that is is revealed, forthwith. And on this account, Jerry Tilcum rejoiced when he entered the timber, between days, on bare ground, which was immediately covered, flake by flake, with snow. Jerry had reason for desiring to be absent, without trace.

He was a pot-hunter; he was determined to kill venison for his winter meat; he needed snow to hide his trail, to reveal the deer, and to cover the fact of his violations. He went into the woods on the 17th of November, which was the day after the last of the law-abiding deer hunters shouldered their packs for the regretful pull-down out of the woods into the highways where they sought home comforts, including home cooking.

Jerry lived in Boulder, and he knew that Game Protector Vincuss had his eye on him. Jerry had violated all the game laws, fish laws and forest laws that he felt-inclined to break.

Otherwise, he was a very law-abiding, circumspect citizen. He didn't have to violate the law, as a matter of livelihood; it was merely a sport with him, like

playing poker with a member of the police board, or buying a glass of good liquor on Sunday from the alderman of the ward.

The trouble was, Game Protector Vincuss was without humor, and he had a sense of duty. Not for the world would Vincuss sit down and eat a venison steak with a boon companion for an early December dinner.

Having sat down to such a dinner, he would immediately arise and take his host to the justice of peace, and force a confession of judgment, with costs, amounting, all told, to $111.14, including war tax on railroad fares.

Before going into the woods Jerry ascertained that Vincuss was trying to catch boys who were shooting muskrats, when muskrat shooting was illegal, because it spoils the hide.

He knew, too, that Vincuss was looking around trying to find automobiles with parts of the meat of does in them, killing female deer being among the innumerable possible violations of the law.

Between days, Jerry slipped his flivver out of his garage; he ran it twenty miles up the Creek Road; he turned it into an old log camp tote road (throwing down some dead brush where he left the mainhighway, to cover his tire tracks), and hid the little car in some hemlock second growth.

Then he shouldered his pack and slipped back four miles to a hunting country in which he had great confidence.

Deer were there in plenty; hunters had missed that locality, having gone too far into the woods, or not gone far enough in, to locate this game pocket.

There was a big, overhanging boulder there, and under this Jerry had often slept, on a bed of hemlock and balsam boughs. In front of it was a built-up stone fireplace, which reflected heat back under the big boulder, where it was dry and cozy. A passer-by, glancing at the camp, would have thought it was occupied only by porcupines, for all the human conveniences were cunningly hidden and obscured by dead-wood, a fallen tree top, and other camouflage.

Jerry reached the camp before midnight. He rolled up in his woolen-waterproof canvas sleeping bag, till just before dawn, he awakened and ate a hot breakfast.

At the first. streak of dawn, he warmed the grip of his rifle barrel over his little fire, and ten minutes later he slipped forth in the falling snow, his moccasins making no noise on the slushy, wet ground.

"I guess I've given old Vincuss the slip, this time!" he grinned to himself.

He hunted slowly, and with the minimum of motion commensurate with covering the ground at the rate of a little less than two miles an hour. Knowing the habits of deer like a successful violator, he sought them where they were most likely to be in such a mild storm, either in rather thick evergreen timber,

or working along the beech ridges pawing among the wet leaves for beechnuts.

The deer were very wild; they had been driven into that small area by the activities of legal hunters of three days previous on all sides, some driving the ridges with wild ballyhoos, and some sneaking with more or less craftiness, according to more or less crude ideas about the art of still-hunting.

Deer tracks were plenty in the dead leaves, showing through the thin white of the snow. The woods, black at the beginning of the storm, seemed to grow whiter and brighter apparently under the inspiration of the snow, rather than because of the coming of day.

The illusion, one of Nature's prettiest, was perfect. The snow was making daylight!

Jerry crossed an area of spruce knolls; ascended an open beech ridge; descended into another evergreen patch—a balsam swamp, this time—and worked his way diagonally up the side of a great, master ridge where deer found a succulent moss along the north side. He struck a deer runway which led into a deep gap in the ridge, and following it, he sat down to breathe at the crossing of many wild animal trails.

Deer runways, cut by sharp hoofs in the soil, were most conspicuous; but the practised eyes of the veteran poacher discovered the claw prints of a fisher, the fresh pads of a fox, and various other sights revealed to him the fact that bears had been using that gap a good deal lately.

Having arrived at a certain monarch hemlock, at the foot of which he could sit down and watch the converging runways, he put his back to the friendly trunk, and with his rifle across his lap, he began a vigil which does very well in place of active hunting, when game is uneasy and when wild life is wandering about very much a foot.

He sat there quite a long time. It was, to his wicked mind, perfectly beautiful. He could not hear a shot of any fellow violator in any direction.

He knew that, except for one trapper, whose line was three miles west, up Sand Creek, it was unlikely another man would be in that part of the woods again before the following hunting season, in October.

The sense of possessing the great wilderness for his own private purposes pleased him very much, and a feeling of snugness, a glow of warmth, combined to soothe his eagerness.

Inspired by the loveliness of the scene, soothed by the certainty of his aloneness, he unconsciously yielded to the demand that he make up for some of the weariness, excitement; and effort incident upon his loss of sleep and scurrying like a hunted man away from his happy home into the realms of game law breaking and sense of fugitive necessity.

No deer in a snug bed, no bear under a dense evergreen, no rabbit in its found ever slept with the soundness that closed the eyes of Jerry Tilcum. He was as much a part of the wilderness as any man could possibly be— smoked by his:camp fire, a fugitive in fact, a raider in instinct, and wearied by his exertions.

So the snow sifted softly down, whitening him; and the faint breeze sifting through the trees, pulled loose a number of late hanging beech leaves, two or three of which drifted down on him, one on his hat, one on his mitts, and one on the toe of a moccasin.

He might have been a wart on the roots of the hemlock, for all he looked, after half an hour.

From the other side of the ridge, something began to approach the gap. It ambled up, worked back a snuffle or two, ambled up a little further; it stopped to scratch into an old stump.

Then it sat on its haunches, and scratched under its shortest rib. When it came up a little higher, and out into a little more open a space, it was revealed that this was a bear, a cub bear which would weigh about forty pounds.

Cub bears are not old, keen-nosed specters of the wilderness. They have much to learn. They are eager to learn it.

This cub's mother was about three hundred yards down the side of the mountain, lying under a clump of hemlock second growth, trying to get to sleep. Her cub was a very great care on her mind, and every'once in a while she had to go hunting all over some valley, or mountain, trying to find the little brute, only to discover that the cub had laid down to sleep somewhere, without the least regard to being found by a hunter, or getting sick from eating too much, without drinking enough water, or some other ailment known to mother bears.

She was going to lie down, now, and sleep, no matter what happened to the little wretch, looking after whom was enough to keep four mother bears and two or three yearlings busy. So she was asleep, but with one ear cocked for sake of her cub.

The cub rambled up to the gap, at last, and seeing a great, beautiful hemlock tree, with elegant rough bark, to climb, and a chirring red squirrel sitting anxiously upon a knot, the cub reached up the grade to, the foot of the hemlock, and walked halfway around it, still looking up, planted one long forepaw upon a protuberance, reached with the opposite hind claw to take a good hold of a pliable, yielding, grippable substance, sank all its claws in, to take a most firm grasp, and then fell over backward with a wild cub call for help, which blended admirably with the nightmare yell of a man.

Jerry Tilcum, sleeping absolutely peaceably, caught first with his nostrils the odor of bear, and it started subconscious trains of thought which rapidly developed and expanded and became vivid as something cold and clammy settled upon his warm neck, and then something short, powerful, and full of energy, gripping power and action, seized upon the mittened fist on his rifle, across his lap.

Jerry Tilcum's nightmare lasted several seconds. While it lasted, it was the liveliest thing ever seen or experienced in the big gap of the long ridge where he had drifted into sleep.

He grabbed it, he fought it, he spurned it, and he tumbled up and down and around in its embrace. It filled him with irresistible distraction and dismay.

He sprang up, at last, gave three jumps, fell into the space over a steep slope, and pitching and plunging, half awake, he rolled and fell and scrambled a hundred yards down the mountainside. When he finally recovered his consciousness, he looked around in bewilderment.

Stunned by the utterly incomprehensible attack, he did not at first remember that he was in the woods. His dream had been that he was in perfect serenity in the quiet of his own bedroom. The bearskin rug, in the adjoining room, rose up and began to snuffle around.

It had shambled sidewise through the doorway, while he lay there, perfectly help-less. It had reached up with a hind leg and clawed his neck; it had lathered upon his face with its gutta-percha tongue.

Then it had fondly clutched at his throat ` with all four legs, and three sets of claws, not including the ones the bear had lost in the trap that had been its doom; all the claws had then rivaled one another in seizing his throat.

Struggling against the horrors of being destroyed by a heretofore perfectly innocent bearskin rug, trophy of much skill and effort, Jerry Tilcum tumbled and pitched and clawed, and he had actually rolled and fallen a hundred yards before he awakened to the fact that it was— well, what was it?

The swath he had made coming down the ridge was perfectly plain. The snow was wiped up in spots, and the brush was bent, broken, pulled up by the roots, so that there were white places, covered with snow, and black places, where the ground had been torn up.

There was plain evidence that he had slid twenty feet down an old glacial polish on a ledge. of rock.

Fifty feet up the mountain Jerry found his rifle, with the muzzle jammed ten inches in a soft spot. He examined the barrel to see if it was bent— it was not; and he, with great care, fished about five inches of humus and sand plug out of the thirty caliber barrel, and then carefully wiped it out with a string cleaner. By this time not less than an hour had passed.

Jerry had reconciled himself to the fact that he had suffered a nightmare, and after glancing up the steep, brushy hillside where he had rolled and torn-up the shrubs by the roots, he neglected one of the cardinal virtues of the wilderness. He did not climb back up the tiresome grade to see what signs he had made in his wrestling match with the nightmare. He did not feel like it!

Jerry Tilcum's neck was sore, but he ascribed it to the fact that he had scrambled head first through green ash and witchhopples, not to mention the top of a windfall spruce and past a few edged stones and rounded boulders.

Lust of sport, lust of game law breaking, hunger for venison, had largely been appeased in the heart of Jerry Tilcum. He regarded himself as a fool for going to sleep up there in the gap.

There was no excuse for him, an oldtime hunter, defiant of game laws, going to sleep in the cozy arms of a hemlock's roots soothed by the whisperings of faint winds, and charmed by the soft falling of a beautiful tracking snow.

At the same time, with the departure of his lust and appetite, he found his pride coming to him. He had come into the woods for the deliberate purpose of killing a big venison and taking it out home, to put down for the winter.

Pride would not permit him to return home, especially now, after dreaming like a tenderfoot, without making the most valiant effort to kill big game.

"Dreams don't mean anything!" he assured himself, thinking of the clutches of that awful fur rug.

He had made enough noise, with his scramble down the mountain and his yells— he knew that he had yelled, that no one in the wide world but would have yelled, even a stoic— to scare all the deer anywhere around there.

Accordingly, he walked along the hillside rather rapidly for half a mile, and then worked up onto the back of the ridge, to approach the point at the end. Nervous, noisy, clumsy, still thinking of the nightmare, he could not hunt thoroughly well.

It was after eleven o'clock, and deer were certainly lying down over the noon of the day. Even if it was snowing, perhaps some big buck would be up there on the point, hardening— no, a buck's horns were already hard. Anyhow, big bucks like to sleep on points.

He was sore, and he ached, here and there. But at last he hunted with care, and like an old woodsman, without relaxing his vigilance in the least.

A tenderfoot will be even skilful and careful in the first few hours of a hunt, but as he grows tired, hungry, and begins to question his prowess and wish he was home, he relaxes and begins to stumble, and thus loses perhaps the only opportunity he would have of killing big game.

Jerry hunted on, and found where a big buck had been routed out, and had fled down a mountain. He went hunting for another big buck, and true to form, late in the afternoon, when the big circle course he had taken through the timber began to close in on his big rock camp, there stepped out in front of him, a buck with antlers as wide as a window.

Jerry dropped his rifle sights in line with the foreshoulder of the noble brute, took aim for the fraction of a second, and pressed the trigger.

One shot— one jump— and a splendid head of live game was reduced to good venison.

Tilcum had never killed a finer deer. He had never seen a better shot. He had never felt a greater satisfaction in his own prowess than at that moment.

The butchery was rapidly and expertly performed; the head, cut off close to the ears— the hair around the horns was pretty long to have mounted that year! He cut off the quarters, and carried them only.a little more than a quarter of a mile to his camp; he returned and brought in all the rest of the meat; the horns he hung in a hardwood tree, thinking that he would some time return there and get it, and that squirrels would be less likely to gnaw it in the open hardwood than in an evergreen's branches.

Then Jerry Tilcum took out of his packbasket a contrivance of the most villainous kind, regarded from the standpoint of the game laws. It was a sausage grinder, and when he had finished with that instrument, beside which a burglar's jimmy is as the contribution basket passed at a suffrage meeting, he had exactly one hundred pounds of— sausage.

He had added to the meat two spoonfuls of sage, three spoonfuls of black pepper, one half spoonful of Cayenne pepper, and four spoonfuls of fine salt, at the rate of ten pounds of meat per each dose of spice.

He put each ten pound batch of meat on a great sheet of oiled paper, and set it out on the rocks where it would freeze, and cool and "blow" or steam— a hundred pounds of pure sausage.

The hide was taken out and buried under a log, very carefully. The bones were buried with the hide.

Jerry also threw some waste stuff away. He viewed, with delight, the steadily falling snow. Every sign and trace of his villainy were covered over, without question.

It happened that he had in his pockets a newspaper, one printed the evening before, and he read it by firelight, for a little while. Then he chucked it away, turned in and went to sleep. He slept peacefully, and without dreams.

In the morning the sun was shining, and Jerry hid his outfit under the rock, shouldered his pack, almost full of sausage, and started out in the new-fallen

snow. His hundred-pound load felt heavy, and he stopped frequently to rest it on a log or stone, and at last hoisted it into the automobile with a sigh of relief.

He brushed eight inches of snow off the top of his car with a hemlock bough, filled his radiator from a nearby brook, gave the crank a lift or two, and then pulled it over hard. The flivver began to shiver, shake, puff, blow, and expound like twenty horses.

Jerry, however, had a second thought. He reflected that as he had a contrabrand load, he ought not to take a chance of meeting his neighbor Vincuss, the game protector, anywhere down the road.

He decided that he had better let the car remain where it was till nightfall, when he would surely escape an unwelcome search by the game protector. Accordingly, having let the radiator warm up good, he stopped the motor and went out around to look at the woods.

A woodsman can never sit at his ease in the woods; he must go out and around and look at the timber, at the tracks in the snow, so wherever a woodsrnan is, there is activity and wandering and observation.

Jerry Tilcum wandered off three or four miles, and circled around in a rabbit swamp, and shot two snow-shoe hares. He felt proud of them, and slung them from his shoulder by a stout cord.

He sat on a log and watched a yearling deer feeding and nuzzling around in the snow— he didn't dream of killing it, for he had all the meat he wanted.

By and by, he returned to the automobile, and, all wrapped up, to keep off the chill, he went to sleep, deliberately.

The pride of Jerry Tilcum was unspeakable! He thought, he believed, that he could go to sleep any time he wanted to, anywhere he wanted to. And he might have done any one of a hundred things, as for example, he might have run his little flivver out into the old tote road, and down the old woods road to the Wilderness Highway, six miles away, and gone to sleep in sight of it.

Then— well, other things happen in the woods besides what a man does. A man, even an old woodsman, is at best an extraneous creature, in the green timber.

Game Protector Vincuss had been so successful cleaning up his district of violators that it was difficult for him to discover and apprehend violators. For two months he had nursed a case against aman who had killed a woodpecker, accumulating corroborative evidence. He had his eye on a certain hotel, where he reckoned a game dinner might be served with illegal viands, to the proper, paying kind of sports.

He was even thinking of making a foray on some small boys, who were suspected of the villainy of shooting muskrats.

Being a game protector of experience and resourcefulness and success, he was without pride. He was more humble than any man of his acquaintance.

On his head fell the curses of more deliberate violators than on any other* law enforcer north of the moonshine belt. His humility was real and earnest, for he knew that the more he knew. about game law breakers, the more he had to learn.

Nothing, positively nothing, could be permitted to escape his vigil, or escape his attention. So he discovered that Jerry Tilcum had gone away in his flivver.

The fact is, one of the victims of the law had cursed Vincuss because Jerry could go out any time and violate the law, and "nothin? is done to him! Why, he went out with his 30-30 just to-night, an' I seen 'im— course, he's gone huntin' red skurrels, er chipmunks!"

"The United States Constitution gives any man the right to bear arms," Vincuss replied gently, and with a kind of piety.

"Yeh— yeh!" the man who had paid a fine fairly yelled. "Yeh—"

Vincuss saw the Tilcum garage door was open, and the garage empty. He slipped into it, by way of exploration, and found that a big fur robe had been thrown over the work bench, which proved it wasn't a social or pleasure ride. An extra overcoat, of the kind commonly carried for chance or visiting passengers, was dumped out, too.

"Yeh!" Vincuss muttered. "Now, where's the cuss gone?"

He sneaked out of the garage, and homeward, unseen. He slept a little, but he was awake a good deal more of the time, trying to think, trying to imagine or divine where Jerry Tilcum would be likely to go, and finally, his wife began to scold him for waking her up all the time, with his pitching and tossings around.

"I got to get an early start in the morning," he apologized to her, though that was the first time he knew he had to get an early start that particular next morning.

"Shucks! I'll wake you up!" she retorted, and so Vincuss went to sleep, knowing that his wife surely would rout him out, which she did, one hour before daybreak.

Half an hour later, having eaten his buckwheats, he kicked the starter of his five passenger, six cylinder and went out into the cold dawn. It had been raining some down in the valleys, but the hills around were white with snow, and accordingly, when he reached the end of the State Road, he put chains on all four of his wheels, and began to buck the mud and snow into the big woods.

He was on a blind chase. He knew, in his heart, that Jerry Tilcum had gone into the big woods, almost surely to kill a deer.

The best he could do was trust to the luck that makes things right. He picked a little trapper's camp over on Sand Creek, and leaving his car at a farmhouse, he went across to the creek.

The camp was cold, deserted, and had not been occupied in several days. Then he went out "for a walk." When a game protector goes for a walk it is a fearful thing, meaning perhaps ten miles, perhaps twenty; they have sauntered away for a "little walk," and spent a week and traveled a hundred and fifty miles.

Vincuss had no idea that he would go far or see much. He just ambled along, listening for distant shots; looking for fresh tracks in the snow that was falling, alert for any least indication.

He was walking along, about half past ten, when he bethought himself of some molasses cake which his wife had put into a game bag for his lunch. There were other things besides molasses cake in the lunch, but the cake—um-m.

Vincuss brushed the snow off a log; sat down and he drew out one slab of the cake, which had been baked in a tin nine inches wide. The slab was nine inches long and three inches wide.

He broke it in two, and carefully put one half back into the piece of oiled paper, with another slab of the same kind, and began to eat; not because he was hungry, but because in all the world there was nothing exactly like a piece of the molasses cake which Mrs. Vincuss made to remind him of her during his absences from his home hearth.

He had eaten almost all of the half-slab, when, suddenly, there raced tearing through the woods, not fifty feet from him, an old bear, with a cub galloping at her heels. She was going for further information, and the cub was uttering an alarmed whine at every jump.

They were the most scared bears that Game Protector Vincuss, had ever heard of. He watched them come, pass, and go with ever so little vindictiveness in his heart.

He had been a good sportsman before he became game protector. Now he had no wish to kill game, not even legal bears. He had in his pocket a 45-caliber automatic pistol, but he did not think to use it on the bears. He was a hunter for bigger game!

The racing, frightened, whining bears were a wilderness sign. Vincuss, marshalling his ideas, recalled the keenness of the bear's nose, its acuteness of hearing, its certainty of vision. One thing, and perhaps only one thing, will make a black bear in the big woods take to its heels and go to a new country—and that is having been scared by a man; sight, sound, and hearing of a man.

These bears had been scared by something, terribly scared. So Vincuss, having digested his thoughts, and eaten his molasses cake, started on the back track of the two bears. .

He knew that bears sometimes ran for twenty miles from the source of their alarm.

These bears had crossed Sand Creek half a mile east of him; he crossed on a fallen tree, and took up the back track in the snow.

It was still storming; the snow was several inches deep. Every jump the claws of the bears had dug down to the ground. They had thrown black humus and wet leaves upon the snow behind them.

They left one of those revealing trails. Vincuss followed it back and he ran it into a thick clump of hemlocks, and there he found the bed which the old bear had occupied. The cub had come right straight into that bed, and the mother bear had jumped ten feet from her dreams into full flight.

Vincuss followed the cub tracks up the mountain, and he did so with comparative ease, for the cub had every time jumped ten feet, and slid five feet clear down the steep southside of the great ridge.

Up on top of the mountain, in the big gap there, he found an extraordinary thing. He found a place where a man had been sitting, and the cub's tracks started from that point. The bear had gone south, the man had gone north, and Game Protector Vincuss studied the signs in the snow, quite unable to determine what had happened.

Apparently, the man had rolled end ove end down the ridge!

But there were a man's tracks. They were partly obscured by the snow, but the snow had not begun to fall till the previous night; ergo, the man tracks, from the viewpoint of a game protector, were very satisfactorily, fresh.

Vincuss did not know what man it was, but he took to the trail, for luck—always for luck!

It was a long trail; it was hard to follow in some places; but it was, unmistakably, the trail of a deer hunter, seeking game in the points, where bucks lie, on hardwoods, where deer feed, and in the evergreen clumps where they find shelter and moss to eat. It was sometimes impossible to follow the moccasin tracks in the evergreens, because there the snow was thin, and more snow had fallen on the tracks than had been on the ground before they had been made.

All day long, sometimes step by step, Vincuss followed the trail. That night he sat in a thicket, all huddled up, to wait for day.

Again he ate his wife's molasses cake and it was solace, comfort, food and encouragement. In the dawn he went on again.

The sun was shining; it had stopped snowing; the hunter's tracks were so faint in the obscuring snow that Vincuss almost despaired of following it to his quarry. As yet, he had not found any proof that a deer had been killed, but he knew the signs; deer were being hunted.

He spent hours, trying to follow the trail, and, finally, he lost it. It was in a big hardwood, and though he circled, he could not pick it up.

So he started with the feeling of defeat for the main road, miles distant, and as he came down over a ridge, a kind of big hardwood flat, he saw something in a tree ahead of him.

It was draped with snow, but he ran up to it, and uttered an exclamation— a great pair of buck antlers, with the head cut off close to the ears, hide, and all.

That was confession of illegality! Furthere proof was the red drip of fresh blood. Also, no one who had killed a pair of horns like that legally would ever have left them in the woods.

From the horns it was only a little ways to the kill— forty feet or so. Already foxes had come to the place, and the three trips which the hunter had made coming and going in the snow had left a plain trail.

In ten minutes Vincuss was at the great rock, with its hidden boughs, its covered fireplace, and another trail which led to the hide and bones of the deer under the log.

Evidence? Plenty of it! There was a newspaper, partly covered by the snow. Its date line read November 16, and it was an evening paper.

There was a little yellow shred of paper on the first page, and that paper had some printing on it.

The hands of Game Protector Vincuss trembled as he breathed upon the paper to melt the ice with which it was covered. When he shook the water away, there was the plain reading:

Jerry Tilcum, November 22, 16.

"Lucky thing for Jerry if his subscription had expired seven days sooner," Vincus mused. "Now to nail the cuss to his job!"

Vincuss looked around the camp, and found an empty cardboard can which had held sage, and tucked back under the rock was a cache of salt, red pepper, black pepper, a sausage grinder and a simple cooking outfit.

When the pepper was delivered from the grocery, a piece of gummed paper had been stuck on the can, to hold the written address of J. Tilcum.

Then Vincuss took the fresh morning trail out of the woods; it was a trail that went deep into the snow at every footstep, and where it crossed logs, and

passed stones, the violator had sat down to rest with a basket heavy laden. But not a drop of blood had dripped from the meat within.

Vincuss grinned.

"A scientist," he mused, "would have the hardest kind of job proving that venison made into sausage, and flavored, is venison."

It was late in the day when Game Protector Vincuss discovered the flivver by its black top ahead of him in a hemlock thicket. He studied it carefully.

He did not know how desperate the violator would be. He recognized that Jerry Tilcum might be "bad," at this moment, when he was caught, red handed.

Accordingly, Vincuss, the man-hunter, slipped up to the flivver with utmost caution. As he drew near it, he heard a little snuffle.

He knew a snore by its sound. Grinning, he crept closer.

Yes, Jerry Tilcum had gone to sleep again. In his pride, he had been sure that he was perfectly safe. 'There he slept in the back seat, with his mittened hands crossed in front of him, a red line of wrist above the mitts.

The 30-30 carbine was in the front seat. Vincuss, all nerve and alert, slipped up to the side of the car, not daring to breathe. He opened both jaws of his handcuffs, and with a jaw in each hand, he aimed them at the narrow, bare lines of the wrists, and with a swift, sure drive, snapped them both in place, and then, seizing the 30-30, dropped the lever far enough to see that there was a loaded shell in the barrel, in front of the hammer plunger.

" Hi-i— I— I— Gee— Holy— Moses! Save me!"

Jerry Tilcum screamed, springing to his feet and then lunged headfirst out onto the ground, half burying himself in the snow. He jumped up, struggling and blowing and pulling at the handcuffs.

Game Protector Vincuss stood by, smiling. He, too, had got his game. He was not exactly proud, for he knew better, from hard experience in the big woods, than to be proud. He saw his prisoner come up out of deep, unhappy slumberland into a more unhappy consciousness.

Tilcum, suddenly realizing what had happened, and identifying the handcuffs on his wrists, wiped the snow off his face and the sweat out of his eyes. He turned a shamed, trapped-bear look at his captor. He blinked, and gave a trapped-bear look out into the wide, open wilderness, in which a man could be free.

He looked back again, and meeting the level gaze of the game protector, accusing him, he dropped his glance in shame to the torn up snow where he had fallen in his nightmare.

"You got me," Tilcum confessed.

"You'll confess judgment?" Vincuss suggested.

"Why— you mean—"

"If you will, you can sign the paper right here, and then—"

Vincuss drew out the wallet in which he carried his papers, and Tilcum read the judgment blank.

"I might's well," Tilcum said, and when Vincuss had filled it in, he signed.

"Now Ill take them off," Vincuss said, and he unlocked the slim steel rings.

They rode out of the thicket together, down the old tote road into the State Highway. When they reached the farmhouse where Vincuss had put up his car, the game protector took the sausage, in the pack-basket which he borrowed from Tilcum, and started to carry it to his car. He stopped, however, and turned back.

"Jerry," he said, doubtfully, "it's none of my business, but— er— I'd like to know what happened over on that big ridge, in the gap there—"

"Eh— you— you were there?" Tilcum demanded.

"Yes— I tracked you from there. I saw two bears running like the devil over beyond Sand Creek. "I knew— well, I thought something had scared them. So I followed their back tracks.

"The old one had a bed down at the foot of the mountain. The cub came from up in the gap, and things were tore up—I couldn't tell very well—it'd snowed quite a lot, you know."

Tilcum felt of his neck, and Vincuss saw under the collar a big, raw scratch.

"Why—I thought I had a devil of a dream!" Tilcum gasped. "I thought my old bear hide rug had grabbed me— I could smell it— feel it—"

"Say! Is that right? You know— I couldn't tell, but it looked to me just as though that cub had stepped on you—"

Tilcum blinked. He pulled at his thick shirt collar, and picked up something to look at it.

"Ain't that bear hair?" he asked.

"Why— it is!"

"Yes, sir! I wrestled with that fool cub!" Tilcum blinked. "If I'd knowed that— um-m. Say, Vincuss, I'm paying right up— no fuss nohow— only I got a favor to ask?"

"Yes?"

"Sure. Mum's the word, you know."

"Not the ketching me— that's all right— but you know, me getting caught twice, asleep!"

"Well, all right," Vincuss hesitated, adding: " Gee!"

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11: The Silent Guest

Anonymous

Great Southern Herald (Katanning) 15 Nov 1911

Also published in several other rural Australian newspapers. Christmas eve around 1800; something sinister in a lonely wayside inn between Greenwich and Deptford

PAST NINE O'CLOCK, and a bitter night. It was raining as it had rained all day, a gathering wind lashed the hedge-rows and the shrieking boughs of the naked elms, and there was sleet in the wind.

For his own, reasons, Mr George Masters was avoiding the highway, preferring instead to plunge in the darkness across the fields, falling again and again in the ruts of sandy mud ridged with last week's snow, gray and sodden. He cursed through chattering teeth, as be made for the far twinkling light of the "Hare and Billet."

Pretty luck this for a man— on Christmas eve, too! He had spent a gray, gloomy afternoon lying among the soaked gorse by the road edge, with the sleet in his ears and the steady rain winning through the shag-coat and the greasy brown coat beneath it, to the flannel waistcoat that sheltered his pistols.

Chilled to the soul, with no dry thread on him, he had waited faithfully till Squire Hales' horse-hoofs had splashed the mud over the gorse bushes, and then the numbed fingertips crept under the flannel waist coat. He half rose among the furze as the red *roquelaure* went past him, to the splash of the hoofs and the jangle of the bridle-reins.

But when he saw the two servants turn the corner, with holsters before them, he sank back into his wet nest, a prey to natural annoyance.

The horses went on towards Shooter's Hill, and a dripping figure stood in the way they had come, shaking a helpless fist and cursing all things below the beetling sky. Then George Masters tramped across the strip of furze-clad common and flung himself through a gap in the hedge of the turnip field. He broke into a heavy run when he saw the light from the kitchen of the "Hare and Billet" blinking before him.

The unfortunate footpad unhasped the gate, and stepped forward to stand with the host of the "Hare and Billet" in one gathering puddle.

"Gone by!" said Mr. Masters, bitterly, "Gone by to Greenwich by this time, likely with his two bloody-minded serving men behind!— a cowardly, white-livered, gold-laced hound!"

"You're wet, George," said the landlord. "Come you under a roof!" Reproof of George's bitterness of speech was in the tone— the tone of a man who had his own disappointments to contend with.

They came up the brick path to the back door and passed in under the lean-to roof of the shed. It was quite dark, and they moved shuffling among the barrels of beer, the fire-wood, and farm tools that covered the earth floor. The landlord raised the heavy wooden latch of the door leading to the house, and they passed up the two steps into the big room— kitchen and tap-room in one— and thus out the night and the cold.

A pleasant kitchen with tiled floor and a comforting mass of jed coals glowing in an iron basket sticking out of the wall. A kitchen ,with blackened settles, long benches, and tables ringed with many ale-cans. A quiet kitchen where only one man was, and he, the hostler, in the big armchair asleep.

The landlord roused him with his foot, and he sat up, rubbing a beery eye with a chilblained fist.

"Mr George is coming in here to sleep tonight, Bill," said the landlord. "I take it in his majesty the King won't trouble a poor fellow on Christmas eve. Got him some ale— a quart of ale— and spread his coat over that chair-back— main wet and main dry, Mr George be, I take it."

"He'll sleep in his chair, then," returned the hostler. "There's a man above us how, in the bed, a real gentleman he is, with his sword and his rooklay— come in when you was out, when the heavy rain come on. I showed him up to the bedroom and kindled the fire, and he lies there, burning two of the big wax candles, and if he don't drink the bottle of claret, it's opened, and will have to be paid for, too. Terry don't like him, Terry don't; hark to him howling— he'th whined like that ever sin' the old gentleman come. Hark to un again,now the wind's quiet."

The mongrel fastened by the front door was baying howl upon howl. A sharp kick at the panel, and a command to "lie down" from the landlord, appeared to soothe him for a moment, but the long whines soon broke out again. The dog wailed to the wind, which answered with fierce gusts of passion, and hurtling of sleet gainst the lattice panes. When the dog was silent for a while and the wind paused to gather itself for new effort, the rain pattered gently, the clock ticked to the chorus of a choir of crickets and East Wickham's belfry jangled in the distance.

The men in kitchen were sitting in the shadow of an idea.

"He don't seem to be moving," said the, hostler, breaking the silence. "He's not awake now, for sure."

The others looked at him with sudden interest, as if the presence upstairs had passed from their thoughts.

"There's a purse above stairs I make no doubt, and a gold sneezin' box, as'll keep awake, if they've any sense," Bill went on, grinning at the subtlety and success of his conversation, but not looking at his companions.

"There's something I don't like, Willum, " put in the landlord, apparently addressing a pewter measure, "an an ole gentleman so lose his purse here. Give the house a bad name— that sort of thing— and a good name," he continued, facing his subordinate— "a good name to a house of entertainment is better than rubies."

Having delivered himself of this sentiment, he spread hia hands over the arms of his windsor chair and leaned forward with an air of awaiting suggestions. But none came.

He coughed, looked at Mr Masters, and went on. "There was a dear old gentleman come here, let me see, why it was as near as possible a year ago."

"It was a year ago," put in George.

"Well, he come here (I'll have to go out and' kick that dog), and 'Is this the Deptford Road,' he says, 'my men?' and you says, 'Matter of twenty mile, master, and a bad road for a lonely traveller to leave a comfortable public behind on.' And he says, 'My horse is at the gate-post and he'd be better in the stable,' and and he walks in and orders candles and supper.' "

"Did he have them?" asked the hostler, breathlessly.

"Had all he ordered, and more," said the landlord, slowly, "but he went on that night, after all." He looked at his companion; appreciated the reminiscence in the eye of George, the child-like admiration for superior achievement in that of Bill, and pursued: "Yes," he went on, "and when he went, he left his gold watch and sneezing-box, and nineteen guineas in a red silk bag. He didn't want 'em where he was going."

"Where was that?"

"Don't I tell you? Deptford."

They all laughed gayly, and the landlord took out a stone bottle and thick glass jumners from the corner cupboard.

"His Majesty, King George, wot you're so fond of— here's his health, and our gracious Queen Charlotte, and long to reign over us!" George gave the toast, and they drained their glasses.

"Giniver," said the hostler, and added tentatively, "a man could do anything wot's drunk Giniver."

"Anything short of murder, he could," assented George, "but it's nothing short of murder would do for that dog of yourn, Tom."

Indeed, the dog's long drawn howls still disturbed their Christmas festivities. Moved by this incongruity, the landlord went out and kicked it.

A gust of wind and rain forced way into the room, and Mr Masters coughed again violently, and shivered and swore.

"Can't you shut the door?" he asked. "This ain't no weather for a poor man with his living to get, and his pockets as empty as the day he was born."

"Well," said the landlord, "our pockets was empty enough last Christmas here, afore that ole gentleman called."

And still no sound from the room upstairs.

"There's another purse up there this night," remarked the footpad, "waiting for them as is sportsman enough to take it, as two bold lads did last Christmas eve."

The chill wind must have made it entry still felt in the room, for the landlord shivered again, and the footpad widened the palms of his hands upon his knees.

"And another old man," he said, "I was the man that did it, and I suppose it'll be my job again. That dog howls fit to wake the dead. I don't like this indoors work, with doors and curtains, and stairs a-creaking, and having to wash your hands this weather. I'm a man that earns his living in the open air, I am, where things is straightforward, and nothing can't come creeping up behind you without your seeing it."

The landlord, suddenly lifted the wooden latch of the inner door, held his candle above his head, and peered into the darkness.

"No one there," he said; "and I could have sworn that minute I heard a breath. I don't like your talk tonight, George. Wake the dead, and washing of your hands indeed, ain't it enough—"

He stopped abruptly, to pour out more spirit.

"Oh, let him talk, master," cried the hostler, "it puts heart into a man, it do— talking over old times.'

George chuckled grimly, and when he had drained his glass, he said cheerfully: "Aye, that does it. It all comes back to me. It was him as held the light by the door, when l run in; and it was me as— He bled very free, he did, very free."

"Yes! I held the light, though much against my wish, mind you— thank Them is be," said the landlord, regarding his grimy fingers with satisfaction. "Thank Them as be, my hands is clean."

"They won't be clean long, then. It's me what holds the light tonight," said George, firmly, and he took the candle and walked to the foot of the stair.

"Not a sound." he said.

The landlord had risen— the shock-headed man shifted his big shoulder on the bench where he lay, and the expression rose in his face of a terrier awaiting with eager nose the rush from cover of his first rat.

"If," said he, hesitatingly,— "If it comes to that, you can both hold this light— sooner than see them guineas should get up and rided off in the morning. I know a young man what would as lief hold a bill-hook as a candle any day of the week."

And he looked so savage that the landlord was unaffectedly shocked. But George came back to the table for another dream,and after it had been tendered him, remarked that that young man would not want for a backer. Then he knocked damp priming out of his pistol on the table edge and filled the pan.

"I'll just listen once again, if so be he's soundly off," and he disappeared cautiously up the winding stairs, turning back to add: "And don't any of you come creeping up behind me, for I don't like it."

The other two looked anywhere but at each other, without speaking. There was no sound from, above after the stairs had ceased to creak under the footpad's weight. Outside the dog howled, a long, low baying that never ceased.

The hostler fetched a bill-hook from the lean-to ahed and employed the tine in taking off his boots. After a glance at the other, he sat down with the bill-hook hidden by his coat-flap.

Both men started at the first creak of the stair.

George stood at the stair-foot, blinking in the sudden light,

"He's a-sleeping like the dead," he whispered. "Can't even hear him breathe. His candles are burning yet; I see them through the key-hole. Come on!"

All three stood together for a moment at the bottom of the stairway. There was a moment's hesitation, while the landlord and Mr Masters adjusted the procession behind Bill, who had planted his foot on the bottom stair. At this inopportune instant, the tail clock in the corner struck, with a shrill metallic stroke, and Bill withdrew his foot suddenly, dropping the bill-hook. It fell to the red tiles of the floor,which gave back clang on clang.

Aghast at this mishap, the host pushed his clumsy-fingered servant back into his place in the corner, Mr. Masters and himself reseating themselves with a hastily assumed appearance of genial domesticity.

But no startled guest appearing on the stairs after ten minutes of complete silence, the procession reformed in its old order, and went up.

Outside the bedroom door they held their breath and listened— not a sound but the ticking of the clock beIow, the rushing of the wind without, and the moaning plaint of the dog.

A stealthier man than the hostler, the landlord thrust a sleek hand forward to grasp the latch of the door. It was unsecured, and opened a little way under his gentle pressure. Through the foot of opening they could see the two waxen candles flame in the sockets as they burned by the sleeping man. By their light his legs modeled themselves under the white counterpane. His face and

shoulders, were in the deep shadows of the faded, green curtains of the half-tester.

At the sight of the bed the heart of the hostler became suddenly sick within him. With white lips and shaking knees he vacated his place in the procession, and pushing past the landlord, who was still poising himself at the stairhead, he made his way to the room below. At that moment, could their limbs have borne them, his companions would have followed him. They huddled together in the corner of the landing, holding their breath and listening until the taproom door opened and shutf and they knew themselves alone with the sleeper.

The wind had lulled, and the rain, falling ceaselessly and silently, made no sound on the thatched roof. For a while the dog was silent in the yard. This was an old man; scant of breath, or surely his breathing could have been heard in the dreadful calmness of the night.

The landlord, with his shoulders raised, had stolen on tip-toe into the room. One of the candles was now guttering and flaring, preparatory to going out; the fragment of the other burned on with a long, red, smoking wick, lighting up the bright point of the rusty case-knife clenched in his fingers.

He glanced upward at the brutal features of the footpad. Their eyes met with the same thought in each. It was the recollection of that other night, when they had stolen into that room to rob another helpless, sleeping old man of sleep and life.

The great silence was not to be borne. The footpad put out his hand and thrust the landlord forward by the shoulder. He drew back, stumbling heavily. As he recovered himself, they both sprang forward toward the bed and tore back the old green curtains.

Behind these, his poor white face thrown back over the pillows, lay the old man, his thin hands rigidly grasping the edges of the sheet, drawn up close under his chin. They leaned over the bed and half drew back.

"My God! 'tis very like him," said the landlord in a whisper.

George had his hands on the sheets and pulled it back roughly.

"It is him, my God!" he cried. For, as he pulled back the sheet, the last candle flared up and died down and went out. Its last light shone on the sleeper's throat, gashed across— horribly gaping— red and wet, This was no stranger, but the man they had murdered a year ago; they had left him just so last Christmas morning.

Their wild cries narrowly prevented some of the others from meeting a similar fate.

The dog in the yard whined with pleasure to hear a human voice, and then once more there was the silence of death in the "Hare and Billet".

IN THE best bedroom the landlord lay dead on the floor— dead beside the white counterpane and impressed pillowe of an empty bed. Something wrong with his heart, folk said.

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12: The Fall of the House of Usher

Edgar Allan Poe

1809-1849

Burton's Gentlemen's Magazine Sep 1839

Son cœur est un luth suspendu;
Sitôt qu'on le touche il résonne.
— De Béranger.

DURING the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country; and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. I know not how it was— but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable; for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment, with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible. I looked upon the scene before me— upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain— upon the bleak walls— upon the vacant eye-like windows— upon a few rank sedges— and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees— with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium— the bitter lapse into everyday life— the hideous dropping off of the veil. There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart— an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime. What was it— I paused to think— what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? It was a mystery all insoluble; nor could I grapple with the shadowy fancies that crowded upon me as I pondered. I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion, that while, beyond doubt, there *are* combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth. It was possible, I reflected, that a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression; and, acting upon this idea, I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled lustre by the dwelling, and gazed down— but with a shudder even more thrilling than before— upon the remodelled and inverted images of the gray sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant and eye-like windows.

Nevertheless, in this mansion of gloom I now proposed to myself a sojourn of some weeks. Its proprietor, Roderick Usher, had been one of my boon companions in boyhood; but many years had elapsed since our last meeting. A letter, however, had lately reached me in a distant part of the country— a letter from him— which, in its wildly importunate nature, had admitted of no other than a personal reply. The MS. gave evidence of nervous agitation. The writer spoke of acute bodily illness— of a mental disorder which oppressed him— and of an earnest desire to see me, as his best, and indeed his only personal friend, with a view of attempting, by the cheerfulness of my society, some alleviation of his malady. It was the manner in which all this, and much more, was said— it was the apparent *heart* that went with his request— which allowed me no room for hesitation; and I accordingly obeyed forthwith what I still considered a very singular summons.

Although, as boys, we had been even intimate associates, yet I really knew little of my friend. His reserve had been always excessive and habitual. I was aware, however, that his very ancient family had been noted, time out of mind, for a peculiar sensibility of temperament, displaying itself, through long ages, in many works of exalted art, and manifested, of late, in repeated deeds of munificent yet unobtrusive charity, as well as in a passionate devotion to the intricacies, perhaps even more than to the orthodox and easily recognisable beauties, of musical science. I had learned, too, the very remarkable fact, that the stem of the Usher race, all time-honored as it was, had put forth, at no period, any enduring branch; in other words, that the entire family lay in the direct line of descent, and had always, with very trifling and very temporary variation, so lain. It was this deficiency, I considered, while running over in thought the perfect keeping of the character of the premises with the accredited character of the people, and while speculating upon the possible influence which the one, in the long lapse of centuries, might have exercised upon the other— it was this deficiency, perhaps, of collateral issue, and the consequent undeviating transmission, from sire to son, of the patrimony with the name, which had, at length, so identified the two as to merge the original title of the estate in the quaint and equivocal appellation of the "House of Usher"— an appellation which seemed to include, in the minds of the peasantry who used it, both the family and the family mansion.

I have said that the sole effect of my somewhat childish experiment— that of looking down within the tarn— had been to deepen the first singular impression. There can be no doubt that the consciousness of the rapid increase of my superstition— for why should I not so term it?— served mainly to accelerate the increase itself. Such, I have long known, is the paradoxical law of all sentiments having terror as a basis. And it might have been for this reason

only, that, when I again uplifted my eyes to the house itself, from its image in the pool, there grew in my mind a strange fancy— a fancy so ridiculous, indeed, that I but mention it to show the vivid force of the sensations which oppressed me. I had so worked upon my imagination as really to believe that about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate vicinity— an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the gray wall, and the silent tarn— a pestilent and mystic vapor, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued.

Shaking off from my spirit what *must* have been a dream, I scanned more narrowly the real aspect of the building. Its principal feature seemed to be that of an excessive antiquity. The discoloration of ages had been great. Minute fungi overspread the whole exterior, hanging in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves. Yet all this was apart from any extraordinary dilapidation. No portion of the masonry had fallen; and there appeared to be a wild inconsistency between its still perfect adaptation of parts, and the crumbling condition of the individual stones. In this there was much that reminded me of the specious totality of old wood-work which has rotted for long years in some neglected vault, with no disturbance from the breath of the external air. Beyond this indication of extensive decay, however, the fabric gave little token of instability. Perhaps the eye of a scrutinizing observer might have discovered a barely perceptible fissure, which, extending from the roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn.

Noticing these things, I rode over a short causeway to the house. A servant in waiting took my horse, and I entered the Gothic archway of the hall. A valet, of stealthy step, thence conducted me, in silence, through many dark and intricate passages in my progress to the *studio* of his master. Much that I encountered on the way contributed, I know not how, to heighten the vague sentiments of which I have already spoken. While the objects around me— while the carvings of the ceilings, the sombre tapestries of the walls, the ebon blackness of the floors, and the phantasmagoric armorial trophies which rattled as I strode, were but matters to which, or to such as which, I had been accustomed from my infancy— while I hesitated not to acknowledge how familiar was all this— I still wondered to find how unfamiliar were the fancies which ordinary images were stirring up. On one of the staircases, I met the physician of the family. His countenance, I thought, wore a mingled expression of low cunning and perplexity. He accosted me with trepidation and passed on. The valet now threw open a door and ushered me into the presence of his master.

The room in which I found myself was very large and lofty. The windows were long, narrow, and pointed, and at so vast a distance from the black oaken floor as to be altogether inaccessible from within. Feeble gleams of encrimsoned light made their way through the trellissed panes, and served to render sufficiently distinct the more prominent objects around; the eye, however, struggled in vain to reach the remoter angles of the chamber, or the recesses of the vaulted and fretted ceiling. Dark draperies hung upon the walls. The general furniture was profuse, comfortless, antique, and tattered. Many books and musical instruments lay scattered about, but failed to give any vitality to the scene. I felt that I breathed an atmosphere of sorrow. An air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all.

Upon my entrance, Usher arose from a sofa on which he had been lying at full length, and greeted me with a vivacious warmth which had much in it, I at first thought, of an overdone cordiality— of the constrained effort of the *ennuyé* man of the world. A glance, however, at his countenance, convinced me of his perfect sincerity. We sat down; and for some moments, while he spoke not, I gazed upon him with a feeling half of pity, half of awe. Surely, man had never before so terribly altered, in so brief a period, as had Roderick Usher! It was with difficulty that I could bring myself to admit the identity of the wan being before me with the companion of my early boyhood. Yet the character of his face had been at all times remarkable. A cadaverousness of complexion; an eye large, liquid, and luminous beyond comparison; lips somewhat thin and very pallid, but of a surpassingly beautiful curve; a nose of a delicate Hebrew model, but with a breadth of nostril unusual in similar formations; a finely moulded chin, speaking, in its want of prominence, of a want of moral energy; hair of a more than web-like softness and tenuity; these features, with an inordinate expansion above the regions of the temple, made up altogether a countenance not easily to be forgotten. And now in the mere exaggeration of the prevailing character of these features, and of the expression they were wont to convey, lay so much of change that I doubted to whom I spoke. The now ghastly pallor of the skin, and the now miraculous lustre of the eye, above all things startled and even awed me. The silken hair, too, had been suffered to grow all unheeded, and as, in its wild gossamer texture, it floated rather than fell about the face, I could not, even with effort, connect its Arabesque expression with any idea of simple humanity.

In the manner of my friend I was at once struck with an incoherence— an inconsistency; and I soon found this to arise from a series of feeble and futile struggles to overcome an habitual trepidancy— an excessive nervous agitation. For something of this nature I had indeed been prepared, no less by his letter, than by reminiscences of certain boyish traits, and by conclusions deduced

from his peculiar physical conformation and temperament. His action was alternately vivacious and sullen. His voice varied rapidly from a tremulous indecision (when the animal spirits seemed utterly in abeyance) to that species of energetic concision— that abrupt, weighty, unhurried, and hollow-sounding enunciation— that leaden, self-balanced and perfectly modulated guttural utterance, which may be observed in the lost drunkard, or the irreclaimable eater of opium, during the periods of his most intense excitement.

It was thus that he spoke of the object of my visit, of his earnest desire to see me, and of the solace he expected me to afford him. He entered, at some length, into what he conceived to be the nature of his malady. It was, he said, a constitutional and a family evil, and one for which he despaired to find a remedy— a mere nervous affection, he immediately added, which would undoubtedly soon pass off. It displayed itself in a host of unnatural sensations. Some of these, as he detailed them, interested and bewildered me; although, perhaps, the terms, and the general manner of the narration had their weight. He suffered much from a morbid acuteness of the senses; the most insipid food was alone endurable; he could wear only garments of certain texture; the odors of all flowers were oppressive; his eyes were tortured by even a faint light; and there were but peculiar sounds, and these from stringed instruments, which did not inspire him with horror.

To an anomalous species of terror I found him a bounden slave. "I shall perish," said he, "I must perish in this deplorable folly. Thus, thus, and not otherwise, shall I be lost. I dread the events of the future, not in themselves, but in their results. I shudder at the thought of any, even the most trivial, incident, which may operate upon this intolerable agitation of soul. I have, indeed, no abhorrence of danger, except in its absolute effect— in terror. In this unnerved— in this pitiable condition— I feel that the period will sooner or later arrive when I must abandon life and reason together, in some struggle with the grim phantasm, FEAR."

I learned, moreover, at intervals, and through broken and equivocal hints, another singular feature of his mental condition. He was enchained by certain superstitious impressions in regard to the dwelling which he tenanted, and whence, for many years, he had never ventured forth— in regard to an influence whose supposititious force was conveyed in terms too shadowy here to be re-stated— an influence which some peculiarities in the mere form and substance of his family mansion, had, by dint of long sufferance, he said, obtained over his spirit— an effect which the *physique* of the gray walls and turrets, and of the dim tarn into which they all looked down, had, at length, brought about upon the *morale* of his existence.

He admitted, however, although with hesitation, that much of the peculiar gloom which thus afflicted him could be traced to a more natural and far more palpable origin— to the severe and long-continued illness— indeed to the evidently approaching dissolution— of a tenderly beloved sister— his sole companion for long years— his last and only relative on earth. "Her decease," he said, with a bitterness which I can never forget, "would leave him (him the hopeless and the frail) the last of the ancient race of the Ushers." While he spoke, the lady Madeline (for so was she called) passed slowly through a remote portion of the apartment, and, without having noticed my presence, disappeared. I regarded her with an utter astonishment not unmingled with dread— and yet I found it impossible to account for such feelings. A sensation of stupor oppressed me, as my eyes followed her retreating steps. When a door, at length, closed upon her, my glance sought instinctively and eagerly the countenance of the brother— but he had buried his face in his hands, and I could only perceive that a far more than ordinary wanness had overspread the emaciated fingers through which trickled many passionate tears.

The disease of the lady Madeline had long baffled the skill of her physicians. A settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptical character, were the unusual diagnosis. Hitherto she had steadily borne up against the pressure of her malady, and had not betaken herself finally to bed; but, on the closing in of the evening of my arrival at the house, she succumbed (as her brother told me at night with inexpressible agitation) to the prostrating power of the destroyer; and I learned that the glimpse I had obtained of her person would thus probably be the last I should obtain— that the lady, at least while living, would be seen by me no more.

For several days ensuing, her name was unmentioned by either Usher or myself; and during this period I was busied in earnest endeavors to alleviate the melancholy of my friend. We painted and read together; or I listened, as if in a dream, to the wild improvisations of his speaking guitar. And thus, as a closer and still closer intimacy admitted me more unreservedly into the recesses of his spirit, the more bitterly did I perceive the futility of all attempt at cheering a mind from which darkness, as if an inherent positive quality, poured forth upon all objects of the moral and physical universe, in one unceasing radiation of gloom.

I shall ever bear about me a memory of the many solemn hours I thus spent alone with the master of the House of Usher. Yet I should fail in any attempt to convey an idea of the exact character of the studies, or of the occupations, in which he involved me, or led me the way. An excited and highly distempered ideality threw a sulphureous lustre over all. His long improvised

dirges will ring forever in my ears. Among other things, I hold painfully in mind a certain singular perversion and amplification of the wild air of the last waltz of Von Weber. From the paintings over which his elaborate fancy brooded, and which grew, touch by touch, into vaguenesses at which I shuddered the more thrillingly, because I shuddered knowing not why— from these paintings (vivid as their images now are before me) I would in vain endeavor to educe more than a small portion which should lie within the compass of merely written words. By the utter simplicity, by the nakedness of his designs, he arrested and overawed attention. If ever mortal painted an idea, that mortal was Roderick Usher. For me at least— in the circumstances then surrounding me— there arose out of the pure abstractions which the hypochondriac contrived to throw upon his canvass, an intensity of intolerable awe, no shadow of which felt I ever yet in the contemplation of the certainly glowing yet too concrete reveries of Fuseli.

One of the phantasmagoric conceptions of my friend, partaking not so rigidly of the spirit of abstraction, may be shadowed forth, although feebly, in words. A small picture presented the interior of an immensely long and rectangular vault or tunnel, with low walls, smooth, white, and without interruption or device. Certain accessory points of the design served well to convey the idea that this excavation lay at an exceeding depth below the surface of the earth. No outlet was observed in any portion of its vast extent, and no torch, or other artificial source of light was discernible; yet a flood of intense rays rolled throughout, and bathed the whole in a ghastly and inappropriate splendor.

I have just spoken of that morbid condition of the auditory nerve which rendered all music intolerable to the sufferer, with the exception of certain effects of stringed instruments. It was, perhaps, the narrow limits to which he thus confined himself upon the guitar, which gave birth, in great measure, to the fantastic character of his performances. But the fervid *facility* of his *impromptus* could not be so accounted for. They must have been, and were, in the notes, as well as in the words of his wild fantasias (for he not unfrequently accompanied himself with rhymed verbal improvisations), the result of that intense mental collectedness and concentration to which I have previously alluded as observable only in particular moments of the highest artificial excitement. The words of one of these rhapsodies I have easily remembered. I was, perhaps, the more forcibly impressed with it, as he gave it, because, in the under or mystic current of its meaning, I fancied that I perceived, and for the first time, a full consciousness on the part of Usher of the tottering of his lofty reason upon her throne. The verses, which were entitled "The Haunted Palace," ran very nearly, if not accurately, thus:

In the greenest of our valleys,
By good angels tenanted,
Once a fair and stately palace—
Radiant palace— reared its head.
In the monarch Thought's dominion—
It stood there!
Never seraph spread a pinion
Over fabric half so fair.

ii

Banners yellow, glorious, golden,
On its roof did float and flow;
(This— all this— was in the olden
Time long ago)
And every gentle air that dallied,
In that sweet day,
Along the ramparts plumed and pallid,
A winged odor went away.

iii

Wanderers in that happy valley
Through two luminous windows saw
Spirits moving musically
To a lute's well-tunéd law,
Round about a throne, where sitting
(Porphyrogene!)
In state his glory well befitting,
The ruler of the realm was seen.

iv

And all with pearl and ruby glowing
Was the fair palace door,
Through which came flowing, flowing, flowing,
And sparkling evermore,
A troop of Echoes whose sweet duty
Was but to sing,
In voices of surpassing beauty,
The wit and wisdom of their king.

v

But evil things, in robes of sorrow,
Assailed the monarch's high estate;

(Ah, let us mourn, for never morrow
Shall dawn upon him, desolate!)
And, round about his home, the glory
That blushed and bloomed
Is but a dim-remembered story
Of the old time entombed.

vi

And travellers now within that valley,
Through the red-litten windows, see
Vast forms that move fantastically
To a discordant melody;
While, like a rapid ghastly river,
Through the pale door,
A hideous throng rush out forever,
And laugh— but smile no more.

I well remember that suggestions arising from this ballad, led us into a train of thought wherein there became manifest an opinion of Usher's which I mention not so much on account of its novelty, (for other men * have thought thus,) as on account of the pertinacity with which he maintained it. This opinion, in its general form, was that of the sentience of all vegetable things. But, in his disordered fancy, the idea had assumed a more daring character, and trespassed, under certain conditions, upon the kingdom of inorganization. I lack words to express the full extent, or the earnest *abandon* of his persuasion. The belief, however, was connected (as I have previously hinted) with the gray stones of the home of his forefathers. The conditions of the sentience had been here, he imagined, fulfilled in the method of collocation of these stones— in the order of their arrangement, as well as in that of the many *fungi* which overspread them, and of the decayed trees which stood around— above all, in the long undisturbed endurance of this arrangement, and in its reduplication in the still waters of the tarn. Its evidence— the evidence of the sentience— was to be seen, he said, (and I here started as he spoke,) in the gradual yet certain condensation of an atmosphere of their own about the waters and the walls. The result was discoverable, he added, in that silent, yet importunate and terrible influence which for centuries had moulded the destinies of his family, and which made *him* what I now saw him— what he was. Such opinions need no comment, and I will make none.

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** Watson, Dr. Percival, Spallanzani, and especially the Bishop of Landaff.— See "Chemical Essays," vol v.*

Our books— the books which, for years, had formed no small portion of the mental existence of the invalid— were, as might be supposed, in strict keeping with this character of phantasm. We pored together over such works as the Ververt et Chartreuse of Gresset; the Belphegor of Machiavelli; the Heaven and Hell of Swedenborg; the Subterranean Voyage of Nicholas Klimm by Holberg; the Chiromancy of Robert Flud, of Jean D'Indaginé, and of De la Chambre; the Journey into the Blue Distance of Tieck; and the City of the Sun of Campanella. One favorite volume was a small octavo edition of the *Directorium Inquisitorium*, by the Dominican Eymeric de Gironne; and there were passages in Pomponius Mela, about the old African Satyrs and OEgipans, over which Usher would sit dreaming for hours. His chief delight, however, was found in the perusal of an exceedingly rare and curious book in quarto Gothic— the manual of a forgotten church— the *Vigiliae Mortuorum secundum Chorum Ecclesiae Maguntinae*.

I could not help thinking of the wild ritual of this work, and of its probable influence upon the hypochondriac, when, one evening, having informed me abruptly that the lady Madeline was no more, he stated his intention of preserving her corpse for a fortnight, (previously to its final interment,) in one of the numerous vaults within the main walls of the building. The worldly reason, however, assigned for this singular proceeding, was one which I did not feel at liberty to dispute. The brother had been led to his resolution (so he told me) by consideration of the unusual character of the malady of the deceased, of certain obtrusive and eager inquiries on the part of her medical men, and of the remote and exposed situation of the burial-ground of the family. I will not deny that when I called to mind the sinister countenance of the person whom I met upon the staircase, on the day of my arrival at the house, I had no desire to oppose what I regarded as at best but a harmless, and by no means an unnatural, precaution.

At the request of Usher, I personally aided him in the arrangements for the temporary entombment. The body having been encoffined, we two alone bore it to its rest. The vault in which we placed it (and which had been so long unopened that our torches, half smothered in its oppressive atmosphere, gave us little opportunity for investigation) was small, damp, and entirely without means of admission for light; lying, at great depth, immediately beneath that portion of the building in which was my own sleeping apartment. It had been used, apparently, in remote feudal times, for the worst purposes of a donjon-keep, and, in later days, as a place of deposit for powder, or some other highly combustible substance, as a portion of its floor, and the whole interior of a long archway through which we reached it, were carefully sheathed with copper. The door, of massive iron, had been, also, similarly protected. Its

immense weight caused an unusually sharp grating sound, as it moved upon its hinges.

Having deposited our mournful burden upon tressels within this region of horror, we partially turned aside the yet unscrewed lid of the coffin, and looked upon the face of the tenant. A striking similitude between the brother and sister now first arrested my attention; and Usher, divining, perhaps, my thoughts, murmured out some few words from which I learned that the deceased and himself had been twins, and that sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature had always existed between them. Our glances, however, rested not long upon the dead— for we could not regard her unawed. The disease which had thus entombed the lady in the maturity of youth, had left, as usual in all maladies of a strictly cataleptical character, the mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and the face, and that suspiciously lingering smile upon the lip which is so terrible in death. We replaced and screwed down the lid, and, having secured the door of iron, made our way, with toil, into the scarcely less gloomy apartments of the upper portion of the house.

And now, some days of bitter grief having elapsed, an observable change came over the features of the mental disorder of my friend. His ordinary manner had vanished. His ordinary occupations were neglected or forgotten. He roamed from chamber to chamber with hurried, unequal, and objectless step. The pallor of his countenance had assumed, if possible, a more ghastly hue— but the luminousness of his eye had utterly gone out. The once occasional huskiness of his tone was heard no more; and a tremulous quaver, as if of extreme terror, habitually characterized his utterance. There were times, indeed, when I thought his unceasingly agitated mind was laboring with some oppressive secret, to divulge which he struggled for the necessary courage. At times, again, I was obliged to resolve all into the mere inexplicable vagaries of madness, for I beheld him gazing upon vacancy for long hours, in an attitude of the profoundest attention, as if listening to some imaginary sound. It was no wonder that his condition terrified— that it infected me. I felt creeping upon me, by slow yet certain degrees, the wild influences of his own fantastic yet impressive superstitions.

It was, especially, upon retiring to bed late in the night of the seventh or eighth day after the placing of the lady Madeline within the donjon, that I experienced the full power of such feelings. Sleep came not near my couch— while the hours waned and waned away. I struggled to reason off the nervousness which had dominion over me. I endeavored to believe that much, if not all of what I felt, was due to the bewildering influence of the gloomy furniture of the room— of the dark and tattered draperies, which, tortured into motion by the breath of a rising tempest, swayed fitfully to and fro upon

the walls, and rustled uneasily about the decorations of the bed. But my efforts were fruitless. An irrepressible tremor gradually pervaded my frame; and, at length, there sat upon my very heart an incubus of utterly causeless alarm. Shaking this off with a gasp and a struggle, I uplifted myself upon the pillows, and, peering earnestly within the intense darkness of the chamber, harkened— I know not why, except that an instinctive spirit prompted me— to certain low and indefinite sounds which came, through the pauses of the storm, at long intervals, I knew not whence. Overpowered by an intense sentiment of horror, unaccountable yet unendurable, I threw on my clothes with haste (for I felt that I should sleep no more during the night), and endeavored to arouse myself from the pitiable condition into which I had fallen, by pacing rapidly to and fro through the apartment.

I had taken but few turns in this manner, when a light step on an adjoining staircase arrested my attention. I presently recognised it as that of Usher. In an instant afterward he rapped, with a gentle touch, at my door, and entered, bearing a lamp. His countenance was, as usual, cadaverously wan— but, moreover, there was a species of mad hilarity in his eyes— an evidently restrained *hysteria* in his whole demeanor. His air appalled me— but anything was preferable to the solitude which I had so long endured, and I even welcomed his presence as a relief.

"And you have not seen it?" he said abruptly, after having stared about him for some moments in silence— "you have not then seen it?— but, stay! you shall." Thus speaking, and having carefully shaded his lamp, he hurried to one of the casements, and threw it freely open to the storm.

The impetuous fury of the entering gust nearly lifted us from our feet. It was, indeed, a tempestuous yet sternly beautiful night, and one wildly singular in its terror and its beauty. A whirlwind had apparently collected its force in our vicinity; for there were frequent and violent alterations in the direction of the wind; and the exceeding density of the clouds (which hung so low as to press upon the turrets of the house) did not prevent our perceiving the life-like velocity with which they flew careering from all points against each other, without passing away into the distance. I say that even their exceeding density did not prevent our perceiving this— yet we had no glimpse of the moon or stars— nor was there any flashing forth of the lightning. But the under surfaces of the huge masses of agitated vapor, as well as all terrestrial objects immediately around us, were glowing in the unnatural light of a faintly luminous and distinctly visible gaseous exhalation which hung about and enshrouded the mansion.

"You must not— you shall not behold this!" said I, shudderingly, to Usher, as I led him, with a gentle violence, from the window to a seat. "These

appearances, which bewilder you, are merely electrical phenomena not uncommon— or it may be that they have their ghastly origin in the rank miasma of the tarn. Let us close this casement;— the air is chilling and dangerous to your frame. Here is one of your favorite romances. I will read, and you shall listen;— and so we will pass away this terrible night together."

The antique volume which I had taken up was the "Mad Trist" of Sir Launcelot Canning; but I had called it a favorite of Usher's more in sad jest than in earnest; for, in truth, there is little in its uncouth and unimaginative prolixity which could have had interest for the lofty and spiritual ideality of my friend. It was, however, the only book immediately at hand; and I indulged a vague hope that the excitement which now agitated the hypochondriac, might find relief (for the history of mental disorder is full of similar anomalies) even in the extremeness of the folly which I should read. Could I have judged, indeed, by the wild overstrained air of vivacity with which he harkened, or apparently harkened, to the words of the tale, I might well have congratulated myself upon the success of my design.

I had arrived at that well-known portion of the story where Ethelred, the hero of the Trist, having sought in vain for peaceable admission into the dwelling of the hermit, proceeds to make good an entrance by force. Here, it will be remembered, the words of the narrative run thus:

"And Ethelred, who was by nature of a doughty heart, and who was now mighty withal, on account of the powerfulness of the wine which he had drunken, waited no longer to hold parley with the hermit, who, in sooth, was of an obstinate and maliceful turn, but, feeling the rain upon his shoulders, and fearing the rising of the tempest, uplifted his mace outright, and, with blows, made quickly room in the plankings of the door for his gauntleted hand; and now pulling therewith sturdily, he so cracked, and ripped, and tore all asunder, that the noise of the dry and hollow-sounding wood alarummed and reverberated throughout the forest."

At the termination of this sentence I started, and for a moment, paused; for it appeared to me (although I at once concluded that my excited fancy had deceived me)— it appeared to me that, from some very remote portion of the mansion, there came, indistinctly, to my ears, what might have been, in its exact similarity of character, the echo (but a stifled and dull one certainly) of the very cracking and ripping sound which Sir Launcelot had so particularly described. It was, beyond doubt, the coincidence alone which had arrested my attention; for, amid the rattling of the sashes of the casements, and the ordinary commingled noises of the still increasing storm, the sound, in itself, had nothing, surely, which should have interested or disturbed me. I continued the story:

"But the good champion Ethelred, now entering within the door, was sore enraged and amazed to perceive no signal of the maliceful hermit; but, in the stead thereof, a dragon of a scaly and prodigious demeanor, and of a fiery tongue, which sate in guard before a palace of gold, with a floor of silver; and upon the wall there hung a shield of shining brass with this legend enwritten—

Who entereth herein, a conqueror hath bin;
Who slayeth the dragon, the shield he shall win;

And Ethelred uplifted his mace, and struck upon the head of the dragon, which fell before him, and gave up his pesty breath, with a shriek so horrid and harsh, and withal so piercing, that Ethelred had fain to close his ears with his hands against the dreadful noise of it, the like whereof was never before heard."

Here again I paused abruptly, and now with a feeling of wild amazement— for there could be no doubt whatever that, in this instance, I did actually hear (although from what direction it proceeded I found it impossible to say) a low and apparently distant, but harsh, protracted, and most unusual screaming or grating sound— the exact counterpart of what my fancy had already conjured up for the dragon's unnatural shriek as described by the romancer.

Oppressed, as I certainly was, upon the occurrence of this second and most extraordinary coincidence, by a thousand conflicting sensations, in which wonder and extreme terror were predominant, I still retained sufficient presence of mind to avoid exciting, by any observation, the sensitive nervousness of my companion. I was by no means certain that he had noticed the sounds in question; although, assuredly, a strange alteration had, during the last few minutes, taken place in his demeanor. From a position fronting my own, he had gradually brought round his chair, so as to sit with his face to the door of the chamber; and thus I could but partially perceive his features, although I saw that his lips trembled as if he were murmuring inaudibly. His head had dropped upon his breast— yet I knew that he was not asleep, from the wide and rigid opening of the eye as I caught a glance of it in profile. The motion of his body, too, was at variance with this idea— for he rocked from side to side with a gentle yet constant and uniform sway. Having rapidly taken notice of all this, I resumed the narrative of Sir Launcelot, which thus proceeded:

"And now, the champion, having escaped from the terrible fury of the dragon, bethinking himself of the brazen shield, and of the breaking up of the enchantment which was upon it, removed the carcass from out of the way before him, and approached valorously over the silver pavement of the castle to where the shield was upon the wall; which in sooth tarried not for his full

coming, but fell down at his feet upon the silver floor, with a mighty great and terrible ringing sound."

No sooner had these syllables passed my lips, than— as if a shield of brass had indeed, at the moment, fallen heavily upon a floor of silver— I became aware of a distinct, hollow, metallic, and clangorous, yet apparently muffled reverberation. Completely unnerved, I leaped to my feet; but the measured rocking movement of Usher was undisturbed. I rushed to the chair in which he sat. His eyes were bent fixedly before him, and throughout his whole countenance there reigned a stony rigidity. But, as I placed my hand upon his shoulder, there came a strong shudder over his whole person; a sickly smile quivered about his lips; and I saw that he spoke in a low, hurried, and gibbering murmur, as if unconscious of my presence. Bending closely over him, I at length drank in the hideous import of his words.

"Not hear it?— yes, I hear it, and *have* heard it. Long— long— long— many minutes, many hours, many days, have I heard it— yet I dared not— oh, pity me, miserable wretch that I am!— I dared not— I *dared* not speak! *We have put her living in the tomb!* Said I not that my senses were acute? I *now* tell you that I heard her first feeble movements in the hollow coffin. I heard them— many, many days ago— yet I dared not— *I dared not speak!* And now— to-night— Ethelred— ha! ha!— the breaking of the hermit's door, and the death-cry of the dragon, and the clangor of the shield!— say, rather, the rending of her coffin, and the grating of the iron hinges of her prison, and her struggles within the coppered archway of the vault! Oh whither shall I fly? Will she not be here anon? Is she not hurrying to upbraid me for my haste? Have I not heard her footstep on the stair? Do I not distinguish that heavy and horrible beating of her heart? Madman!"— here he sprang furiously to his feet, and shrieked out his syllables, as if in the effort he were giving up his soul— "*Madman! I tell you that she now stands without the door!*"

As if in the superhuman energy of his utterance there had been found the potency of a spell— the huge antique pannels to which the speaker pointed, threw slowly back, upon the instant, their ponderous and ebony jaws. It was the work of the rushing gust— but then without those doors there *did* stand the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher. There was blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame. For a moment she remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold— then, with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated.

From that chamber, and from that mansion, I fled aghast. The storm was still abroad in all its wrath as I found myself crossing the old causeway. Suddenly there shot along the path a wild light, and I turned to see whence a gleam so unusual could have issued; for the vast house and its shadows were alone behind me. The radiance was that of the full, setting, and blood-red moon, which now shone vividly through that once barely-discernible fissure, of which I have before spoken as extending from the roof of the building, in a zigzag direction, to the base. While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened— there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind— the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight— my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder— there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters— and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the "*House of Usher*."

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13: The Rescue

Elinor Mordaunt

Evelyn May Clowes, 1872-1942

Australian Women's Weekly 17 July 1937

MARIAN POWELL prided herself— and a fierce pride was her chief characteristic— on two things her coolness and her ability to take care of herself. She also had a sneaking fancy, a queer conceit, that she was able to make herself practically invisible by what she called her "protective coloring."

"There is a great deal to be said in favor of being an old woman— "thirty-three— "responsible to no one for one's actions"— she was a widow— "and perfectly plain."

This was what she said, adding that she could go anywhere, among people of any sort of nationality, and pass unnoticed.

And it was a fact that wearing a double felt hat, such as English women affect in the tropics, with a neutral-colored, native-silk dress she was easily merged into any sort of crowd.

She was the only English woman on the steamer from Saigon.

Reaching Djibouti rather before noon, the Health and Customs officials boarded the ship, spent some time in the saloon over their *dejeuner*, and emerging— picking their teeth— examined the French passengers' eyes, and supplied them with little pink tickets allowing them to go ashore, which they did, in the blazing heat of the day. The women wore coquettish little hats, tight, high-heeled shoes and tight, silk dresses; the men, white suits and immense solar topees; the innumerable children were, as usual, whining and perfectly unmanageable.

With a sigh of intense relief Marian Powell retired to her cabin and lay down, conscious of the first pleasant silence she had known for some weeks.

SHE was a cool and seasoned traveller, a little superior, and she knew what to do. They would not be sailing until after midnight.

By dinner-time, at six-thirty, all the French passengers were back, tired out and very cross. It was then that Marian finished her dinner and went ashore. No one saw her go, for the *maître d'équipage* and fourth officer in charge of the gangway were standing with their backs to her, arguing, and she hailed her own native boat.

She had not cared to wait for her after-dinner coffee on board ship All the same, she did not care to go without it, and, climbing the steep, gravelly slope, disregarding the French hotel to her left, she made her way to the native quarters, turned into a large, open-sided Arab cafe at the first corner she came to

The place, dimly lighted by hanging-lamps, with dark, murky shadows and occasional beams of amber light, was crowded with men sitting on cushions or on the bare, earthen floor. There were men of every gradation of color and race; hideous, grinning blacks from Timbuctoo, bearded Arabs in voluminous, cream colored, woollen draperies, who took no more notice of her than if she had been invisible, and Somalis, undisguisedly staring, with immense heads of hair, wearing nothing apart from a loin-cloth.

Glancing round, however, there was one man leaning against a post who might have been an Arab, but with lighter eyes, a squarer jaw than is generally seen, whose glance met hers, mocking and amused. In a moment Marian Powell's spirit stiffened. Here was the sort of man she just could not do with, unveiling, almost undressing her.

"A renegade of some sort," she thought scornfully, and, turning away her head with her chin in the air, she passed on through a wide arch, picked her way, perfectly un-embarrassed, among the group of men. Into the kitchen beyond the cafe.

Marian asked for a cup of coffee, and stood there eating and drinking, amused and perfectly at ease. When some of the rougher sort came in from the cafe and crowded round her, she told them in French to be off.

"I'm not French, I'm English," she told them, and when they retreated she was pleased. She was proud of being an Englishwoman. "One can always go where one likes, do what one likes, If only one keeps a stiff upper lip," she thought.

Passing out of the cafe, a small boy who had followed her, smiling contemptuously at the defeat of his fellows, offered to show her the way to "The Street of the Dancing Women." She signed her assent.

By now the night was complete, with its large, perfectly clear moon.

Sheik in the Desert

its green-blue sky and velvet black shadows.

In the Street of the Dancing Women there was the thin sound of stringed instruments, the Insistent throb of a single drum. The women were beautifully graceful and lithe, with shining, copper skins, their hair dressed In innumerable minute plaits, the partings showing a clear pattern over their small heads. They wore tightly-drawn saris reaching to their feet and short, light muslin bodices. They crowded round Marian, and, under the Instruction of her small guide, she picked four, adding, for the fun of the thing, a fat, elderly woman with a grotesquely laughing face.

They went into a small house with a single room, lighted by a hanging lamp, and Marian was helped up on to a high bunk, very clean, with mattress and pillows covered with printed cotton stuff. This left the room clear, and the

women went into a corner, dropped off their saris, and discarded their bodices, and began to dance in a semi-circle, the old woman last, mocking and imitating.

Marian turned on her side, propped on one elbow, and watched them. She had travelled much and had seen many strange sights. But here was one of the strangest.

Round and round and round they went, bending from the waist to the side, and then backwards and forwards so that they almost touched the ground. They were all like an animated string of bronzed beads with the old woman as the queen bead.

The worst of it was the heat, the smell of music and paraffin. A queer, tranced feeling that nothing was real came over Marian.

She shifted the arm supporting her head so that she might lean over the edge of the bunk, clap her hands to the dancing women, and tell them to stop dancing, and so break the monotony that was making her giddy.

In place of raising herself, however, she sank lower and still lower until her head dropped on the pillows, which had a queer scent like cloves.

It seemed to Marian Powell that she was back on the steamer, which was pitching more sharply than usual. For the first time in her life she felt horribly seasick, as though her Inside was turning over and over.

The ship stopped, and, after all. it was not a ship at all but a camel.

Someone Jerked her upright, as though she had been a bundle of merchandise, undid the cords that cut into her, and loosened her heavy draperies.

A man on a horse came up to her. He raised himself in his stirrups, and, at a word, a boy brought a half gourd of water. The man held it to her lips, and, after she had drunk, he splashed it over her face and laughed.

"Make my camel kneel down," she commanded, believing that if only she could get her feet on firm ground again she would be mistress of the situation.

But the man only laughed.

"There's time enough for that when we get a little farther; cover your face if you want to save your life," he commanded, and cantered on ahead, while the men with the camels at either side of her jerked her into a cross-legged position and thrust her feet into slipper-like stirrups.

Someone gave her beast a blow on the rump, and it lurched forward, started off again on its sickening gallop.

Somewhere about midday the cavalcade stopped at a small oasis.

Getting off her camel, staggering round and round in circles as though she were drunk, uncertain of her feet, horribly stiff and giddy with the heat. Marian sat down until she was more sure of herself. She drank some strong

black coffee, ate the camel's milk cheese offered to her, and then— more sure of herself— got up and confronted her captor, who was sitting placidly on the ground, eating and drinking, with his back against a palm-tree.

"Look here," she began, her small face flashed with the heat— with anger- her eyes brilliant. "This may be some sort of joke, but it's finished. I've had enough. Now take me back."

"I THINK not."

The stranger glanced at her coolly. "You will only make yourself ill if you get excited here in the heat of the day."

With a furious gesture— most angry with herself for being so angry— Marian moved away and sat down under a palm. Whatever happened she would not sleep, she would keep her eyes open. It was certain that she would be missed from the steamer and a search-party sent out.

For all her determination she felt as though her body was crumbling away with her; her spine gave out, she sank to the ground and dropped into a deep sleep.

When she awoke she found that the shade of the palm had shifted and that someone had put up a shelter of triple grass matting above her head. The men were reloading the camels; some of them were filling skins at the well, the drops of water gleaming like diamonds in the low light of the late afternoon.

Away in the distance, across a stretch of sand which was already golden, rode a solitary horseman: a man who had ridden on, leaving her— Marian Powell— like a bale of unconsidered merchandise to be hoisted on to her camel by his servants.

"Oh, well, he'll pay for it in the end!" she thought.

Somewhere about eight o'clock, she calculated, they stopped again, and Marian got off her camel to stretch her legs. She drank a little water and ate a few figs. But this time the halt was for less than a quarter of an hour, for a troop of horsemen arriving with spare horses burdens were transferred, and once more they pressed on in the darkness.

THE path grew more and more narrow, more and more steep. They were forced to move in single file and the stones rattled away beneath her horse's feet. In places she was obliged to lean forward and twist her hands in the horse's mane to keep herself from falling off backwards.

There was another deep ravine, another mountain beyond it. And on the side of this mountain, on a shelf-like plateau, full in the moon-light, appeared the most amazing city, so strangely beautiful that it was more like a dream

than a reality. Tall, square towers, tapering towards the top. low, round buildings all alike, painted in large, clear squares of black and white, dazzling in the moonlight.

Next morning her courage had returned. Of course, the French would make every effort to find her. With the thought of British gun-boats in her mind, she went to one of the long, narrow windows and stared out. Immediately beneath her was a steep valley with almond trees in blossom and palm trees. There was grass, too— actual grass— laced over with what looked like tall white daisies, and mountain sheep feeding. Beyond that was the rocky mountain they had come down the night before.

She passed into the next room and from the window there saw the length of the ravine, ending in a bright shimmer, not the sea, but illimitable desert. She gave a wry smile at herself for thinking of gun-boats.

The outer door of the second room was locked. It was opened by a jet black man in an immensely high fez, who admitted a woman with a tray of coffee and bread and dates. He handed in jug after jug of water with which she filled the huge, earthenware jar in the tiled bathing recess. Then, while the woman was sweeping, tidying the rooms, shaking up cushions, he opened the door, again and gave her an immense bunch of roses to put in water.

Even when, after luncheon and a long sleep, her captor came to see her, it was difficult to beat herself up to any sort of indignation. Oh, well if this man chose to keep her for nothing, let him, she told herself.

The woman had brought tea, and it amused her to ask him to sit down, to inquire if he took sugar, to make light conversation.

Tea finished, she rose and looked out of the window down the ravine. "All this"— she indicated it with a gesture— "ends where?"

"In the desert. No, not at the sea," answered the man standing behind her, as if he had read her thoughts. "I kept the outer door locked in case you should run yourself to death among the rocks. It will remain open now."

He was so close that, although he did not lay a hand upon her, something in his nearness shook Marian and sent the blood flaming up in her

"All the same, I would like a little fresh air occasionally," she said, moving aside, trying to speak lightly.

"We can ride; we can go for a ride this evening if you like."

"Well, what am I to do about this?" She indicated the Arab draperies she had found put ready for her in place of her own crumpled and dust-stained clothes.

"I have some boys' jodhpurs and a shirt, if they will be of any use," he said, and when Marian answered In the affirmative, he added that he would send

them in, and would expect her in half an hour. At the door he turned. "I suppose I ought to introduce myself. My name's Harcourt— Richard Harcourt."

He made a half-mocking, half-shy bow, and Marian, quick to realise this shyness, responded coolly:

"Marian Powell— Mrs. Powell, supposedly - say superficially" — she shrugged her shoulders— "at your service'"

He laughed.

"I saw the light on your wedding ring in the cafe, and took it you were free, or you would not have been careering about the world alone."

"Yes, I am free," answered Marian. "It's the very devil, this freedom isn't it? No one to miss one, to know whether one's alive or dead."

Later on, dismounting from their horses, wandering about the garden in the ravine which he had made by damming up a spring, turning it into a basin, with an overflowing stream growing roses and carnations, cosmos, marigolds, zinnias, jessamine and spotted, climbing red-and-white lilies— a vivid, silken patch upon this bareness of the rocky hillside— hi told her of his own life. How he had married as a very young man losing his wife a year later at the birth of their son. How for his sake he had beaten himself down to the dull life of a country squire, always apart, always hating it, until, during his first year at a public school, the boy had contracted phthisis, and he had brought him out to Northern Africa, where he died.

AFTER his son's death everything had seemed ended, and he had wandered about learning Arabic, his one interest in life a growing liking for the Arab: until at last, becoming too daring, he had been taken prisoner by the people of this strange, dream-like town.

He was not looking at Marian as he spoke. He sat by the water, one elbow on his knee, his chin in his hand, staring in front of him, and she thought she had never seen more tragic face— like the mountain-side swept by the wind, baked by the sun— with those strange, brilliant eyes.

"The old chief died," he went on, "and after a few months his only son was killed. They are strange people; they will have nothing to do with any of the tribes from outside. I seemed to have found a niche for myself. There were any amount of things I could do for the people, and I buckled to. I made my life here, sent home for books and things. I was in Djibouti meeting some stuff— when— when— Oh well, I thought I was contented, h I suppose I wasn't, not really, or wouldn't have been so mad."

"How mad?"

"Well, mad enough to carry you off in that theatrical fashion. It was a fool's trick."

Marian did not answer. On the top of herself, she felt that now was the time to challenge him, demand that she should be taken back to civilisation. Yet what was civilisation?

Her companion's words came back to her.

"What's the good of freedom, after all?"

With an effort she backed away from the question and rose to her feet, shivering a little.

"It's getting chilly, I think."

"Yes, we'd better get back. We'll go farther to-morrow."

Richard Harcourt went after the horses, which had wandered along the water's edge, brought them back with the reins looped over his arm and helped her to mount.

Marian was perfectly aware that what she ought to have said was:

"But to-morrow we shall be starting off for Djibouti. The joke's come to an end, you realise that?"

It seemed so easy, and yet, some reason or other, she could force herself to the fatigue, the boredom of anything so definite.

THE two of them dined together in an immense room: a delicious dinner. Because it was cold, they sat together over a fire of dried camel dung and played chess, the only game Marian had ever really cared for.

In the night, however, she had a ridiculous dream. She dreamt that she was being rescued by French soldiers, who were tearing her away, not from captivity, but from Harcourt's arms.

Awakening, she put her hands to her cheeks, and found them flaming hot, and, turning on her side to bury her face in the soft pillows, she laughed to herself— laughed and cried a little.

Every day they rode together. More than once they started off almost before dawn on to a wide plateau topping the mountains above the town, hunted small buck with a following of Arabs in flying burnouses, with a pack of wiry mongrel hounds; and then, in an air like champagne, it seemed that life whipped through her, clearly and freshly, as though she were a young girl.

Harcourt himself held a sort of sick parade every morning, treating the inflamed eyes, the dreadful sores, calling upon her help with the occasional fractures. It was Harcourt who, by means of a pump which raised water to the town— had made it possible for the women to keep themselves and their children clean, wash their clothes at the fountain he had built, water tiny pockets of gardens among the rocks.

THE thought came to her— grew and even obsessed her— that if the party of rescuers from Djibouti, which she had once counted upon, discovered her, took Harcourt prisoner— and, to her own annoyance, she no longer thought of him, spoke to him even, as anything but Richard— there would be an end to all his work, and the people would drift back to their old state of precarious living, semi-savagery.

It was possible that she only realised how happy she and Harcourt had been together when, almost imperceptibly, the atmosphere began to change, an awkwardness grew up between them. It seemed as though they must start all over again on another basis if they were to achieve anything. The thought of French soldiers sweeping upon them from Djibouti, destroying all Richard's work, became an obsession with Marian.

Almost every night she dreamt of it, awoke in terror, while she realised from his restless nervousness, from the way in which he would let a joke drop suddenly, would forget a move at chess, that Harcourt was infected in the same way.

It was when they were at chess, indeed, that the thing came to a point, was put into words:

"It's your move now," he said, and sat back, staring at her curiously, when it was not her move at all. Then, as she said nothing, her trembling fingers hovering uncertainly over the pieces, he tipped up the board, sending them rolling on the floor.

"I give it up," he cried. "Checkmate to you," and would say no more that evening beyond: "Do you imagine I don't realise it? The game's at an end. The devil of it is caring— caring so frightfully."

He walked over to one of the long, narrow windows and stood staring out with folded arms.

When Marian moved to his side, however, put a hand upon him, he shook it off, crying out:

"No, no— not like that! I was a fool, a mad fool— like a boy stealing an apple he's unable to eat!"— which hurt her horribly.

Next morning he came to her room, very stiff and cold. They would be starting on their way down to Djibouti just before dawn next day, he announced. The best thing she could do was to rest and prepare herself.

"But even if I do go—"

Marian was utterly taken aback; it was as though she were dealing with a complete stranger.

"You are going."

"Well, even so, it's impossible for you to come, too. It would mean all sorts of trouble for you."

"It will mean all sorts of trouble, and worse— looting, any sort of thing for the people here if— if I remain," he said. He added: "To-morrow morning, then," and slammed out of the door, opening it again, shooting in the words: "I told you it was your move, and you made no move," and once more he banged it to.

When Marian followed him, wandered about the rambling place seeking for him, he was nowhere to be found.

It was blazing hot on the mountain-side; the heat from the rocks struck upon her like an open oven door. The loose stones rolled away beneath her feet, the others, set and jagged, cut through her soft shoes. She kept twisting her ankle so that each moment she thought she might sprain it or break her leg.

One half of her thought:

"This is nonsense. I must go back." The other half, with stupid obstinacy, forced her on. "Now, I've started," she said to herself, as though that meant anything.

At last, streaming with perspiration, she reached the garden, sat down by the stream, took off her head-cloth and cloak, and felt the deliciously freshened air about her bare neck and arms.

A feeling of complete emptiness overcame her. It seemed as though she were hung in space, a nobody, of nowhere.

Through this desolation of the soul, like a sharp tang in a brass bowl, came the actual sound of horses' hoofs. Oh, well, after all, Harcourt had missed her, was coming to seek her. There was still time to spare.

Here at the water's edge they could come to some real understanding.

The clatter of hoofs drew nearer, and yet nearer. All the same, they were a long while coming; there were many more than one horse. The place was so full of echoes that it was impossible for Marian actually to place any particular sound, but suddenly she sprang to her feet, listening so intently that it was a pain to listen. She pressed her hand against her heart in an endeavor to stop the sound of its beating, the thud of pulses in her head.

It was in reality no distance from the town. The sound must have been far away when she had first heard it. It seemed that she must have wasted hours before she became certain that the clatter was not on the town-path at all, but on the mountainside behind her, was by now very near. She could hear the rattle of falling stones, men's voices.

Her first idea was a mad one; to get away up to the town again and have the great gates shut behind her. With an immense effort of will she pulled herself together, forcing herself to something of her usual coolness, and the very effort calmed her, like a draught of cold water.

A knot of red-eyed, dusty French soldiers pushed their way in among the trees of the oasis, their reins hanging loosely on their horses' necks, already stretched out towards the sweet-smelling water. The men stared half-blindly at the white woman, with her head draperies thrown back, her hands full of flowers; then, too exhausted to take any great Interest in anything, they flung themselves off their horses, lay down on their stomachs by the stream, drinking, splashing water over their faces.

An officer rode up, dismounted, and stood for a moment or so, balancing himself with straddled legs, too shaken with the long ride, the blazing sun, to be sure of the ground beneath his feet, while his horse, with trailing reins, moved off to join its fellows at the water.

The officer— his face raw with sand and sun, taking off his sun helmet, wiping round inside it, pushing his handkerchief down in between his neck and the collar of his tunic— stared at Marian, his prominent dark eyes popping, completely taken aback.

"You are Madame Powell? But, yes, you must be. There could be no other white ladies here. But we— my Government had thought— feared—"

"Yes, I am Madame Powell." With a gesture of weakness and surrender, not altogether false, for her knees were shaking under her, Marian sank down on the grass. "You must forgive me, monsieur. I am still very tired. I have been through a terrible— yes, a terrible time."

She closed her eyes for a moment, and, opening them again, saw a look of complacent self-satisfaction spread over the young man's face.

"Then I must congratulate myself and my brave men, madame— my Government, too. It has spared no trouble, no expense. Believe me, madame, we have had scouts out all over the country ever since the news came through from your steamer. It seems that you were not missed that first night at sea. Of course, being men— knowing these Arabs we had fears, grave fears— the gravest. But— What is it, madame?"

Involuntarily, Marian had turned her head a little sideways, was listening. The sound she heard was so perfectly distinct that she wondered how it was possible for her to have been mistaken before. A horse was being ridden at a reckless, scrambling trot down the path from the town.

At that moment her brain started to work like a knife, and she rose to her feet, gazed at the young officer with wide, tragic eyes.

"Alas, monsieur, it is impossible to tell you what I have been through since I was carried away from Djibouti," she said, with the words "Liar! Liar!" screaming at her from the back of her own brain. "If I had not been rescued three weeks or more ago by one of my fellow-countrymen, who appears to be a sort of king here, and nursed back to life in the sanctuary of that lovely

city"— she pointed to the black-and-white towers showing above them— "Heaven only knows what might have happened to me."

A sense of passionate reality swept aside her pretence. After all, she had been rescued, really rescued from something worse than death, the dreadful loneliness of a solitary woman. And that town— that lovely dream-city— was it not worth any sort of a lie to save it?

THE young officer's face had fallen.

"You mean you were rescued before— before—"

Harcourt was already riding in among the trees, and he glanced from one to another with sharp suspicion. "Madame, I think you might at least have informed my Government."

"But, *monsieur le Capitaine*, I was dreadfully ill, utterly broken. As it is, everything has been arranged for us to start off down to the port tomorrow."

She glanced at Harcourt, who had dismounted and was moving towards them, his horse's reins over his arm.

The soldiers, with dripping tunics, had risen, were staring at him. twenty and more of them.

A sense of panic swept over Marian. She knew what she had planned to do, but she had no sort of idea what Harcourt's attitude might be.

Moving to his side she laid one hand on his arm.

"Richard, this is Captain— Captain—"

She hesitated and the young officer supplied the name, with a stiff little bow.

"Rambert, madame— Captain Andre Rambert, at your service."

Young as he was, he was no sort of a fool, and his bloodshot eyes were raking Harcourt, who stood there, silent, staring down at Marian's hand as though it were something dropped on his sleeve by mistake, looking very cross— not angry, but just cross.

In a sudden panic, she thought. "If he fails me now we are done for," and she pressed closer, clinging to him.

"And this, Captain Rambert, is Mr. Harcourt, who rescued me from those dreadful Arabs at the risk— the greatest possible risk— of his own life. As I said," she dashed on— "as I said, it was arranged that we should start off down to Djibouti at dawn, but I think, in the circumstances, we owe it to you to tell you something more, don't we, Richard?"

She glanced up at Harcourt's face, set like stone, and added— more frightened and uncertain than she had ever been in all her life before:

"We are going to be married. We had planned it— in Djibouti— you understand," she stammered lamely, breaking off with a sob of relief as she

felt Richard Harcourt's arm about her shoulders and realised the sudden stream of passionate warmth and understanding which instantly broke loose and flowed between them, the most unmistakable realisation the world can give.

"After all, that's what I rescued her for, you know," he remarked with perfect coolness.

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14: The Wild Star

Henry Leverage

Carl Henry, 1879-1931

All-Story Weekly 29 Dec 1917

THERE are cracksmen and cracksmen. There is the beetle-brow yegg who is half hobo and half venturesome. Then there is the professional who was once a machinist or a blaster. Perhaps he was crossed in love, or didn't believe in the sign: "Burglar Proof." He had become peeved at the safe-makers, and spoiled their finest designs.

This tribe had quite a time until the police and the "Pinks" of the middle West got busy and rounded them up.

The history of "gopher-work" is a long series. of triumph and disaster. The safemakers were confronted with the same problem that faced the armor-plate manufacturers— that which man had put together, man could tear apart. The race was long and keen till the time of the "cannon-ball" and the up-to-date balanced-relay protection. Then the "best in the world" started doing time with monotonous regularity, and the jig was up, save for the master minds.

It was for this reason that Calvin Cole swung aboard the limited for Chicago in search of a master mind. He had left that in Brookfield which was boiling and simmering, and was liable to destroy him. The energetic and painstaking district attorney nursed a safe full of papers, ready to spring an explosion that would rock the county, and fill the empty cells of the State prison.

Calvin Cole's name was on a number of these "bedplates," as he called them. Their existence spelled stripes for him.

He had considered the gathering storm from a score of directions. He could flee the county— there was time for that— but they would catch him as sure as they caught Tweed. Also, there was much in Brookfield worth holding. Brookfield was his home town. He had been born there. They had made him mayor. He looked the part. One thing only he had overlooked. Honest men had slipped into high office, with a rebel yell of: "Turn the rascal out!"

They had enough on him to give him life and fifty years. A county clerk had turned informer; another henchman had made a confession, while a third had given the full details of a traction grab in a series of checks and vouchers that made for conviction.

This last was the item that worried Calvin Cole. The rest could be fixed. There was no getting away from the grab save the destruction of the papers in the case. He had started for Chicago with this in view. Surely, he reasoned, the daily reports of that town showed there were men capable of ripping the

district attorney's safe into its component elements and touching a match to all that was compromising.

He carried ten thousand dollars with him to pay for this work. It was in large bills that could never be traced. The grand jury would sit within thirty days. His time was limited. He wanted a fast man with soup or a can-opener or an oxyhydrogen blow-pipe— he didn't care which. The work had to be done by a master mind, for the bedplates were reposing in the last word of the safe-maker's art— a cannon-ball strong-box, inside of a network of alarms and patrolled protection.

There is a place in the Windy City named from an oil-painting: the Shower of Gold. To this saloon Calvin Cole made his way. It was flash and famous. The owner had often visited Brookfield. He had been dined and wined by the mayor. His name was Cragan—William Cragan. He had offered his services at any time for any work. He numbered among his patrons many that were left of the hauteunderworld. He went their bail or bankrolled them, or bought such things as "stickers" or stones, after they were broken from incriminating settings. He had told Calvin Cole that he could furnish a man for anything.

The emphasis had been upon "anything."

The Mayor of Brookfield did not look like a mam who had bedplates against him as he swung the ornate doors of the Shower of Gold and sauntered through to the bar. Rather, he looked like the picture of prosperity, garnished by a nose the color of an African sunset.

His porcine eyes gleamed from folds of fat in the manner of good nature and big dinners. The cane he carried with easy grace was gold-tipped. It had been a present from his loving friends of Brookfield. His portly paunch was covered with a potpourri of hues in the manner of Joseph's coat. The charm he wore upon his chain was the greatest little hand-shaker ever devised.

His entrance was the signal for action upon the part of the bartender. The pudgy hand that took the glass dazzled the place with a three-carat diamond. The bartender's eyes lifted. They met those of a tired-looking individual who sat at a little, round table. A signal flashed between them. The tired party rose and stepped over to the bar.

It was then that Cragan, the proprietor, came through the door. He saw the play and smiled. "Hello, Cal!" he lipped, motioning for the tired individual to take a back-step.

The Mayor of Brookfield swung on one rubber heel. His eyes twinkled as he held a hamlike fist out to his friend.

"Come over here," Cragan said cautiously. "Over this way, Cal. We can be served just as well here."

A whisper and an echo of the situation at Brookfield had floated Chicagoward. Cragan had heard of it. He reasoned that Cole would be around sooner or later. The mayor's last questions upon a former visit were those of a man who was in a labyrinth.

"What can I do?" asked Cragan, after a glance of caution.

"Get me a peterman, yegg-man, soupman, gopher-man, dynamiter, or plain John Yegg. I want one— quick. I'm in a helova hole. They're goin' to indict me for a franchise grab. The bedplates are in a strong-box. The strong-box is in the D. A.'s office, up over the town jail. I want a yegg or a mob who will rip the place open, take those bedplates and light cigarettes with them. I want to see their ashes. I'll put them in an urn fer remembrance."

"Easy, easy," lipped Cragan. "Easy is the word. I'll get all you want— at a price. But go easy."

"What "ll it cost?" asked Cole heavily.

"There's one man," went on Cragan, "for you. Just one I'd recommend. He's a gentleman-burglar—"

"A what?"

Cragan laughed.

"I'm serious," puffed Cole.

"He's the best out of jail" went on Cragan. "He'll lift your bedplates if anybody can— if it's in the power of man to do it. He took the Pasadena job, and he took the Richmond, Virginia, stickers, and he can take anything in the country, if you give him time and money."

"He's the man," Cole decided huskily, dropping his hand round a glass and lifting it to his pursed lips. "Bring him in!"

"He's in already. See that lad over there toying with a straw? That's him."

Cole took his time, then turned a bulletshaped head upon a bullock-neck, and surveyed the cracksman.

His scrutiny was far from being satisfactory. Had Cragan told him the man in question was a "lounge-lizard" or a tango-instructor, he would have believed it. "Yegg" was not written there at all. He saw only youth and bland innocence, touched, as if by the city, with a cool veneer that might, possibly, hold a harder interior.

"Gawan!" exclaimed Cole. "You're kiddin'."

"Take it from me, I'm not. He's the captain of them all. The fastest man on a box that ever worked. He's the Mauve Mouse of the underworld. He's never done time, and he don't drink. The C. O. Dicks know him, and take their hats off to him., He's the man."

Cole was convinced. "What'll this wonderful party want?" he queried.

"Give him enough."

"Five thousand?"

"Don't be a piker— if they got you right."

"Five down, then, and five when I get the bedplates. How'll that be?"

"He'll need help," mused Cragan. "He'll need two or three to take the box. The more noise they make about it, the better it will be. Make it ten down and ten on delivery. It's all or nothing for you. I'll handle the matter here, and send the Mauve Mouse down to look over the prospect."

Cole nodded, after thought, then jerked his head toward the bartender for service.

"Its a go," he announced throatily. "Tell your dude friend to get a room for a week out near Brookfield College— say at Professor Marr's place. The, professor and his daughter run a sort o' select boarding-house for students and teachers. That's the best place, 'cause he won't be suspected there. I'll communicate with him. I'll show him the lay of the D.A.'s office, at the first chance. It ought to be nuts for him, if he's as good as you say."

"He's a helova lot better than that," chuckled Cragan as he reached under the table and took the packet Cole had been trying to hand him.

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THE Mauve Mouse, as Eddie Smith, went south the next day. He found the professor's just the place he was looking for, so he said. The books he draped about his room were on higher mathematics, and the parallelogram of forces— two subjects he could have held a degree upon.

His "rah-rah" alibi extended to hanging some college flags from the chromos on the wall, and propping a suit-case so that the "E. S." would loom large to the curious or the inquiring.

Satisfied with this, he tiptoed down the stairs and went out upon the campus. It was an old college. Its walls were covered with ivy. The Mauve Mouse glanced about him keenly. He shot a question up at the clock in a dark tower. It was near noon. He threw back his head and breathed the quiet air. The droning of the midsummer bees and the students at their tasks brought him back with a jerk to just such a scene in England— a memory of "gold-coast" days.

His eyes hardened to blued-steel. He turned and made his way back to the professor's. The students were filing. out of the class-rooms as the clock struck twelve, slow strokes.

He was the first at the table. A girl came through the door for his order. He glanced up at her. Their eyes met. Hers dropped beneath long, brown lashes. A

slight blush crept up her cheeks. It was as if the skin of a peach had been ruffled. He knew her to be the professor's daughter.

Cragan had stated that Brookfield paid its professors only eight hundred a year. It was for this reason the daughter was waiting on the table. The Mauve Mouse gave his order as if he had addressed a queen. He avoided her eyes. There was a hardness in his own, he knew, that was well worth covering.

She stood in the shadow of the room and watched him. No man or student had ever impressed her like the new guest. There was that to his actions that was never of any college world— a worldly grace, and a polish that contact with a thousand situations endows. She grew thoughtful, then sighed.

He took the last offering of the meal with a nod, then rose and bowed himself out through the door.

That night he met Calvin Cole. The mayor wasted no words. Things had developed during his absence that called for prompt action. The district attorney was on the job with both feet, and a mouth closed as tight as the suture of a strongbox. Cole was plainly worried as he drew the Mauve Mouse into the shelter of a hedge, between the college campus and a cranberry swamp. It was a quiet spot, but even there he was cautious.

"Who sent you?" he queried.

"I dropped down with a shower of gold," explained the cracksman from the corner of his mouth.

"All right, you'll do," said Cole heavily. "Now we'll get busy as Chinamen on a contract. Have you looked the job over?"

"By daylight— yes. What protection have they got at the court-house at night?"

Cole unreeled a string of facts, He had his quarters in the building, and had the details.

The prisoners were in the basement. The police station was on the main floor. The district attorney's suite, with the other city offices, was upon the second and third floors. The cannon-ball safe was in a fireproof extension to the inner law-chamber. Two windows of this chamber overlooked a side street which was "deader than a graveyard," according to Cole.

"I'll look it over to-night," decided the Mauve Mouse. "Then Ill drop north and get two I know. You sit tight. Keep ten grand ready for me. I'll see you after the blow. Good night!"

The Mauve Mouse swung with quick decision. He crossed the campus to the professor's house. The girl was on the porch. She nodded to him.

He touched his hat. "Is supper ready?" he asked.

"Supper is over," she said, "but I've kept something for you. Won't you come in?"

Again she had caught the hard glitter in his eyes that had disconcerted her. It was a thing that worried. It was not of Brookfield. He followed her through the doorway, and ate in a silence which he broke by asking:

"Will you pardon me, but I don't know your first name. Your father's is Marr, is it not?"

"And mine is Helen," she said.

He rose and extended his hand. "Let's be friends, then— I may finish my studies here. I'm keen about this place. It's quiet and away from the world, isn't it?"

She nodded. He wondered what his life would have been had he met her ten years before. He knew she had no place in that boarding-house at all. She was for a better game. A city should know her. The knowledge that he was what he was would keep her from him.

And yet she wore her poverty with a high grace. She had helped her father to the limit of her ability. He rather concluded that no student of the college had interested her. The dream fire in her eyes was of other lands. Her hair would have enhanced any woman.

He went out with her in mind. When he returned, his step was soft and catlike. It was 3 A.M.

AFTER BREAKFAST Smith went to Chicago. The men he met there were given their orders with that terseness that is born of long command.

He minced no words. They were to get the tools and things to take a box at Brookfield. Soup would be needed to blast it open, if necessary. Discretion was their part to play in coming in to the town. The cranberry swamp back of the college campus was the safest hiding-place. They were to wait there till they got his signal.

"A polly is in Dutch," was all that the Mauve Mouse explained. The two yeggs nodded gravely. "Polly" was short for politician. "They're usually getting in bad, anyway," said Alias to Alibi, as the Mauve Mouse tossed over half the packet he had received from Cragan.

The Mouse left them to follow later. He had a half-hour for his train. A drugstore near the station supplied him with collodion for finger tips. He preferred it to gloves when on a job.

He also bought two bottles of the best French perfume. A thought had come to him that Helen would appreciate it. She was too poor to use the kind he liked. She was too sweet not to have any. He wondered if she would know that the six ounces he was bringing as a present had added a twenty-dollar bill to a cash-register without any change. He laughed at this. Easy come, easy go— it had always been that way with him.

The blush that mounted Helen's cheeks was perfect as he pressed the perfume into her hand. "Try it," he suggested, across the table. "It's just a little thought, you know. It's really all I dared get for you. I hope you'll take it."

Helen watched him from beneath her lashes as he went through the door. Her hand went over her heart as she stood perplexed and pleased. He had spoiled her for other men. There was that to him she had never known could exist.

He was bad. His eyes were a telltale. Yet with his hardness there was a grace of action— a sureness, that reminded her of a fencer or a dancer trained to the last ounce of his weight.

She glanced at her gingham dress. Her rolled-up sleeves revealed arms that were freckled and brown. Her hands were swollen from her work. She wanted them otherwise. She tried the perfume. Its aroma almost overcame her. Wealth and gold and rare things seemed to be imprisoned in its drops. He was spoiling her with the vague call of hidden things.

She decided to please him by wearing her best. He noted the change and frowned. He would have her other ways— unspoiled and unsophisticated.

Cole grew anxious. Two conferences were held in the seclusion of the cranberryswamp. The woods were thick there. The night the Mauve Mouse had picked for the job was still days off. The mayor insisted it would be too late. The district attorney was too cock-sure to suit the politician. The matter of the indictments was the talk of the town. Men openly avoided him. The railroad had refused to call the county authorities off. Its attorney scoffed and said there was no proof.

Cole knew better. The bedplates were the nearest thing to a commitment to State prison that existed.

"Get done," snorted the mayor. "A week more and the papers will be shoutin' 'All about the great traction grab!' I know them— the stuff is already written. The whole pack is at my throat— it's flowers and stripes for your Uncle Dudley."

"Beat it, then," said the Mauve Mouse, glancing keenly into the deeper swamp. "Get into town. Start a poker-game, and don't leave it till daylight. That will cover you. Make it strong." The Mouse whistled as the mayor climbed the fence and started down the road toward Brookfield. The whistle was repeated. Two men slouched out of the gloom.

"All right, boys," said the cracksman. "To-night's th' night. We start at twelve thirty— no later. The polly's got a wire, it's now or never."

"We're ready," said one of the two. "We've been eatin' our mugs off, waitin'. We dasn't show our noses, an' th' skeeters are fierce back there." The yegg jerked a stubby thumb over shoulder.

The Mauve Mouse turned. He stooped and lighted a cigarette. By the light of this he read his watch.

"Nine now," he said. "Be at the side door of the court-house at twelve-thirty. Rap twice and I'll let you in. Bring everything—the bag with the jimmies, and some chains. We may have to drop the cannonball out the window, and wheel it out here before we open it. It wouldn't do to wake the jail up, would it? Some of those prisoners might guess what was coming off."

"It'll be a helova job," laughed Alias, as the Mauve Mouse climbed the fence toward the road. "Think of it—coppin' th' D. A.'s safe out of th' county jail! That's a rich deal, that is."

iii

THERE is an old saying in the underworld that: "Whatever can't be lifted can be dragged." The Mauve Mouse believed in this axiom thoroughly. One by one the doors of the district attorney's suite were sprung by master work from Alibi's jimmy.

The fireproof compartment, wherein was the cannon-ball, was protected by a network of wires that would wake the town if touched, severed or pressed together. A new, innocent-looking shutter stood before the door to this compartment.

The two yeggs grinned. They turned to their leader.

"At the side," he whispered. "Don't touch that shutter! The roof is protected. Rip out the false work. I'll stall at the window."

It was an hour later when they broke through. The noise they made would not have awakened a light sleeper. The Mauve Mouse peered through. He touched a, fountain-pen flash-light, then backed. "Get this brick-work away from the floor," he ordered. " When that's done, slide the keister out—drag it out to the window. We'll never take it here. We might wake the watchman up."

The Mauve Mouse went to the lowered blind and peered through. It was after two o'clock. The town was dead. He exeamined the sash, then turned his attention to the sides of the window. It was not protected by a "bug." He pressed the catch over, listened, then lifted the window inch by inch.

A soft flower-bed was below. He marked the spot by dropping a coin. Then he turned toward the perspiring yeggs.

"Get some of those law-books out, and we'll roll it up on them," he suggested. "The law's a good thing, sometimes— it works both ways."

Alias grinned. The cannon-ball weighed all of four hundred pounds. The two grunted as they raised it inch by inch to the level of the window-sill. They

waited. The Mauve Mouse peered out. The townclock struck two. There followed a hollow boom from the clock in the tower at the college. " All right," he hissed, " get it on the sill, but don't let go till I give the office.

" Now!"

Alias and Alibi pressed it outward. The sill creaked and splintered. There was a moment of suspense— a leg caught. A ripping followed as the globe disappeared from their sight. A soft thud came up to them.

They waited with clenched fists— each breathing heavily. The Mauve Mouse thrust out his head, inch by inch. The safe lay deeply imbedded in the flowerpatch. It loomed to him like a plum in a pudding. He lifted his eyes and searched the dark aisles of the tree-arched street. All was secure. His hand went back as he withdrew his head. He lowered the window and adjusted the blind to its former position.

The two yeggs waited as he crawled into the vault, and made a hasty search. The Mauve Mouse had known of cases where the treasure was not where it was supposed to be. It was an old trick to hide the funds of a bank in a hollow book, and lock up an empty safe. He was taking no chances.

Satisfied that whatever was worth taking was in the cannon-ball, he backed out through the brick-work and led the way down through the jimmied doors.

"We've got three hours till it cracks dawn— four till the town wakes," explained the Mauve Mouse. "Better roll the keister across the street to the stone sidewalk. Get it on that so we don't leave any trail. You, Alibi, dig round the corner and get that wheelbarrow back of the pig-iron dump— it's there. I saw it to-day."

A "pig-iron dump " is a hardware-store.

Alibi slouched off, while the Mauve Mouse and Alias waited under the shelter of the jail. The barrow came through the gloom, its wheel squeaking. The Mauve Mouse fished an oil-can from a hip-pocket and oiled the axle. "He always carried oil for tell-tale hinges, or other things that needed attention. These little details had won him the leadership.

He rose from his crouching position, listened, then motioned for the cannon-ball. A minute later, after a détour to throw off possible trailers, they started down the road that led to the cranberry swamp.

The night was like a vast tunnel. The stars were out, but a haze dimmed their luster. The town of Brookfield seemed wrapped in a shroud borrowed from Morpheus. The district attorney's bedplates made no protest as they were wheeled through the silent streets.

The two yeggs took turns at the handles till they reached a railroad track. Here the Mauve Mouse assisted them to roll the safe between the rails. He waited and listened. The wheelbarrow was dropped to the bottom of a ditch. It

would be found there, after a search. The conclusion it pointed to was that the cannon-ball was loaded upon a hand-car or a train.

Rails, like water, leave no trail.

The outer circumference of the cannonball was a perfect sphere. The Mauve Mouse had figured on this. He drew a line with a piece of chalk. Along the rail they rolled the safe until they came abreast the woods that fringed the track. Back of this fringe was the underbrush that marked the edge of the swamp. Beyond rose the dark tower of the Library where the college was.

Mauve Mouse called a halt. Two tackles were rigged out of steel chain. One was passed over the double dial, the other about the base-plate. The two yeggs strained, grunted, and lifted the safe from the rail.

"Follow me," said the Mauve Mouse. "Step from rock to rock, if you can. Don't leave any tracks. Strike for the brush. We're almost at the camp."

The camp was a picked spot between two rocky outcroppings. Trees were over it, and brush closed it in. The Mauve Mouse flashed the way with his pocket light. Alias dropped his end at a signal.

"Take a drink and a rest," laughed the Mauve Mouse. ^ You've earned it. I defy anybody to follow us from the courthouse. They'd be dizzy before they started. If they don't hurry they'll have to come to Chi to get us—and we stand right, there."

Alibi passed the flask to Alias. The latter wiped his lips with his sleeve, then squared his jaw. He gazed down at the cannon-ball as if he would swallow it. He spat at it.

"What a hell of a grouch the fellow had who invented that," he husked, giving the safe a kick. "Keepin' hard-workin' gents like us from makin' an 'honest livin'."

The Mauve Mouse laughed. "Get the sledges," he ordered, "and see if you can get a wedge started. I want those bedplates within an hour."

"Goin' to hand them to th' polly?" asked Alibi, with a shrewd wink.

The Mauve Mouse passed over a leather case filled with a set of graduated slivers of steel. "I don't know," he answered. "They'd be mighty fine things to hold for the highest bidder. We'd never do time if we had them intact."

"Intact is good," agreed Alibi, swinging a short sledge to test its weight. "I mind 'th' time—"

"Go on!" snapped the Mauve Mouse.

The yegg swung the sledge. The wedge entered, then broke off flush with the rim of the door. Another was started with a low curse. It was like getting an opening in the breech of a twelve-inch gun. There was no give to the stubborn metal.

Other wedges were tried. They broke as the first. Knife-points were inserted. They slivered against the hardened steel.

Alibi rose to his full height. He swung the heavy weight over his shoulder. His jaw clamped as he brought the sledge down upon the knob of the dial. Other blows followed. Alias relieved him. They pounded at every projection that offered a mark. They battered the face, then turned the safe over and sheared it from its softmetal base.

A berserk rage seized the two cracksmen. They were beyond all control. The Mauve Mouse backed as they went at the stubborn metal with a clank of blows like a steam-riveter on a rampage.

The Mauve Mouse glanced at the sky to the eastward. He turned his watch-face to the half-light of the glade. It was four o'clock. He frowned. Dawn was almost due. They had made no progress, sáve to batter the cannon-ball to a shapeless mass.

"Try a shot of soup," he ordered, as a last resort.

Alibi dropped back in the brush. He appeared almost instantly with a small rubber bag. Alias rolled the cannon-ball till its battered face was upward. A thin crack showed there.

Alibi deftly formed a cup out of yellow soap. The bottom of this cup was over the suture. The bag was tipped slightly. A drop of oily nitroglycerin fell. Others followed. The cup filled. Alibi set the bag at the side of the safe, whipped out a double-X detonator, laid it across the cup, and lit the fuse.

"Back!" shouted the Mauve Mouse, seizing Alias by the arm. They ran. Alibi followed through the underbrush. They stood in a group and waited. The Mauve Mouse glanced down at Alibi's hand. He wheeled him by the shoulder,

"Where's the dinny?" he shouted hoarsely. "What did you do with the bag of soup?"

Alibi's. hand went up to his brow. * Hell!" he blurted. "I left it by th' keister!"

"The Mauve Mouse threw himself at the yegg with tigerish savagery. The two went down. Alias dropped to the ground and waited with bated breath. A fuse sputtered through the gloom. A flash and a roar followed. A pillar of dazzling yellow fire shot up to the zenith. The earth rocked.

Then, amid the cloud of flying fragments overhead, there flashed a wild star that burned the night and was gone.

iv

THE Mauve Mouse reached the professor's house at sunup. He had been through a hard night. His clothes were slightly torn. There was a cup upon his

chin. He had succeeded in hiding this with the same collodion he had used on his finger-tips.

The search he had made for the cannonball safe had proved a vain one. It had been lifted in the air by a full quart of powerful nitroglycerin. Where it had landed was a mystery to him. The most likely place for it to come down was the cranberry swamp. They had agreed upon this as he dismissed the two yeggs, who were to hurry back to Chicago by the first freight and await his coming at a later date.

Helen greeted him at the breakfast table. No one in the boarding-house knew that he had been out all night. There was that to Helen's manner as he took his seat which attracted his attention. She seemed preoccupied. Once she dropped a dish. He stooped with her in order to recover it. Their heads came close together. They rose hesitatingly and stood side by side. The Mauve Mouse reached back then and grasped his chair.

" What is it?" he asked, feeling the flame that blazed from her eyes.

Helen's finger crept to her lip. She turned and glanced toward the kitchen door. "Its a secret," she stammered. "Promise me that you won't tell."

The Mauve Mouse nodded. "I've kept many secrets," he said truthfully. "I'll promise on my honor, Helen."

The girl hesitated. She searched his face intently. "Father," she whispered, "has finally found it! He has been searching the garden for a long time."

"What for, Helen?" he asked as she paused.

"For a meteorite that fell."

"A meteorite?"

"Yes, Mr. Smith. It is a big one, he says. He's gone to town to get help to dig it up. It's way down deep. He's been searching and searching for it. Then he found it this morning— isn't that grand? Poor papa!"

The note of love in the girl's voice struck the Mauve Mouse as a thing to remember and cherish.

"This meteorite," he asked, struck by a sudden thought— "this thing your father found— how big is it?"

"Father says it must be as big around as a beer-keg— that's just what he said."

A thought struck the Mauve Mouse as if a pistol-shot had been fired within the room. He had been trained in a hard school; but despite this, his hand gripped the top of the chair and drew it toward him with the knotting of his muscles. Suppose, he thought, almost aloud— suppose the professor's find was the safe that had been projected into the air by the explosion of Alibi's quart of nitro? Suppose it was the cannon-ball? He forced a smile as he turned toward the girl.

"May I see it? Can you show me where you father found it?"

The girl's answer was to nod toward the kitchen. The Mauve Mouse tossed his napkin upon the table and followed her as she passed through the doorway. The grace of her motion held him, despite the danger of the situation, should the meteorite prove to be the missing safe.

The professor, with two workmen, came through the back fence as Helen pointed out the spot where the meteorite had been discovered. The Mauve Mouse leaned and examined the depression where the professor had been exploring. He was pushed aside by the excited scientist, who was all eager to see the discovery.

The two workmen struck a metallic substance after they had gone down two feet. This was uncovered, then lifted to the surface with difficulty. The Mauve Mouse stooped and examined it long and critically. It looked badly battered, and was coated with dirt and rust. It was the same size as the cannon-ball safe he had stolen from the district attorney's office.

There was a light of understanding in his eyes as he turned toward the girl.

"What time," he asked, "does the county clerk or this district attorney come down to work?"

"About ten," said Helen. "I think it's about ten. Why do you ask, Mr. Smith?"

"It's eight now," he said, consulting his watch. "It's eight, Miss Helen. The reason I asked is that you had better have your father record this find. Have him make an affidavit. It may be necessary to prove ownership. This is a very rare and valuable specimen. It is his, by right of finding. It should make him rich. People will want to buy it. I know one man who will."

The girls eyes brightened. "And father— poor father is so deserving," she said with deep feeling.

It was the light in her eyes and the depth of her pity for the old scientist that showed the Mauve Mouse a game that would right many wrongs and bring justice where justice was due.

The district attorney would discover the loss of the safe by ten o'clock, the cracksman figured. Calvin Cole, fortified with a poker alibi, might be suspected, but never connected with the job. The two yeggs were bound to leave some trace that investigation would show led to Chicago.

There, however, the trail would end. No man would suspect him, the Mauve Mouse concluded. He did not look like a peterman capable of lifting a four-hundred pound cannon-ball out of a county jail. He could stay in town with entire safety. In fact, he knew it would be far safer for him to stay than to leave.

He turned toward the waiting girl. The hard glitter to his eyes was gone. " Helen," he said softly, "I think that you should tell your father to place the meteorite in the college museum. I know a scientist in Chicago— he's keen for meteorites. He'll pay any price. This one weighs over four hundred pounds. It's a big find— it may make your father rich. Think— what that means to you! I'll telegraph for this man to come."

Helen's brows lifted. It meant everything to her. It meant fine clothes, hats, peace, instead of eternal drudgery. It would leave her father free to experiment with his theories.

One doubt only filled her mind—the meteorite might not be worth what the Mauve Mouse thought it was. She smiled at his enthusiasm. Her hand went out to him. "I'll tell him," she said, "just what you suggest. I'll—"

The girl turned and inclined her head. The raucous clanging of bells sounded from the town. A boy came running up, shouting:

"Somebody's robbed the jail! The safe is stolen out of the county court-house! Somebody pinched the district attorney's papers! Hully gee! Ain't dat de limit?"

The Mauve Mouse turned slowly. His eyes swept from the girl to the professor. That individual was examining the fallen star with the air of his powerful spectacles.

"Well?" asked the cracksman, stepping over.

"Most extraordinary," mumbled the scientist. "A true specimen from sidereal space— a remarkable specimen, young man!"

"It is," declared the Mauve Mouse with conviction.

v

IT was late in the afternoon when Cragan, of the Shower of Gold saloon, reached Brookfield. Calvin Cole had wired for him to come down. The mayor had acted from a suggestion dropped by Eddie Smith, the Mauve Mouse. The town was in arms. Search was being made everywhere for the stolen strong-box. The wheelbarrow had been found by the side of the tracks as Cragan alighted from the passenger-train.

A detective was on the platform. He eyed the saloon-keeper, then passed a suspicious eye over his ample form and heavy, hamlike hands. He turned and followed.

"There's hell poppin'," blurted the mayor as he drew Cragan into an automobile. "Some awful thieves have stolen the district attorney's safe. Now isn't that terrible?"

Cragan fished out a cigar.

"It sure is," he chuckled. "Any clue?"

The mayor's outburst had been for the benefit of the chauffeur. "I ain't out of the'woods yet," he whispered. "Keep mum— you're a scientist from Chicago University. Here's some kale to buy me out. Remember you've heard all about the great meteorite that's been discovered in Professor Marr's garden. The Mauve Mouse says it's the safe."

Cragan moved to the end of the seat. He glared at the mayor, then at the rapidly unrolling countryside. He half lifted himself, as if to jump out. The mayor was mad as a hatter, he concluded.

"Stand pat— here we are," said the mayor, pointing toward an old stone building. "This is the college museum. Professor Marr will be waiting. He's got an idea his damn' shootin' star is worth a million. Chicago ought to have it. It should go to your university to-day. It's a wonderful specimen of— yegg work." This last had been dropped into Cragan's ear as an enlighter.

The saloon-keeper whistled. He was beginning to see a light.

The two descended from the auto as it drew up under an ivy arch.

"This way," said the mayor, taking Cragan by the arm. "This way, Professor Cragan. Up these steps, like this. Now along the hall. Right in here, now. Here we are. There is the professor who owns the, meteorite. The girl is his daughter. The young man is Mr. Smith— a student."

"Ump!" throated Cragan, thrusting his hand out to the aged professor. "Glad to meet a fellow scientist," he said blandly.

"Pleased," cackled Professor Marr, wincing in the saloon-keeper's strong grip.

"Where's this— this wonderful discovery— this meteor-star?" asked Cragan, glancing about the fossils.

Cole nudged the saloon-keeper in the back. He turned. "Ah," he exclaimed, "there it is! What a remarkable specimen, professor!"

"Not that!" Cole hissed in Cragan's ear. "That's a paleolithic brick. The one on the pedestal!"

Cragan went over and tapped the professor's find. It was round and hard and metallic. It had been pitted and scorched by a tremendous fire. It was flat in one place, "where it had struck the earth—" the professor explained.

"How much do you want for— this?" asked Cragan, throwing out his chest.

The Mauve Mouse glanced at Helen Marr. He formed the word "twenty " behind Cragan's back. His lips repeated the signal. The girl turned as the scientist was about to speak. "Father!" she exclaimed. "Father will not-take a cent less than twenty thousand dollars for this meteor. It is worth it— every penny of it!"

She glanced at the Mauve Mouse to confirm her statement. Her eyes twinkled. He nodded his head toward Cragan. He edged alongside the scientist and pressed his toe. Then, as an afterthought, he got Cole's attention.

"Buy it at any price," he whispered. "Don't waste any time— the D. A. is liable to get hep any minute. Get the bedplates out of town."

The mayor of Brookfield was in a quandary. He did not believe in endowing college professors with a life annuity. As far as he could see, the mass of metal before him was not worth its weight in junk.

The bed-plates were inside, however. It was up to him to destroy them, or somebody might call the district attorney's attention to the similarity between the lost safe and the meteorite. The Mauve Mouse had explained that it was the only thing to do. He had refused to steal it again for any consideration.

Cole nodded as Cragan turned. "All right," snapped the pseudo-scientist, " I'll take it for twenty thousand dollars. The university will have to foot the bill. I've got the cash here. Make out a receipt."

Helen turned a strained face toward the Mauve Mouse. Her eyes shone bright with gratitude. She smiled as he quickly witnessed the professor's signature to the bill of sale. Cragan flourished the paper, pocketed it, and drew forth a roll of bills.

"We'll be back in thirty minutes," he said as he turned toward the door. "I'll send a truck for the sa— for the meteorite. My college chums will be— will be— For th' love of Mike!"

The Mauve Mouse wheeled as Helen grasped his arm. Three men stood in the gloom of the hallway. Two of them looked like detectives— the other came forward.

"I'm the district attorney of this county," he explained dramatically. "You know me, Cole— damn well! You're under arrest, Cole."

"For what?" blurted the mayor.

"For a lot of things— for every crime on the calendar— including safe-breaking."

"You're full of hop!" shouted the mayor.

The district attorney turned toward the meteorite. "That!" he exclaimed, pointing. "That is my safe! There are affdavits enough in it to send you away for your natural life. I've got you right, Cole, dead bang to rights. Come in, boys. Arrest the mayor!"

"That sa— meteor is mine!" shouted Cragan. "I bought it— here's th' receipt. I'm a professor from the University of Chicago, I am!"

"You look like a yegg," laughed the district attorney. "Do you mean to tell me that is a meteorite?"

Cragan was silent. His face grew red. The Mauve Mouse pressed Helen's hand, then led her to the professor. He turned.

"Gentlemen," he said, with an edge to his voice that held the group— "gentlemen, there has been some error here. I'm a stranger— a student in the college. I don't know you people— except Miss Marr and her father. I'm boarding with them. A meteor— a falling star was discovered by the professor this morning. I helped dig it up and bring it here. The professor has just sold it to this gentleman from the University of Chicago. He paid a rather high price for it, but it is sold. The transaction is closed— completely."

"He has sold stolen property!" exclaimed the district attorney.

"This— meteor," suggested the cracksman, "came from heaven. It fell out of the sky into the professor's celery-bed— therefore it is his own."

"That ain't a meteor— that's a stolen safe!"

The Mauve Mouse turned and tapped the meteorite with his finger-nail. "What leads you to this impression?" he asked.

"Two things," sneered the district attorney. "Cragan was followed from the station and seen to get in Cole's automobile. The papers in Cole's case were in my safe— this strong-box. It was to the mayor's interest to destroy the papers— or the safe. His hired thugs blew it into the professors yard— carelessly— when they tried to open it. When I heard about the find, and where Cragan was bound, I saw a light— a clear light, my friend."

"But, father," said Helen sweetly, "it *is* a meteorite— surely you know?"

The aged professor removed his glasses, polished them with the corner of a handkerchief, then replaced them upon his nose. From a vest-pocket he fished a small penknife. All eyes followed his actions as he drew the point of the blade across the pitted surface of the sphere.

It was soft. It was iron. It was easily scratched!

"Are you convinced, gentlemen?" asked Professor Marr. " A safe or a strong-box of this shape would be made of the hardest kind of steel— case-hardened, I think they call it. Besides this test, what was the weight of your safe, Mr. District Attorney?"

"About four hundred and fifty pounds— or close to that."

"This meteor weighs over five hundred pounds," added the professor severely. "I give you my word as a scientist that it is a true visitor from space."

It was the Mauve Mouse's turn to feel surprise. He glanced from the positive face of the aged scientist to the puzzled one of the district attorney. The mystery was far from being cleared. He had believed the professor's find to be the missing cannon-ball safe. The district attorney believed likewise. The professor, however, had proved his discovery.

The Mauve Mouse had an inspiration.

"When did this— this meteor fall into your garden, professor?" he asked with gaining hope.

"Years and years ago," said the professor. "I looked for it at the time. Its light woke me up. I never thought it had struck so close to the house. But I searched. It got covered over when we plowed. Then this morning I was weeding, and saw traces of burned earth. The rest you know."

"I'll trouble you to take the bracelets off my friend the mayor, then!" shouted Cragan in a bull-like voice. "If this bunch of junk fell years and years ago, it ain't no safe, Mr. District Attorney. It ain't th' safe you're lookin' for. You lost yours last night."

The district attorney turned toward the professor. "Are you certain?" he asked.

"It's a true meteorite. It was cold when I found it."

"Take off the handcuffs then," blurted the district attorney. "I'll get you later, Cole," he added bitterly.

The mayor rubbed his wrists in relieved satisfaction. He shot a shrewd, underbrowed glance at the Mauve Mouse as the detectives, followed by the fuming district attorney, passed out through the doorway.

"Come on!" said Cole. "Come on, Cragan! We'll donate this beautiful piece of junk to Brookfield College. It ain't no good to us, save as a door-weight or somethin' like that. We forgot to give it to that fresh district attorney."

"But them bedplates?" exclaimed the saloon-keeper. "Where's th' safe they were in?"

"I ain't no detective," snapped the disgusted Cole. "How should I know? I've endowed th' professor for life— that's all I know. I guess I'm stung by this mix-up. I thought I was buyin' somethin' worth while." The mayor shot a keen glance toward the Mauve Mouse.

"Good-by, boys!" said Eddie Smith sweetly. "Good-by and good luck! I don't imagine that you will hear anything more from your friend the district attorney. The bedplates are probably in the swamp— yards under. I was wrong— that's all."

"What are you going to do, Eddie?" asked the mayor curiously.

Eddie Smith, alias the Mauve Mouse, turned toward Helen Marr.

Her eyes shone with a glad light.

"Me? I?" he said. "Why, I'm going to stay right here in Brookfield, and complete a course in domestic science. Look for the announcement later."

———————

15: The Iron Man and the Tin Woman

Stephen Leacock

1869-1944

In: *The Iron Man and the Tin Woman*, Dodd Mead, 1929

"PARDON me," said the Iron Man to the Tin Woman, "I hope I don't intrude."

He spoke in the low deep tones of a phonograph. His well-oiled cylinders were working to perfection, and his voice was full and mellow. The revolutions of his epiglottis, running direct from its battery with a thermostatic control to register emotion, was steady and unchanged.

"Not at all," said the Tin Woman, '"pray come into the drawing-room."

She was working at a higher revolution, but speaking evenly and clearly.

The Iron Man inclined himself fifteen degrees forward from his third section, recovered himself by his automatic internal plumb line, turned seventy five degrees sideways and took four steps and a quarter as dictated by his optometric control, to a chair where he turned one complete revolution and a quarter and sat down.

But, stop!

IT IS NECESSARY to interrupt the story a moment so as to explain to the reader what it is about.

Everybody has been struck by the invention of the Iron Man, the queer mechanical being recently fabricated in Germany and exhibited there and in the United States. He is called a Robot, but he might just as well be called a Macpherson.

The pictures of the Iron Man show him with a head like a stovepipe, and a body like a Quebec heater. He is cased in nickel, jointed in steel, and one kick from his pointed iron foot would scatter a whole football team. In other words, he has us all beaten at the start.

The Iron Man talks with a phonograph drum, sees with high-power convex mirrors, and gets his energy from electricity stored inside of him at 2,000 volts.

The Iron Man, it seems, is able to walk. He can walk across the floor of a room, step up on a platform, bow and take his seat. In this one act he displaces all public chairmen, chancellors of universities, and heads of conferences. He is able, if you put a speech into his stomach to reel it off his chest without a single fault or error. In this he outclasses at once all public speakers, platform orators and after-dinner entertainers. He can not only make a speech, but while making it he can move up and down, saw his arms around in the air, and gyrate with his head.

In other words, the Iron Man can act, and after this there is no more need for living actors to keep alive. Consequently, the Iron Man will rapidly take over

from us a large part of the activity of the world. Anybody of sufficient means will soon have an Iron Man made as a counterpart of himself. When he has anything to do peculiarly difficult or arduous or needing great nerve, he will let the Iron Man do it.

For myself, I intend to have an Iron Man do all my golf for me, which will reopen at once the whole question of the local championship. That, however, is only a personal matter. The point is that each and all of us will very soon be making use of an Iron Man.

Equally is it evident that some one will now invent a Tin Woman. She will be made of softer metal outside, but just as hard inside, with eyes that revolve further sideways and a phonograph drum of double capacity to go two words to one from the Iron Man.

So these are the two beings that are going to replace us individually in the world, to do our work and leave us to play. The timid human race will shrink behind its metal substitute. And even such a thing as a proposal of marriage, arduous, nerve-racking, and disturbing— will be gladly handed over to the deputy.

With which, let us continue the story.

THE TIN WOMAN moved sideways eighteen degrees as guided by the reflected rays from the Iron Man's concave eye-pieces and adjusted herself at half a right angle, with her base on a sofa. There was a pause. Both waited until the situation grew warm enough to raise their temperatures to the speaking point.

"I have come—" began the Iron Man in a low voice. Then there was a click in his throat and he paused. He was not yet warmed up.

The Tin Woman, under the impact of his phonograph, altered the angle of her neck.

"Yes—" she murmured. Her phonograph seemed to revolve, hut almost without sound.

"I have come," said the Iron Man again, this time in a firm strong voice, while the hum of his self-starter seemed to give him an air of confidence, "to ask you a question."

The ophthalmic plates of the Tin Woman, delicate as gold leaf, had been so adjusted that the sound-unit of the word "question" would start some thing in her.

"It is so sudden—" she murmured.

The Iron Man made an upright move on his seat so that his body-cylinder was perpendicular to his disc.

"I want you to marry me," he said.

He had to say it. These were the last of the words that had been put into him. He had no more. But it was enough. The mistress of the Tin Woman, whom she here represented, had had her adjusted so that as soon as the word "marry" hit her, it would set her going.

"—Oh, John—" she gasped.

She rose up on her spring legs and fell forward with her tin body case flat on the floor. The Iron Man stooped his body to eighty-five degrees, picked her up with his magnetic clutch, and then placed his facial cylinder close against hers so that his magnetic lamps looked right into her. He put one steel arm around her central feed pipe and for a moment put her under a pressure of two thousand volts. But he spoke no word. He couldn't. He had used up all his perforated strip of words.

He stood the Tin Woman up against the wall, revolved twice on his feet to get oriented, and then clumped off out of the house. The proposal was over.

And a few minutes later the Man— the real man, if he can be called so— was telephoning to the Real Woman.

"Darling, I am so pleased. My Iron Man has just come home and as soon as I opened him I knew your answer II

"I'm so happy, too," she said, "I could hardly wait to unlock Lizzie. I nearly took a can-opener to her, and when I heard your voice, I nearly died with happiness."

"And we won't wait, will we?" continued the man. "Let's have John and Lizzie go through the Church Service part of it right away--"

"Just as soon as I can get Lizzie a new tin skirt, from the hardware store," said the woman.

And a week after, Iron John and Tin Lizzie were married by a Brass Clergyman and a Cast Iron Sexton, while a Metal Choir sang their cylinders loose with joy.

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16: Under the Shwe-Dagon

Beatrice Grimshaw

1870-1953

In: *The Valley of Never-Come-Back*, Hurst & Blackett, 1923

THE shadows of the trees, in that still lake, were like the spreading greens of a moss agate. Surprisingly, in the middle a tongue of gold trembled out, licking towards the centre of the lake. You raised your eyes to see what this thing might be, and .once again the Shwe-Dagon, flaming into heaven, seized you by the heart.

It was always surprising you. When your steamer first came stamping through the yellow ripples of the Irrawaddy mouth, and the wharves and warehouses of Rangoon began to cluster on the starboard bow, you saw it, unexpected, marvellous, blaring its trumpet-note of gold into the blue, beyond the roofs of the town. When you went out at night, beneath the moon, to drive on the Pagoda Road, it caught you round a corner with a sudden sparkle of wreathed lights slaying the stars up three hundred feet of sky. There was no escaping it. In the town, or miles away, it dominated, it was— Rangoon.

You thought a great deal about it. You had time to think, because there were many days to wait for a boat. You had come up country, where the rubber collapse was spreading general ruin, in a vague, foolish hope of finding the "good billet" that is always somewhere else, round the corner. It was still somewhere else. You were beginning to get frightened. The boat had been put off, and hotel bills were high, and somehow or other things had worked out so that you hadn't even enough to pay the steamer fare home, once your bill was settled. You wondered— sitting of nights alone in your high, white-walled room, with the punkah humming away overhead; sitting there because you could not afford the price of drinks down in the lounge— whether, after all, there was any good in taking the ticket, even if you hadn't to pay the hotel. For what can a man trained only to drive coolies do, penniless, in London?

A cab, the little shuttered "gharry" of Rangoon, costs only threepence a half-mile, but you could not spare threepences. So in the afternoon, when the wicked sun was down to safety point, you went out walking, which nobody does in the East— but you could not loaf all day about that three times cursed hotel. And it happened that your feet led you to the Cantonment Gardens. And again you saw the golden Shwe-Dagon reflected in the water among green reflected trees.

And, looking down at the exquisite picture of that golden loveliness, you cursed it in your heart. For it is very hard, when you are drifting fast towards the rocks of financial disaster, to know that just above you three hundred feet of pure gold leaf, caked inches thick on stones, is topped by a slab of solid gold

three feet by one and a half, set with diamonds, rubies, emeralds, and sapphires of fabulous size and worth.

York had not been inside the Pagoda grounds; hardly any Europeans enter them nowadays since the insulting edict that orders the white man to take off shoes and stockings and advance barefooted over ground trodden by innumerable lepers and diseased, limping beggar-folk to the shrines that surround the great Pagoda itself. But he had walked round the enclosing wall and looked up, more than once, at the amazing shaft of gold that smote the sky, springing from a golden, onion-shaped base. And he had strained his eyes, enviously, up towards the small, horizontal finger, dark against the blue that capped the soaring spire of the Pagoda summit. That was the flag; the flag of thick pure gold, seven or eight hundred years old, starred with jewels, each one worth a fortune. It was safe enough; certainly no one could touch it. The onion-bulge of the Pagoda was unclimbable, even if the priests and pilgrims, never absent, would not have massacred on the spot, despite all British rule, anyone mad enough to attempt such folly.

Down here, in the Cantonment Gardens, York, looking at the golden image in green water, fingered his few last coins, beyond the price of the steamer ticket that was to take him from poverty in the East to poverty in London. He bit his cigarette in two and threw it away. For he was wishing, so hard that it hurt, for the old days back again in Burma; the days he had vaguely heard of, before England's conquest and the driving out of Theebaw. He was sure that, in those times, adventurers like himself had often enough found fortune in ways that no one heard about. Why, to-day, if he weren't afraid of the British Government, he'd swear he could have made a plan of some kind. The thing must be worth a million— anything you liked to name— and there it was up in the sky, doing no good to anyone. But of course, as things were ....

It was growing dusk at last; the Shwe-Dagon in the water and the Shwe-Dagon in the sky were fading into fingers of dull grey. York turned his back upon them. They leaped, on that instant, into one long serpent of electric stars, standing on its tail. York did not look. He knew they were lighting up, but he hated the Shwe-Dagon.

A few hours later, in the lounge of the shabby-fine hotel encrusted with dirt and marble, they were talking over York.

Two or three men, wearing the curious costume of coat, shirt, and "shorts" affected by Rangoon in leisure hours, were sitting round a small table, smoking and drinking beer. It was moderately hot— scarce warmer than an English August afternoon, for this was the cool season. The fans whined above. Burman waiters, tall, bearded, professorial, moved in stately fashion serving

drinks. It was supposed that they, as servants, were necessarily deaf and uncomprehending; the talk flowed on without regard to waiters.

"Asked you about it too, did he?"

"Yes. Seems to be a little mad on the subject. Nearly cried when I told him about the big wind last year, and how the priests put up scaffolding and took down the flag for the first time in God knows how many hundred years, 'cause it had been blown crooked."

"These newcomers are funny about the Pagoda. Good thing the residents don't bother themselves about it quite so much. One does get fed up with answering their silly questions."

"One does. He wanted to know all about it, and how long they had it down, and when they put it back again. And then those Americans—"

"Sh't!"

The man who was speaking looked round. A woman had just come in, with a husband towing behind. She was tallish, fat, and marked clearly out as lower-class American by the blunt, small features, the heavy, short-waisted figure, the ill-dressed hair of her type. The husband was weedy and suppressed-looking; he had a sharp nose, and a money-changing look floating somewhere on the surface of his indeterminate face. Both were dressed with extreme richness. The woman had chosen an elaborate "costume" of dark embroidered satin, unsuited to tropical wear; she wore the inevitable diamond rings; she had a Paris model hat, of the kind made in Paris specially for the tourist trade. The husband was in thick Assam silk; his watch-chain drooped with heavy solidity, his lustrous socks cried out their price in dollars. The two found a place at the far end of the lounge and ordered iced drinks from a Burman in a white frock coat, gorgeously sashed with red and gold.

"That's the two," went on the man who had been speaking. "They're clean mad on souvenirs. They've filled boxes with rubbish exported from Manchester, and they've chipped bits off the images in temples— wonder they didn't get scragged— and they took off their shoes and stockin's—"

"No—"

"Yes— to walk round the shrines at the Pagoda. Give you my word, disgustin' thing. Man, I know, saw it. The old boy had some decency; he remonstrated— but she said: 'Why-y, Clarence, it's the most inturresting and instructive thing in Burma, and think of the souvenirs we can buy inside!' So he gave in. And I believe he had to pacify the priests with Lord knows how many dollars because she scratched the base of the Pagoda with her parasol to pick off a bit of gold leaf for a souvenir."

A quiet, well-bred looking man at another table took his cigar out of his mouth and remarked: "I suppose you don't take these for representative Amurricans, do you?"

The gossips murmured vaguely that they did not.

"Because," went on the quiet man, "we aren't any too proud of that kind, even in Amurrica. I might as well tell you that the man hadn't the best of reputations in N'York before he made good."

"What's he done? " someone made bold to ask.

The American half shut his eyes.

"Oh, you can search me," he answered with more of a drawl than he had hitherto displayed. And only the hotel manager— an Armenian, whom nothing escaped, who saw everything with the back of his head or the tip of one ear from his window in the hall— noticed that the American gentleman was somewhat elaborately crooking one finger as he held aloft his cigar.

"Crook, eh?" thought the manager to himself.

"I suppose he's all right now," suggested the man in shorts. It seemed impossible to think badly of anyone who spent so much money as did the gorgeous man and his wife.

The American gentleman nodded lightly. "No temptation to be otherwise," he said.

"Yes," thought the Armenian manager to himself, "but once a crook always a crook, and I will tip the waiters a hint to look out for the spoons. Those souvenir hunters—" He turned aside from the window and spat into the waste-paper basket.

All the time the silent Burman waiters, tall, long-waisted, in their sashed frock-coats, archidiaconal in gravity, moved about the hall bringing drinks.

It was almost dark now. York, who had walked back from the gardens to save a gharry fare, came in dusty and perspiring. He passed the lounge without entering and made his way up the shallow marble stairs. How he hated this mock magnificence of the hotel! How he hated the flint-hard faces of the office staff, looking out blankly from their pigeon holes upon the stream of passing travel ! Not the first, nor the millionth, traveller to sense the de-oxygenated spiritual atmosphere of hotels, in which no human feeling can draw free breath. York, young and egotistical, was sure that no one could ever have noticed it before. "It's damnable," he thought. "If one went to those frozen images there, and told them your wife or your mother had just fallen dead on the landing, they'd say: 'Deaths in the hotel are charged thirty-five-and-sixpence extra; we'll be glad if you'll kindly settle it now.' Or, if you said you were just going out to cut your throat round the corner, they'd merely present

your bill for you to settle before you did it. Bill ! I wish to heaven I knew how I was going to settle mine next week."

He had reached his room. He switched on the punkah and flung himself on the bed, wondering as he did so how many other distracted heads had lain where his lay now; how many other miserable hands had plucked at the mosquito curtains in nervous, fidgetty distress. Probably a good many. The East was a place where sudden disasters might fall at any time; where remedies were few. Also his room was one of the cheapest in the hotel. The huge suite occupied by the Americans below had probably not harboured much distress.

The howling of the immense, oar-bladed punkah above his head troubled his overstrung nerves. He rose and shut it off. He did not switch on the light; it was better to lie in darkness. Yes, it certainly was hot without the punkah, but he could stand it for a bit.

Outside, in the white concrete corridor where many wide arches looked down on yards below, on palm tree tops, on pond-like tanks where the Indian crow perched and called, there was silence for a while. Then bare feet came pattering, and native voices rose. The servants of the hotel were talking. Someone had come in from outside; gossip flowed freely. Why should it not? All the rooms up here were out of use save one, and the darkness there, added to the silence of the punkah, showed that its occupant had not returned.

It happened that the plantation where York had been employed used Tamil labour only. York had a gift of tongues; he spoke Tamil unusually well, and what was more understood it. The men outside were talking in Tamil, more or less. They were Burmans, but the visitor, whoever he was, seemed to be Indian.

York, occupied with his own troubles, did not hear at first. By and by a sentence struck his ear.

"Yes, the people from America, who are as rich as Theebaw, could be made to give almost anything. But, brother, what sort of work would this be? Foolish work and bad work." It was a Burman who spoke.

The Tamil visitor replied :

"No harm should come to anyone."

"That is nonsense." The first voice grew excited. "Great harm should come of such a sacrilege."

"Where is the sacrilege? " asked the thin, cynical voice of the Indian.

"Where? He asks me, where?"

"You are a Mission-wallah."

"If I am of the Mission, I can still remember.... And I do not want to have my head cut off."

"Foolish talk. This is no question of head-cutting."

"But I tell you it might be. Before there was time to explain who knows that might happen?"

"It comes to this, then, brother, that you are afraid to make a fortune?"

"No— no. I would make a fortune safely, if I can."

" Well, you can make a fortune if you will do exactly as I say, and there will be no danger to anyone."

The Burman murmured something.

"See," went on the Indian. York by now was sitting upright on his bed and listening with all ears. "All you have to do is this— to tell the rich, mad Americans that one Ramsawmy of the bazaar can obtain for them the finest "soo-ve-nee" in all Asia— in the world— but that they must be secret and pay very greatly. You are room boy to the Americans; it will be very easy for you. I cannot speak their tongue even, and if I tried to approach them they would drive me away as a beggar."

"Yes," agreed the Burman promptly. "You look just like one." And in his tone York could recognize the pride of the fine man confronted by a physical weakling.

The Indian's thin voice was sharper when he spoke again.

"Tell them, if they rise to the bait, that it shall be theirs the night the boat sails, very late. It must be night, you understand, and they must be away before daylight."

"Yes, that I do understand," laughed the Burman, who seemed to have some secret source of amusement.

"And what am I going to get out of arranging the whole matter for you?"

"One-twentieth," said the Indian promptly. The Burman's sneer seemed to rankle; there was a snarl in the voice of the smaller man as he spoke.

"One-half!" was the Burman's reply, given lazily and without excitement.

They began to wrangle, the Indian growing more and more vehement, the Burman calmer. "What could you do without me?" he asked. "Who told you about the Americans and their souvenirs?"

"Who thought of the plan first, brother?" whined the Indian.

"I have said I do not like the plan. That is the more reason for wanting a fair share. If I get a fair share I can leave this accursed women's work in the hotel and go and live like a man in my own town. There is a girl in my town—"

"May your girl—" began the Indian, and broke off. In a quieter, more cunning tone he resumed:

"For the sake of the girl you should take what I offer. One-fifth."

"One-fifth! What do you suppose the Americans will give? A thousand dollars, I daresay— and not American dollars, either. What good would a fifth part of that—"

"Oh, fool," suddenly broke in the other in a low hissing tone, "what do you know? One? One? No, but they shall give ten thousand dollars— and American dollars at that. Or at least," he said, cooling down, "I will ask them for ten thousand."

"Then they will give five thousand, you think? "

"Maybe three— American. That is a fortune."

"I do not like it," declared the voice of the Burman.

"Are we living in the days of Theebaw, foolish one? Does not the British Raj protect—"

" I must have one-third; that is the last I shall say. If I am to help you about such a matter as the Shwe-Da—"

The voice broke off short; there was a brief struggle. York, sitting on his bed, cheeks and hands hot with excitement, nodded to himself. " The little chap has put his hand over the other one's mouth, and the other one's giving him biff," he thought. There was a stamping of feet; a moment of silence and then voices talking fast in abuse. From the main staircase a coloured superintendent came up and called out angrily. The Burman and the Indian moved away.

"Now they will be coming to do my room for the evening," thought York, and he got under the bed.

Someone opened the half-door by and by, switched on the light and the fan, brought fresh water, emptied the basin, tidied up the tables. York, choking in thick layers of dust underneath his bed, was not at all afraid that anyone would start sweeping there. It did not seem to be a custom of the hotel.

When he could safely come out he did so, waited until there seemed to be no sound outside and then slipped out to go to dinner, shaking the dust off his clothes as he went. There was not much trouble about that. York did not wear the all but universal white; he could not afford it. He slunk into the dining-room, conspicuous in his grey tweed, where all the men who did not wear the orthodox dinner coat were in fresh suits of shining white. Everyone else was ordering beer, whisky, at the least iced soda. York drank the tepid water in his bottle, and felt the dignified waiter's scorn fall on him like hot rain.

"Money— money," his thoughts went as he fed with sickly appetite, "It's like a raft in the sea— you drown without it; you're choking and sinking while people all round you are sailing along in their safe boats and never casting a thought to you, unless to despise you. I believe they're beginning to guess. I believe the manager knows. Perhaps they search your luggage— ask questions of the banks. This food I'm eating now isn't mine. I shan't be able to pay for it on Monday, or else I shan't be able to buy a steamer ticket. I wish I was dead."

He saw himself in one long mirror after another reflected endlessly; a well-looking youth full face, with dark hair fashionably brushed off the forehead; a sturdy looking youth three-quarters back, with a coat that had seen too much wear; a refined, well-bred looking youth in profile, with a facial angle that did not quite satisfy....

He felt extremely sorry for all these young men. The world had treated them badly. Europe had taken their subsistence away when it was too late for a profession, and thrown them out per Bibby liner from Liverpool, a doubtful gift to the Far East. Asia had played with them for a little while, cat-and-mouse fashion, and then hit them hard with claws unsheathed. And America— America was, before their very eyes, snatching at the thing that they had coveted; the thing they had longed, but never hoped, to seize.

The various youths ran into one again, and York, sitting up straight in his chair, looked not at the mirrors but at the table where the fat American woman and her husband were seated, richly feeding and drinking For he knew— had known since he heard the little Indian spring up and clap his hand across the mouth of the Burman waiter— that the thing which was to be secured, with danger, and sold with secrecy to this wealthy, souvenir-hunting pair, was nothing less than the jewelled flag from the spire of the Shwe-Dagon.

He was not at all shocked. York was honest according to the lights that Providence had vouchsafed him. He had never niched profits from his employers on the plantation; had never cheated at cards, "bilked" a cab-driver, or even borrowed money with the intention of not returning it. But deeply engrained in his mind was the idea— fostered by a thousand treasure-hunting tales, by the white man's arrogant pose towards all coloured folk, by the sense of being, in his own small way, one of the conquerors of Burma— that it was not stealing to possess oneself, if one could, of jewels and treasures out of heathen temples. And he also felt that the attitude of the Pagoda guardians, in excluding the European by ingenious rules framed to deter and humiliate, merited punishment. York was no thinker; with him, as with most of us, feelings took the place of reasoned thought. But clear enough in his mind was the conviction that the Burmans would be served " jolly well right " by the loss of the thing that he happened to desire. It was a comfortable thought; it made his desires seem actually virtuous. Other people and their points of view did not greatly trouble him. He was, perhaps, too much concerned with those young men in the mirrors; the impression that they made upon a mostly unimpressed world; the sufferings, undeserved, that they underwent or might yet undergo; the future that lay before them— dazzling, golden, vaguely unseizable, as in the lakes, the shadow of the Shwe-Dagon.

Why, he said to himself as he walked out into the nightly crowd of Chinese, Indians, Burmans, buffalo carts, rickshaws, gharries, motor cars, all seething through the wide, white-lighted streets of Rangoon— why should he not manage to get the treasure after all? He had an enormous advantage in that he knew what was going on, though he was supposed to know, and care, nothing. He was sure that the fellows he had read about in stories would have managed it— somehow; he didn't know how, but he supposed himself to be quite as clever as any hero in a movie or a book. Give him time and he'd see the way.

He had tramped far out from the town into the quiet and the fresh night scents of the wooded Pagoda Road, before he quite realized where he was. The lights of the Shwe-Dagon, drowning a dozen constellations with their own high-flung splendour of electric stars, came on him round a corner. He stood for a long time looking at them; fancying he could see above them, three hundred feet in heaven, the tiny outstretched finger of the jewelled vane.

It was late when he got back to town. He did not sleep well that night. Plan after plan passed through his head as he turned about beneath the wide, close- tucked mosquito curtains. How could he use the knowledge he had filched? He could not hope to overhear again; that had been a chance in ten thousand— lucky he was to have had it. Well! well! the flag would be got at somehow— that was not his concern— would be brought, somehow, to the Americans (if they consented, and he had no manner of doubt they would). It would be brought the night before they sailed— disguised somehow. He must find out when they were sailing; that was obviously the first thing to do.

Sleep came, suddenly.

Next morning he felt lighter, more cheerful than he had done since coming to Rangoon. There was something to think about; something to hope for. He knew what no one else knew, and it would go hard but he'd find some way of capitalizing the knowledge.

Before him, as he dressed, floated the golden shaft of the Pagoda, wreathed with visions more glorious than itself. Not for nothing surely had he felt himself obsessed by that high splendour from the first moment of his seeing it. It was Fate for him. It was going to mean, for him, all the things that his life had missed. He was always missing things; what a history he had had up to this present time! Just not sent to Harrow— just not an inheritor of his father's property (a very moderate fortune that grew larger and larger in his mind every time he thought about it)— just missing the last of the rubber boom in the Federated Malay States and landing upon the edge of the downward slope when he ought to have made his fortune! It seemed tragic to Charles York, who was young enough to have missed experiencing in person

the real tragedies of the war. But these things were going to be made up for him now. Like all unsuccessful men, young and old, York was a firm believer in luck, in turns of chance, in waves of good or of ill fortune.

What was the first thing to do to-day? The very crows in the palm-tree tops outside called out the answer. Watch the Americans, of course; make friends with them, if possible. They were the key.

It would be necessary, too, to find out what ships were leaving the port, and what date had been put down in the hotel register book as the Americans' intended day of departure. It would be well, if possible, to see something of their movements.

Feeling like all the detectives of fiction and the "movies" rolled into one, York ran down the marble staircase.

Luck favoured him at once. The Klaws were in the hall, and Mrs. Klaw, as he came down, happened to drop her gorgeous beaded handbag. It burst open and a number of small goods rolled out— smelling salts, handkerchief, purse, gold powder-box. Yesterday, Charles York would have left the picking up to the nearest "boy." To-day, he made one jump of the last three steps and flew to rescue the bag and its contents before the scandalized hall porter could cut in before him. If York had not been to Harrow he had been to one of the many "next bests"; his manners were good. Mrs. Klaw, accustomed to and greedy of male homage, felt his action, his bow, to be exactly right. Besides, the young man, if he was oddly dressed, was quite personable looking. He reminded her, surely?— of the dear Prince of Wales, which was not astonishing since York happened to be one of the many thousands of fair, long-faced youths who cultivate a vague resemblance to the Prince, just so far as hair, tie, and pose of head may take them.

It all ran on wheels. Mrs. Klaw asked York if he had breakfasted; if he wouldn't come to their table. Mr. Klaw, gauging him with narrow, money-changer eyes, said nothing. He diagnosed this young man as a not impossible borrower of money. But Sadie had to have her way; she wouldn't be happy without a young man to tote her round, and here in Rangoon, there did not seem to be exactly a flush of amiable polite young men anxious to squire an aging, fussy woman. Klaw had a vision of himself set free to study the Burmese nation in its younger and more attractive aspects if only Sadie could get hold of some harmless youth to "keep her pacified." This York (Klaw knew his name, as he knew most other things) was clearly harmless. Well, let him come along, then, and when the inevitable yarn about delayed remittances arrived, why he, Klaw, would stand for anything reasonable.

York, not knowing this, and anxious to find a chance of talking to Mrs. Klaw alone, was relieved and surprised when Klaw took himself off, directly after breakfast, into the searing sun of the Strand Road.

Mrs. Klaw at once invited her new acquaintance to come upstairs. "We have an elegant suite," she said, "and I'd like to show you some of my curios; I've gotten a first-rate lot of souvenirs."

The verandah sitting-room was cool, rather dark, handsome, and dirty. Mrs. Klaw had piled it up with boxes of silks, Burmese gongs of all sizes, wood carvings and bronzes of high price and little worth. She had a handful of loose jewels in a silver glove-box; she had china, ivory, amber, jade. She had furniture. She had alleged ancient manuscripts. She had toys from the bazaar. She had chips off temple gateways; fragments broken from the exquisite carvings of a Buddhist monastery. She had the head of a warrior from the friezes of the Buddha temple on the Pagoda Road. She had a vase stolen from a Chinese joss-house. There was no end to it. The gem of the whole collection, proudly displayed, was a small packet of gold leaf that, with her own sacrilegious parasol, she had scratched off the surface of the Shwe-Dagon.

York listened and looked, thinking all the time what a flabby, ageing face the woman had; what an overrunning figure and an overflowing tongue.

He did not like being polite to her. His natural instinct would have been to pass her by in the hall as if she hadn't existed. She didn't exist, for him. She was nothing; a puff of wind, the hull of a cracked nut, a withered leaf blown down the winds of Time. But here he was, in her "boudoir," wasting his time with her and talking to her as if she were really something alive and to be counted with. It hurt his self-respect in some obscure, deep way. It made him dissatisfied with himself, for almost the first time in his life.

Mrs. Klaw talked on. It was not often that she had so satisfactory an audience. She told York that she was "Vurry, vurry artistic," that she believed above all things in "mawral uplift," that psycho-analysis was to her more than her daily bread. Also that she had the "most elegant foot in Sen Louis," and that sculptors had begged her to allow it to be modelled, but her natural purity of heart had always stood in the way. She showed him the foot, and York, drowning under the flood of her unceasing talk, wondered vaguely what strange dispensation of Providence it was that so often gave pretty feet to ugly women.

And he grew less and less satisfied with himself.

They were interrupted, at last, by the room boy, who announced, in a voice York knew well, "One man from bazaar wanting to see Mem-sahib."

York's heart missed a beat. What luck, if only Mrs. Klaw asked, sharply, what the man from the bazaar wanted. The room boy disclaimed all

knowledge, but added that "this man Ramsawmy having plentee good thing, Mem-sahib."

"Bring him in," ordered Mrs. Klaw.

York, knowing that no business could be done in his presence, excused himself and fled.

"Good God ! " he thought, running down the stairs with the light foot of youth. "Awful to think that all women grow into that some time!"

On the last flight he almost cannoned into a man he did not know; a tall, clean-shaved fellow, with a fine blue eye and a smallish mouth. Far as the Poles apart from the kind of Klaw, he yet was typically American; the type that is, some day, to rule the world. Had you been asked what term would most accurately describe Bart Hunter, you would have found one word rise automatically to your lips, and that word would be, "Clean."

Hunter was clean in dress and in person; his mind, one felt, was sharp and bright and at all edges nothing rusty, nothing blurred. He thought straight and acted straight. He could be hard, he could be kind, but he would always be just. Masculine in every line, his face showed what an increasing number of male faces show in these growing years of the young twentieth century— the forthright glance and cool self-possession that go with a decent life.

One does not think he would have troubled himself much about York, being no sentimentalist, on the look-out for other folk's burdens to bear, had it not been for the fact that his fortieth birthday had rather recently come and gone, and that he was a homeless man and childless.

At forty, the man without a son begins unconsciously to cast looks of interest, that is almost envy, upon the youth of twenty who might have been his own. He does not know exactly why he does so. He only knows that young fellows, instead of being tiresome, have somehow become attractive to him; that he likes them and pities them as "young bears with all their troubles to come," and that he would very willingly give them, from his stores of experience, many kinds of counsel.

If York, absorbed in his own worries, had not observed the Californian, Hunter had taken note of him. He thought the lad was in difficulties of some sort. He did not think the acquaintance of the Klaws was likely to help him out. Mrs. Klaw— he knew her kind— would try to make a fool of him. As for Klaw himself, his reputation stank to heaven; he was enough to destroy the financial morals of a dozen stray young planters— supposing them to have any. It followed that Bart Hunter, who had seen him go up to the Klaws' suite of rooms and seen him come away a good while later, decided on a mission of reform.

"The lad will go to drink and the devil, as sure as God made little apples, if he drifts about much longer in this cursed East," thought Hunter. "Well, I guess it's up to me."

"You seem in a hurry, young man," was his comment as York pulled himself out of the way and apologized. "Where are you off to? "

"Nowhere," said York, slackening and taking the rest of the flight with deliberation. He had only rushed because he was excited.

"That's bad," remarked the tall American. "Dull work waiting for boats when you've nothing to do. I'd sure go off my head in these Eastern towns if I had to hang around watching myself breathe. Care to come along with me? I'm here putting through a deal in teak, and there's a lot of timber to be looked over."

York would have been abjectly grateful— yesterday. To-day he felt the American's interest something of a bore. But he accepted the invitation. Until Ramsawmy and the room valet had had their talk with Mrs. Klaw he could only mark time.

They spent the morning together. And York came back with a new interest, a new faculty of mind— or what would have passed as both yesterday. It seemed, surprisingly, that he was a natural judge of timber; that he had absorbed more information than anyone, himself least of all, had suspected, away in the Burma jungle overseering coolies. Also it seemed to him that he liked timber; was on the way to love it. That is, he would have been had not yesterday existed. As things were, of course, he did not care about it. Nor did it matter that he had been able to give Hunter facts new to Hunter's own special line of business. Nor did it matter much that Hunter had been surprised, and pleased. Nothing mattered except the fact that the Shwe-Dagon was splendidly visible from the timber yards, and that its small black horizontal vanes stood up in the blue-white sky and talked and beckoned to him.

That night he dined again at the Klaws' special table, and Klaw, who had enjoyed a singularly interesting day, saw without emotion that Sadie was "putting the hooks in" the new young man. York himself, warmed by unaccustomed champagne, found it necessary to correct his impressions of Sadie's age. He was sure he had erred by ten years or so. Further, he was sure he himself had been to blame for any element of boredom in the morning's talk. Mrs. Klaw, in the light of half a bottle of mis-labelled Pommery, shone out "quite top-hole."

Klaw, silently blessing the guest, slipped away after dinner without hindrance, beyond a guinea-fowl cry of "Come back early!" from Mrs. Klaw. And York found himself asked up to the boudoir again. There, among the niched and ravished "souvenirs," Mrs. Klaw sat her down, the celebrated foot

well displayed, and, touching her eyes carefully with a Venice point handkerchief, proceeded to "register" distress.

"I'm sure up against it," she said in broken tones. "I don't know— where I'm at. Mr. York, the chance of a life has come along and I can't do anything. I feel like as if I were getting bug-house over it all."

York, though somewhat alarmed by the vivid idiom, drew his chair closer and assured the distressed lady of his entire sympathy. While he spoke he was telling himself with the other side of his mind that he rather thought he could name the cause of her distress, though not its exact nature.

Sadie did not leave him in doubt. She also had enjoyed a good many glasses of the golden nectar so cruelly banned from dry America. Charles York, with his vague, cultivated resemblance to the Prince of Wales, with his English politeness and his flattering readiness to be "taken up," seemed to her, in the light of the champagne, a noble and a generous youth, greatly to be trusted. She proceeded to trust him. Within five minutes he had been told the whole of Ramsawmy's tale— almost. Mrs. Klaw, even when warmed with wine, kept some of her native caution. She did not inform Charles York— who knew all about it already— just what the treasure was that Ramsawmy was obtaining for her. Indeed, she lied about that. She said that it was a stone from a Buddhist temple— a carved stone, very sacred and enormously heavy; that its loss was sure to be discovered the first thing in the morning, and that she had found out— too late to alter plans— there was no boat leaving the port before daylight.

"I was as sure as anything," she complained, tears still hanging about the edges of her talk like rain round the horizon rim, "as sure as death there was a boat leaving to-night at eleven. And now I find out the fool steamer man mistook what I said on the 'phone, and what he meant was eleven to-morrow morning. And I got Klaw to take our passages, and he's coming back early to get down to the boat by half-past ten. Ramsawmy's packing the— the stone— in my cabin trunk so as to account for the weight. I let him take the trunk with him this afternoon. He'll be here with it to-night, and what am I to do?"

"Have you paid him anything?" asked York, cautiously.

"I gave him a hundred dollars for expenses, and he's to have two thousand dollars as soon as it's in my hands to-night. I've gotten the money from the bank; it's all ready."

"Two thousand dollars? " York could not quite understand. The golden treasure of the Pagoda— the marvellous jewelled flag— for something between four and five hundred pounds.

"Yep. Of course he's to have more if we get it safely home." Her eyes flickered as she looked at him. York said to himself that he did not think much

of the Indian's chance of securing that "more." There was something he did not grasp about the whole scheme— the Indian's part, and the Klaws' part. Something like a dream that you didn't altogether believe in, yet from which you could not wake up. He thought it must be the effects of the champagne. Probably rotten stuff; he had been sure it was not true to label.

Mrs. Klaw went on:

"They say— with this Indian native trouble brewing— that our lives wouldn't be safe if we couldn't get clear away with it, Mr. York; we've just naturally got to get away to-night. And the boat ain't going!" She held the Venice point up to her face and wept through the holes.

"If you could do anything to help me," she said, keeping back a sniff. "Me and Mr. Klaw would be only too delighted .... compensation...."

"Oh, don't speak of that," was York's mechanical reply. He was thinking hard; Ramsawmy was, somehow or other, getting possession of the flag. He was bringing it down to the boat, packed in Mrs. Klaw's trunk to account for its weight. Probably he too had supposed the boat was leaving that night. But it wasn't, and there was serious trouble brewing for somebody if the stolen treasure could not be got away before revealing daylight broke high up on the golden spire of the Shwe-Dagon.

Mrs. Klaw looked at him as he sat, head in hands, evidently thinking hard. She was really distressed; she felt grateful to this charming young man for his actual interest and his possible help. If she could have read his thoughts she might have felt differently. For the one idea surging through York's mind, as he sat holding his head and considering, was how he, York, could profit by the hitch in Ramsawmy's plans.

"I'll go and see Ramsawmy," he proceeded at last.

Mrs. Klaw was quite sure he was right. Mrs. Klaw blessed him, as much as a Christian Ethical convert is allowed to bless, and squeezed his hand without any reserve at all. And York went out into the warm, brilliant, busy night of Rangoon.

He found Ramsawmy in a small mixed shop, where Macclesfield silks were sold as real Burmese, and temple gongs from Birmingham claimed falsely a romantic past. York was capable of acting with decision when circumstances pushed him hard enough. He got Ramsawmy into the back of the shop under pretence of looking at picture postcards, and then told him curtly that he was Mrs. Klaw's special friend— ("He can make what he damn likes out of that," thought York, cynically)— and that he was empowered to deal regarding the treasure she was taking away that night. Ramsawmy, who had doubtless been gossiping with the room valet, blinked perfect comprehension of that which

was not. York told him of the difficulty about the boat; and here he got his first surprise, for the little lean Indian overacted amazement and dismay.

"By God he knew it," concluded York. "What does he mean?"

Ramsawmy explained. It was most unfortunate that the error had been made— but in truth the port authorities were very foolish and high-handed over such matters; they would not let boats of large tonnage go out after dark for fear of accidents that might block the only passage available into the harbour. But small boats could go. He knew of a boat— a good fast launch, quite comfortable; a launch that would take the American Sahib and his Mem-Sahib to a safe port down the coast. The steamer would call next day and pick them up, and there would be no trouble. It was necessary to get out of Rangoon before sunrise; that was all.

Again the feeling of something uncomprehended; something he did not grasp, came over York. But he put it aside. Surely nothing could be clearer? It was all so clear indeed that he even saw his own part in it. For he meant that the flag, the golden, jewelled flag of the Shwe-Dagon should never leave Rangoon.

It was absurdly simple. Mrs. Klaw had bought in Rangoon a new cabin trunk specially meant for the safe keeping of what she then persisted in calling the "Buddhist stone." It was a beautiful and expensive trunk of solid leather, strengthened with fine steel ribs. She had not had her initials or her husband's painted on it, but she had covered it with one of the special trunk covers that she affected, made of thickest and finest canvas and carefully lettered with her full name.

Now it happened that York's one and only trunk, also of leather, exactly matched in size and weight the trunk that Mrs. Klaw had bought. This was not a very surprising coincidence, since steamer trunks are made to special measure. But York saw where it would serve him. He knew where he could get a cover at short notice. He knew where lead in thick sheets was for sale. It was only necessary to load up his trunk as heavily as possible, put the cover on it, and, at the first possible chance, change the covers on the two trunks. The Klaws would be getting away in secrecy, in a hurry. They would look once to see that the treasure was safely packed away by Ramsawmy inside the trunk, and then they would never think of opening it again until well out from land. As for himself, he would be down in the hall when they were going; he would have his own trunk there, as if he were leaving that night. He'd probably get his chance all right. If not, he was prepared to follow them and travel with them on the launch; any excuse would do.

There was a good deal that would have to be trusted to chance; still he had an idea that chance was going to favour him. So long a run of bad luck had been his that the turn of the tide must be near.

These and other thoughts ran in his head as he sped in a taxi down to the harbour to settle about the launch; back to the hotel, still in the swift motor that made one feel so prosperous, so full of command It was a good while since York had cared to hire taxis, but to-night one wasn't going to spoil ships— treasure ships— for the sake of a ha'porth of petrol.

In the hall of the hotel, as he came in, stood Hunter, the tall American. He was lighting a cigar; he looked at York over the circle of his joined hands keenly, but said nothing. It was growing late; people were drifting away to bed. York wished the timber man had not been just there at just that time. He represented things— ideas— that York had jettisoned for good. It was all very well to be complimented on one's knowledge of teak and one's eyes for measurements— to guess, from the conduct of this prosperous and influential man, that doors were opening somewhere, at last, too late. But the vision of the golden, jewelled flag now shut out everything else. It had become a fixed idea, almost a mania, with Charles York. Such things are not common in our day. But in the years when men sought Manoa, the golden city, when rumours of golden altars, lakes and images of gold, crept eastwards overseas to fire men's brains, from the far, little-known Americas— such devilish possession of souls and bodies by the treasure lust was a matter of every day.

Hunter saw the changed look on the face of the lad he had been trying to save; the eagerness, the cunning, the greed. There was little that Hunter did not see. "Whatever devilment the Klaws are up to," he thought, "the lad is neck deep in it." And because of that tall son who was not his, who lived only in the sons of other men, Hunter made up his mind that he would see the thing through, whatever it might be.

So he did not go to bed but went to the reading lounge, half way up the stairs, which, like a steamer's bridge, commanded a view of nearly everything below. And he took up a paper and did not read it, and waited.

York, meanwhile, had gone to the Klaws' sitting-room, found Mr. Klaw returned, and informed the two that he had made arrangements for a launch to take them down the coast, where a steamer from another port could pick them up. He was careful to speak only of the "Buddhist stone," but he saw, by Klaw's face, that the latter knew very well what was in the wind. Klaw did not seem disposed to welcome his interference now that the affair was fairly under weigh, a fact that suited York well enough.

He waited in the sitting-room, keeping Mrs. Klaw engaged in talk, till he heard a heavy step outside. Someone was coming slowly along the verandah, someone who carried a weight.

At that moment the mystery of it all rose up once more and struck him fairly in the face. How had it been done? Why had it been done? Surely the man who scaled the Shwe-Dagon and stole the sacred flag should not have been satisfied with a mere few hundred pounds? Surely the scaling of the onion-shaped Pagoda was not

He remembered that the Pagoda had been scaled, the flag taken down and replaced, only a few weeks earlier. Means were available; whatever they might be. No doubt Ramsawmy— There! he was coming in.

York excused himself and went out to the dark verandah. Two men, panting hard under a heavy weight, passed him by and entered the lighted doorway of the sitting-room. It was very late now; all the electric lights of the hotel were out save one on the stairs and a couple on high landings. Native Rangoon still strolled and traded, made love, quarrelled and ate, down in the Strand Road below, but even Rangoon was beginning to go home. A breath of salt, dank wind came up from the Irrawaddy River.

York was done with scruples— or they with him; it is a nice point. He bent down and looked through the crack of the partially closed door. Ramsawmy had set the leather trunk on the floor; he was explaining with wide gestures that there was no time for delay. The Sahib and the Mem-Sahib must immediately take the taxi he had in waiting and get away to the harbour or he would not answer for what might happen. There was a moon— an entirely accursed moon— due to rise very shortly. They had better be out at sea before the moon came up and shone on the temple vane. Much better. And if they would give him the English bank-notes that the Mem-Sahib was keeping for him he would show them the wonder of the world and go away. He wanted to go away as soon as he could lest things should transpire that might endanger his throat. He, Ramsawmy, did not want to wake up in the middle of some night with his breath and his blood running out together through a knife slit.

York saw the over-dressed head of Mrs. Klaw bend down; he saw her husband's bald, shining skull. The lid of the trunk was raised for a moment; a low cry came from Mrs. Klaw. It is recorded, with regret, that she said "Hully Gee!" Klaw looked, and said nothing for a moment. Then he asked a short question.

The Indian bent down and seemed to scoop with one hand. He raised it. On the point of a knife that he held was a fragment of soft, glittering metal. Klaw took it, bit it, twisted it, and nodded his head. "I reckon you can hand over and let us clear," he said to his wife.

Ramsawmy's clutch at the bundle of notes was dramatic. Dramatic— melodramatic, almost— was his exit from the room, with the unnoticed and unconsidered Burman who had been waiting outside. He seemed to spread his wings and fly. In a moment it was as if he did not exist.

Now arose the difficulty that York had foreseen.

The trunk was too heavy for Klaw's slack muscles; the hotel servants were asleep, save for a single clerk drowsing somewhere in the office. Quietly he slipped down the verandah, to return with audible tread; to knock at the door and civilly offer help in getting the luggage away.

It all went on oiled wheels after that. The Devil must have been in it, was York's half -humourous thought. Nothing could have fitted better. His own trunk was lying in the darkness at the side of the stairs, cover off; he carried down the Klaws' new trunk, laid it beside his own and offered to guard it while Klaw fetched a boy to bring the rest. Sadie thanked him effusively and said something about the value— "purely artistic value, of course, Mr. York"— of the Buddhist stone they were taking away. "Like the Elgin marbles," she explained in a hissing whisper. "We're saving it for a nation that can appreciate real Art."

"Sure thing," affirmed Klaw, nervously chewing an unlit cigar. He padded up the stairs again, followed by a native boy who had by this time waked up and come forth from some mysterious lair, scenting his natural prey— a tip. The half asleep night clerk behind the office pigeon hole leaned over, drowsing, upon an open ledger. Klaw had paid his bill, and in that act, for the clerk, had automatically ceased to exist.

In the hall, one lamp cast wavering light among pools of darkness. York, breathing hard, bent over the two trunks. It was now or never for him.

Had he put enough lead in his trunk? It didn't seem quite heavy enough. If! It would pass; old Klaw would be in the deuce of a hurry. How tight the cover stuck, damn it— if it wouldn't come off— if it wouldn't. Thank goodness! On with his own cover— now to slip the Klaws' cover on his trunk Pull!

They were coming down the stairs— pull....

"That's real kind of you," said Mrs. Klaw in her hissing, conspiratorial whisper. York, panting, glass-beaded with sweat, was standing on the steps of the hotel, a cabin trunk at his feet.

"Shall I put it in for you?" he asked. The taxi was within arm's length; he did not wait for a reply but lifted the box with a mighty swing, and, staggering, dropped it on the taxi seat. The cushions went flat and the woodwork creaked.

"Thank heaven 'twasn't the real one. That's heavy enough," he thought, catching his breath.

Sadie and her silent, cigar-chewing husband scuttled in after the box; the door was shut. "Good-bye, Mr. York, I'll never forget you; you've been real good to me," hissed Sadie over the side as the car leaped forward. The street was long and white under the electric lights; York saw the car grow smaller, quickly smaller, disappear.

And behind him, in the dark at the foot of the staircase, lay the treasure of the Shwe-Dagon.

He was choking to tear it out. He wanted, more than he had ever wanted anything in his life, to lay that sparkling beauty under the lamp and gloat upon the wonders that, as yet, he had never dreamt of, never seen. But he held himself. Not now, not here.

The night clerk was going to bed at last; the Burmese boy had disappeared. One had only to slip upstairs into the dusk reading lounge and watch till the office was closed and the lone light in the hall left to keep guard till morning. Then to toil upstairs with the treasure, to open it in his own safe room and know that the golden, jewelled wonder was his— at last.

Was it time yet? Yes, it was time. The hall was silent; the night clerk gone. They did not trouble about night porters in this Oriental hotel. From midnight until dawn the lower storey guarded itself. Now!

God, but the thing was heavy! Coming downstairs it had been bad enough, but going up it was worse by far. York, tough and in fair condition, strained hard, his arms locked round the trunk, his knee helping up each step of the flight. He was afraid his panting breath would be heard. This was the lounge, this wide arched room running far back into the first storey. He must get in there and rest a minute else he'd never get to the top of the house.

Once in the safe gloom of the reading lounge, lit only by a little glow from the hall lamp downstairs, desire became his master. He felt that if he did not see the treasure, did not set his greedy hands upon it, he would go mad. In truth, he was half mad already; the gold lust, rising like a tide, had drowned all prudence in him. He set the heavy trunk upon the floor, well out of sight, and by the faint light of the hall lamp picked and worked at the lock with a bunch of his own keys. One fitted. The lock clicked.

He had to strike a match and hold it inside the trunk lid before he could see anything. The match flared up, then caught the draught from downstairs, and went out. But York had seen.

God! what a blaze of gold! The jewels— well, a match was scarcely the light to show up sapphires and rubies, but one could see their enormous size. One diamond in the middle shone glassily; it seemed as big as a shilling. What could the thing be worth, wondered York, on his knees in the dim twilight left by the

flaring out of the match. Should he try another? No, better not; someone might be

Someone was.

Knowledge of the alien presence came swiftly, even before proof. Proof followed— a slight vibration of the floor; an air that moved. Then, while York knelt stiff as wood telling himself it was nonsense, merest nerves, came the unmistakable— a hand on his bent shoulder.

For a moment he knelt there, fixed, like a man in a nightmare. Then, with one movement, he clapped the lid of the trunk and swung round. He saw, in the faint light from the hall, a long pair of black dress trousers, a glow-worm shine of shirt. There was a face at the top, but in the twilight it was featureless. The hand that had fallen on his shoulder slipped away as he turned; clearly this tall intruder had no desire to hold him by force. York was on his feet in an instant. He felt surprisingly cool, and set like steel to do battle for his darling treasure.

"It's Mr. Hunter," he said. The American's height and shoulder width were unmistakable.

"It's young York," said the American. " Well, what do you know about that?" —a purely dialectic flourish, for nothing could be clearer than the fact that York did not mean to tell anybody what he knew about anything.

York said nothing, but breathed hard. He didn't think there had been time for anyone to see inside the trunk. And if he chose to examine trunks in the reading lounge, in the small hours of the morning, who had the right to say him nay?

There was a moment's silence, the two men looking at each other through the dusk, trying, it seemed, to read one another's minds. In the hall below, the clock, which no one could hear in the daytime, clicked steadily on towards three. Upstairs, the droning of many punkahs merged into united hum, like the voice of a closed hive. A motor, returning late, tore through the warm, still street at illegal speed.

It was Hunter who broke the spell by turning on a powerful electric torch and holding it so as to show the other man's face.

"You might tell me, if you don't mind," he said quite coolly, "what you are doing with all that trumpery?"

"What trumpery?" defended York.

"I saw it when you struck the match."

"What do you suppose you saw?"

"Looked like a model of the—"

"Model be damned— it was— I mean—"

"The real thing? H'm— worth something, eh?"

York maintained silence.

"Worth a couple of million, they say. Specially since the tribesmen came down from the hills and filled it up with new jewels from all the gem mines in Burma. Didn't know you were a millionaire."

York kept silence. He was conscious now of only one feeling— a fierce determination to hold on to the treasure; to clutch it, to slay for it, to die lying over it and protecting it with his body. If he had wanted it first for its value, so did he not now. Pure gold lust, treasure lust held him. He was not, for the moment, sane.

It may be that Hunter understood. At all events he cut short the scene brusquely.

"My good chap," he said, "do you know what you've made yourself a thief for?"

The stab went home. York, black and white faced in the light of the electric torch, turned on Hunter with fury.

"How dare you?" he demanded.

"You hold your horses, my son. I reckon I know all about it. Some native thief has stolen for the Klaws, and they've stolen from the Burmese nation at large, and you've stolen from them. And the whole lot of you— the whole damned lot— have been sold."

He was quite calm. He lifted the lid of the trunk— York, half paralysed, did not obstruct him now and turned the light of the torch upon the radiance within.

"I guess," he said, in the odd up-and-down accent that expresses American emphasis, "I guess I can reconstruct this—" He pulled a fine diamond ring from his finger. "*You* watch *me*," he ordered. With the ring held tight in his right hand he worked for a minute over the huge winking diamond that shone in the centre of the flag. "*You* look at *that*," he droned. And York looked, and he saw the diamond was unscratched. Existence seemed suspended, thought wiped out, as he watched the American calmly passing his ring over stone after stone, leaving white marks on each.

"*You* look at *this*," went on Hunter. He pulled out a heavy knife and drove it across the golden splendour of the flag. A thin shaving of metal came with the blade. "Put it in your mouth," ordered Hunter, and York, hypnotized, did so. Immediately he spat it out. Brass!

"Lean inside," pointed out Hunter, scratching away. "Brass plated—"

"My God!" burst out York, his words running into one another. "I saw the Indian fellow chip off a piece of solid gold—"

"Sure thing. They're pretty smart at sleight of hand."

Feeling was coming back— with it, dry-mouthed despair. He had lost— he had lost! He ought to have known— the price paid for the flag, absurd compared with its value; the Indian's insistence on a night departure, hurried, unpremeditated; the concealment of the whole affair from Klaw, right up to the last— all these things should have pointed out the truth to him. They had not, any more than they had pointed it out to Sadie— to her husband even. Wily with the wisdom of a race far older than theirs, the Indian had known what the treasure lust could do. On that knowledge he had played, and won.

The Klaws had lost. He had lost. Biters, they were bitten. Thieves, they were robbed.

And York, awake at last, knew himself for what he was. And from his heart went up the cry that all of us have sent to heaven in our day— "How could I do it?"

Hunter, watching, understood; better than York himself.

"He's had his medicine; he'll be the better for it," was the thought of the elder man. "There's stuff in the lad." Aloud he only said: "You and I will tote that box up together; no use leaving it here for the boys to talk about."

They took it up to York's top-storey room, and the American left him. "To-morrow," he said at the door, "I want to see that Indian."

It was not yet breakfast time when he walked into York's bedroom. His face was grave, but his eyes held amusement.

"Ramsawmy," he said, "will be here to tote that rubbish away some time before tiffin. No, he won't talk any more than you will. Ramsawmy," he added, "is a vurry disappointed man this morning. Yes, sir."

He paused to take out and light a Burmese cigar. "Yes, sir," he repeated presently. "Sadie Klaw knew what she was about. Those notes—"

"What?"

"They were bad. And that rounds the story off real neat."

York, sitting pyjama'd on the edge of his bed, stared up at Hunter's face. How big he looked— how prosperous! How well the world seemed to go with him! And with himself, Charles York, the world was at an end. As Hunter had said, the story was rounded off— was done. He didn't know what remained— unless the Irrawaddy, at high tide, some night when it was late, and no moon shining .... He wished this intruding, prosperous fellow would go away and let him finish dressing.

"York!" remarked Hunter, with the big Burmese cigar tucked in the corner of his mouth, "you'll have to get up a darn sight earlier than this."

York stared, silent.

"Because," went on the American, "as you're going to learn the timber trade of Burma from me, right here, you'll have particular use for all the hours there are in the day, and I'm going to see you use 'em. *You* watch me."

He went out and shut the door.

Over the tops of the palm trees, far away, as York dressed in a fury of haste and excitement, singing to himself the while, showed, splendid, the golden finger of the Shwe-Dagon. The tiny flag, upon its utmost tip, showed dark in the rose of dawn.
